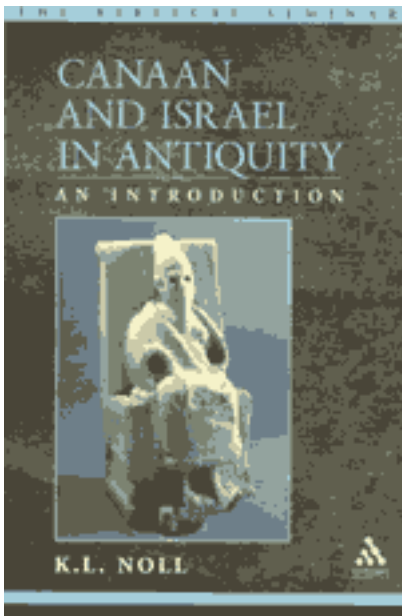


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**Noll, K. L.**

***Canaan and Israel in Antiquity: An Introduction***

The Biblical Seminar 83

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This nicely written book brings its reader what it promises: a comprehensive introduction into the problems and perspectives of ancient Israelite historiography. The book is designed for classroom work, and it is one of the best textbooks for an undergraduate course that I have read recently. The main reason for this positive assessment is the fact (granted that the word “fact” is appropriate in a historical discourse) that Noll is able to bring the reader from a position of not knowing, or having a biased view on Israel’s past, to a position of grasping the problematic concepts of historiography.

How is this done? The book opens with a general introduction (15–30) into themes such as the land of Canaan and Israel and the various canons of the Hebrew Bible. Here the scene is set. The second chapter discusses the question “What Is History?” (31–57). Noll is able to avoid the debate between maximalism and minimalism by his definition of history as a narrative on the past. I, of course, welcome this sound methodical distinction between the idea of the past, that is as such unreachable, and the concept of “history” as a narrative relating the past by making a selection from the available evidence and by suggesting connections between assumed events. Correctly, Noll states that there are three genres of histories: (1) “positivist history” aiming at a reconstruction of the past; (2)

“humanist history” aiming at the description of the role of human beings in the past; and (3) “ideological history” narrating the past from a biased perspective. The first is an illusion, the second is what historians should be doing, and the third is to be avoided.

Chapter 3 deals with the genre of ancient history (58–82). Noll assumes that history as a literary genre originated in ancient Greece. The best “histories” from ancient Greece are at best “humanist histories.” They, however, are not that much evidence-based as the modern historian would have it. The “historical parts” in the Hebrew Bible should be construed as “ideological history.” The book of Kings, for instance, is drenched in a Yahwistic ideology. This, however, does not imply that all features in the book of Kings are ahistorical. The redactor of this biblical book has digested and selected “facts” to tell his story or, better, to convince his audience of a religious symbol system. In other words, the Hebrew Bible should be treated with caution when used as a historical source. This position is common knowledge among scholars, or at least it should be, but even in the twenty-first century C.E. many undergraduate students are surprised by such a view.

The core of Noll’s book is a narrative on the past (chs. 4–8 [83–237]). His chapters are named after archaeological periods (such as Iron Age I) and not after labels from the biblical story (such as the period of the judges). I consider this an important approach that gives both archaeology and epigraphy its appropriate place. These disciplines supply us with an albeit meager framework to which the stories of the Hebrew Bible can be related and not the other way around. In these chapters he presents the results of current scholarship that should not surprise the informed reader. His display of modern insights is very helpful for a student who is finding her or his way through the complex material. A few positions will be mentioned. The patriarchs cannot be treated as historical. The book of Genesis contains late narratives that are related in view of the collective identity of later generations. Archaeology does not supply evidence for an exodus out of Egypt. When it comes to the “origin of Israel,” Noll defends the position of the symbiosis-hypothesis: somewhere in Iron Age I various groups, such as Merneptah’s “Israel,” local Canaanites, some *shasu*-bedouins, melded together into clans and chieftain groups that later formed the so-called tribes of Israel. It should be noted that one of his chapters is not named after an archaeological period but just named: “The Tenth Century.” Here the pros and cons of the “united monarchy”-hypothesis are displayed, arriving at the conclusion that the balance of evidence hints at the view that during the tenth century B.C.E. a large state was not present in the Cisjordan highlands.

In chapter 9 the reader receives a short tour around the “Religions of Canaan” (238–82). The plural form *religions* indicates already his view that throughout the country and during the ages not one monolithic and monotheistic form of religion can be traced. In fact Noll offers the reader a matrix to understand religion in Canaan/Israel. In this matrix

two important views are merged: (1) the idea of Lowell Handy that the pantheon in the various Canaanite religions can be understood using the metaphor of the court; and (2) the hypothesis developed by Manfred Weippert and Rainer Albertz that religion should be approached as being different at three various levels: state, clan or village, and household. From this perspective he discusses Yahweh and the other gods of Canaan. The short tour is finalized with a visit to the “prophecy-room.” Noll connects prophecy to mysticism and divination. He opposes himself to the view that prophecy is foretelling the future.

The final chapter is, in my view, the weakest one. In “After the Iron Age II” (283–312) the reader is introduced into the Babylonian, Persian, and Hellenistic periods. Here the author relies too much on the biblical books. He seems to have overlooked recent epigraphic evidence containing Yahwistic theophoric names from the Persian era. On the other hand, the “Jewish” colony at Elephantine is discussed.

In sum, I appreciate Noll’s book for the goal for which it has been written, and I hope that it will open the eyes of many students to the rich reality of ancient Canaan and Israel.