

Michael Peppard. *The World's Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016. 336 pages. \$50.

Where can preachers find inspiration for reformation in this post-Christian century? If we ask Augustine, he might advise: “Remember. Remember into the future.” (Confessions: 3.7.12) The title of this innovative study in art, ritual, and Bible invites us to do just that. It is a text that stirs up the cry of the humanists and reformers of the 14th century, “Ad Fontes! Back to the sources.” The source, in this case, is the world’s oldest house church, once located on the Roman frontier in an ancient military town in Syria. This is a breathtaking adventure in theological archeology, ritual studies, and art history as Peppard leads us, like new believers, deeper into the mysteries of Christian initiation as practiced in one place, at one time, in early Christianity.

This text requires a “robust historical imagination” (218)—and that is not a paradoxical request! The author pays rigorous attention to the disciplines of biblical studies, early church history, archeology, art history, and ritual studies as they relate to this famous Christian site. This kind of insightful review would be valuable in and of itself for those scholars of the word who find pure oxygen through analytical study. Peppard’s inductive approach to the question of Christian identity is prompted by the possible interpretations that these ancient rooms and the congregation inside these much-studied walls provide. His cumulative and relational insights provide breathing room for those of us who need to walk around a text or a context before we get to the if/then normative application, if, in truth, we ever do.

What if this congregation did not identify with “being buried with Christ in baptism and raised to new life” (Romans 6) as their primary understanding of their initiation? What if their anointing and baptism were seen as preparation for battle, for empowerment, for illumination, and for healing? How might our preaching be re-formed by recovering a vision of the Table as a wedding feast, and water, not as a source of death, but as the primordial symbol of God’s care now and in a restored creation rightly named paradise?

If the painted images of David and Goliath, and the Good Shepherd are connected to a militarized and Christian community facing overwhelming odds from an enemy army, does the Dura-Europos baptismal connection to the 23rd Psalm offer insights that we need to unearth again? Narratives of war and suffering pour from our news sources these days like the Syrian refugees themselves. Peppard dedicates his book to the people of Syria with a note: “This book about the oldest church building in Syria was thus written under a dark cloud of despair. I read daily about tragedies both large and small throughout contemporary Syria, even as I wrote daily about its ancient beliefs and cultures” (x). Might it assist a 21st century US congregation to be immersed again in the wisdom and the otherness of this witness of a community that followed Christ centuries before our own?

Christian initiation is best understood as a life-long process; and the walls of this once house, now church, communicate that understanding. A procession of women, now understood to be carrying torches of flaming oil, line the walls leading to the place that the Table once stood. They were the faithful, the watchful; they are painted as waiting for Christ’s return. They represented both men and women, holy, anointed, baptized, preparing to celebrate the mystery of the holy meal. That insight alone might lead to a consideration of a reformed table practice that is more celebratory and eschatological.

What might happen to our preaching of the biblical passages in John 4, the Samaritan woman at the well, if the case can be made that the image of woman/well in this oldest of

Christian churches is not one of sin and conversion, but incarnation. Mary was often associated in early Syrian Christian hymns and images as drawing water from a well or a spring when Gabriel greets her. Peppard proposes a still startling thesis that these images symbolized an understanding of Christian initiation that we have yet to incarnate into our understanding of the radical discipleship initiated in our baptism.

Scholars of the early church, such as Paul Bradshaw, in his classic work, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, caution against a generalist reading of early church worship that leads to an uncritical acceptance of uniformity and a desire to impose it in a false sense of authenticity. *Sanctum Catholicam Apostolicam* “always everywhere, by all Christians” (*The Commonitory of Vincent of Lerins* 2:1, Baltimore, MD: Joseph Robinson, 1847) is the ecumenical consensus and affirmation of God’s self-disclosure, not the prescription for practice. The contribution of this text to the field of homiletics and liturgics is both memory and imagination. The world’s oldest church continues to illuminate a way to nurture new believers. As Peppard writes, “Preserved under duress, rediscovered by chance, and restored with great toil, the remains grant us only a keyhole’s view into a cityscape as full as it is foreign. Regarding this unique church building, then, we would be wise to keep our oil of interpretation burning—and to leave the door open” (219).

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