

to probably authentic. Why? Perhaps because the overall result of what the conclusion acknowledges as a thoroughly contrarian argument is that the parables play only a marginal role in reconstructing the teaching and ministry of the Jewish eschatological prophet, Jesus of Nazareth. The Evil Tenants parable shows that Jesus was aware of the mounting hostility against him and linked his fate with that of Israel. The parable of the Talents or Pounds (M. argues for two distinct versions) highlights divided responses to the eschatological proclamation. The rich, powerful, or professionally pious tend to reject it, while the poor and marginalized find hope in the great reversal imaged in the Great Supper. The Talents/Pounds divested of the modern tendencies to see the master as harsh or abusive, an accusation voiced by the servant who failed, teaches an important lesson about God's grace, a free gift with strenuous demands.

Exegetes, especially those criticized in M.'s extensive footnotes, will have plenty of objections to details. For the theologian or ethicist, the book on its own leads to a Bultmannian conclusion: the historical Jesus is the presupposition of Christian theology, not its foundation.

Pheme Perkins
Boston College

The World's Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria. By Michael Peppard. *Comparative Approaches to Early Christianity in Greco-Roman Culture.* New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2016. Pp. xi + 320. \$50.

Books often come with sensationalist titles, but, in this instance, the superlative is warranted. The house church in the border town of Dura-Europos, which was buried in 256 CE by the Roman army and excavated in the 1930s, represents the oldest church to have survived to the present day. As such it is of inestimable significance, though the only monograph-length study of it in English was the final excavation report published in 1967. This is therefore a topic that has long needed a scholarly, yet accessible treatment, and in many respects that need is fulfilled in the new study by Peppard.

P.'s book is focused on the most remarkable feature of this church, its partially preserved wall paintings in the room used for a baptistery. P. provides a revisionist interpretation of these paintings, employing a methodology that draws on both texts and ritual to imaginatively recreate the experience of the neophyte processing through the room toward the basin. Most of the new interpretations he offers have been set forth in the past decade by several scholars in a variety of shorter studies, two by P. himself. Still, it is a worthwhile achievement to have drawn together all of this scattered scholarship into a single, readable volume giving a comprehensive interpretation of this ritualistic space.

While P. rightly does not insist on a single referent for each of the images, but gladly concedes the polyvalent way in which early Christian art was conceived, he does argue for the primacy of certain themes with reference to each of them. So, for example, the image of David slaying Goliath (chapter 2) evokes David's status as God's "anointed,"

an appropriate image for neophytes to contemplate as they themselves receive pre-baptismal anointing. P. treats the next three scenes together—Jesus and Peter walking on water, the healing of the paralytic, and the shepherd and sheep—pointing out that the presence of water in all three biblical episodes makes them particularly apt for a baptismal context, and noting that they depict the power of Jesus which the baptizands expected to encounter (chapter 3). The final two images are the most ambiguous and therefore the most contested. P. takes up and defends the minority position that the procession of torch-bearing women approaching a white object is not a depiction of the tomb on Easter morning, but is instead a wedding procession along the lines of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. Finally, P. brings forward much comparative evidence to argue that the image of a woman at a well is most likely a portrayal of the annunciation to Mary from the *Protoevangelium of James* rather than the Samaritan woman of John 4.

P. makes a convincing case for the identification of the final two images. Still, some criticisms of the book are in order. First, a significant omission from the bibliography is the 2010 monograph by Ulrich Mell, *Christliche Hauskirche und Neues Testament: die Ikonologie des Baptisteriums von Dura Europos und das Diatessaron Tatians*. Moreover, the quotations from Tatian (81–82) almost certainly do not belong to the second-century Roman Christian, since, to my knowledge, no one has ever taken seriously J. Rendel Harris’s proposal that this much later Armenian work attributed to Ephrem in fact belongs to him.

Finally, readers should be aware that there is also a theological argument in this book. P. emphasizes early on (55) and then further on throughout the book that the Dura baptistery demonstrates that the Eastern pre-Constantinian church had no place for “Pauline death mysticism” (cf. Rom 6:3–4) in connection with baptism, with its attendant themes of the cross, sin, sacrifice, and forgiveness, which only became important following Helena’s discovery of the true cross in the fourth century. Instead, the “dominant symbols of Christian initiation” prior to this period were healing, empowerment, incarnation, marriage, and new birth (218). Yet to make such a negative claim on the basis of a baptistery only half of whose artwork survives is precarious and the thesis is open to challenge on other fronts as well. Aphrahat, whom P. quotes repeatedly, cited a combined version of Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12, calling baptism “the mystery of the suffering of the Savior” (*Dem.* 12.10). Similarly, Ephrem, that other great fourth-century exemplar of Syriac Christianity, praised God “who pardons sins in a baptism of water” (*Hymns on Virginit*y 31.4), and described the pre-baptismal anointing with oil as that which “blots out our debts” since “sin is drowned in the water” (*Hymns on Virginit*y 7.9). These exceptions to P.’s thesis were found with ten minutes of searching, so it is likely that further counter-evidence could be found. Hence, the book would have been better had P. simply highlighted the themes that are unquestionably communicated through the artwork that does survive (e.g., divine power, incarnation, marriage, birth) and not used this as evidence for the absence of “Pauline death mysticism” in third-century Syria.

Matthew R. Crawford
Australian Catholic University, Melbourne