Book Reviews

Copying Early Christian Texts: A Study of Scribal Practice. By Alan Mugridge. WUNT 362. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016. 558 pp., $239.00, hard.

Blame the scribes! That has been a refrain for quite some time in the field of New Testament Textual Criticism. Now, Alan Mugridge, Senior Lecturer of New Testament at Sydney Missionary and Bible College, attempts to find out what we can actually know about those who penned the manuscripts.

The purpose of the volume, according to Mugridge, "is to examine the extant Christian papyri, along with a number of allied papyri as a control set, in order to ascertain what kinds of writers actually copied or wrote them" (2). By "Christian papyri," he means the ones bearing Christian texts: Old Testament, New Testament, apocryphal, patristic, hagiographic, liturgical, gnostic, Manichaean, and unidentified texts. By "allied papyri," he means those addressing a deity or deities for help in life: amulets, magical texts, Jewish texts (OT and other), and school texts.

To non-experts, there is still much to consider in this work beyond the papyrological particulars provided in the catalogue of 548 papyri that dominates the book (155–410). Mugridge eagerly contests widely held beliefs about the copying of early Christian texts—the idea that early Christians had their texts copied "in house" (i.e., by themselves without much scribal expertise)—and he refutes the persistent suspicion that the copyists of some NT papyri deliberately changed the text to comply with their theology because they were Christians. The reality, he argues, is that the copyists of early Christian texts were *not* typically Christians. Rather, the majority of them were trained, professional scribes, who probably had a variety of religious convictions.

These arguments will no doubt elicit howls of protest from other specialists, but they touch upon one of the book's greatest strengths. Mugridge offers a remarkably rich discussion of scribal features and of how the copying of Christian texts took shape over time (1-154). He shows how complex of a topic it really is, and presents his case through a closer reading of more manuscripts than most can claim. His hope is readers will come away with

a better understanding about how Christians had their texts copied during the second to fourth centuries AD, as well as the kinds of people who would have had the ability and opportunity to copy them.

In this work, we also learn that "there are so few examples of Christian or Jewish papyri (at least up to the end of the fourth century AD) with regular and clear spacing between words" (71). While that news is not especially fresh, it certainly helps actualize the importance of what a growing number of scholars are saying about the alleged difficulties of reading a manuscript written in *scriptio continua* (i.e., without spacing between words): it was the norm of the day and we should essentially drop the line of argument that says a "professional" reader was required. In fact, the author's treatment of various "reading aids" is necessarily brief but useful for that very reason: readers' aids "cannot serve to confirm or indicate the professionalism of the copyist of the Christian papyri reviewed here, since writers on the spectrum from highly professional scribes down to the very unskilled writers made the same kind of intermittent and inconsistent use of them" (91).

Some major overstatements, however, detract from the volume's overall effect. In attempting to counteract the dominant view that early Christian texts were reproduced by Christians, who were mostly nonprofessional scribes, Mugridge exaggerates the evidence. For instance, to say that professional writers required writing implements that "must have been unusual for anyone to possess, except trained scribes and members of the elite" is to overreach (13). It is also bold to give so much credit to the *assumption* that over 80-90% of the population was illiterate because some scholars have argued that a certain type of formal schooling "was available only to a few" (12), and therefore risky to base an entire book on this premise. Valid objections can be made to refute this latter claim, and ample evidence exists contrary to the former one. See, for example, counter arguments and evidence in my article on ancient literacy (*TrinJ* 36.4 [2015]: 161–89) and forthcoming book on early Christian reading practices (*Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017]).

Mugridge then goes on to state that "there is no reason to use the word ['scriptorium' as a setting in which the copying of texts involved more than a single scribe] for this early period in general, [and] it would be better not to use it at all when discussing Christian papyri from the first four centuries" (16). This assertion, however, remains unsubstantiated, especially because

there is evidence that can be used to suggest that scriptoria were well-established by the end of the second century AD. The utilization of *nomina sacra*, preference for the codex form, and a host of other common characteristics among early Christian texts, such as uniformity in manuscript size, range of handwriting, and particular readers' aids, are all indications of organization and standardization of practice that cannot so easily be swept aside in just a few sentences or paragraphs. Some type of controlled production (i.e., quality control) for the public usage of the following second-century Christian manuscripts, for example, seems probable: 155, 171, 172, and 201 (according to Mugridge's catalogue numbering system; or more popularly known among readers of this journal as P64/67, P104, P77, and P90 respectively).

He also seems to assume throughout the work that there exists a directly proportional relationship between scribal professionalism and textual purity. Yet scribal hands do not necessarily dictate scribal accuracy (among studies not noted in this volume, see Colin Roberts, *The Antinoopolis Papyri* [1950]; Susan Stephens, *Yale Papyri in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library II* [1985]). Granted, he does note that trained scribes could and did make errors (e.g., see 142). But he still concludes with such strong language to the contrary: "By drawing on the services of trained copyists to have their texts reproduced, the Christians were *guaranteed* prompt and *accurate* work … the *accuracy embedded in the copying* of texts served as *the* basis for generally *very consistent* texts being dispersed ... To have *ensured accurate copying* from the start, rather than leaving that task to amateur 'insiders,' laid a foundation for *thoroughgoing reliability*" (153; most italics added).

Last but not least, because there are so few surviving papyri with signs that a professional scribe had done the copying (i.e., "stichometric counts") in the archaeological record, much of the research Mugridge discusses in this regard is speculative, some extremely so. That is not necessarily a bar to his project; the speculations are thought-provoking, and the process by which scholars try to piece together the past from many different perspectives is an interesting story in its own right. In other words, the lack of sharp conclusions comes with the territory.

In sum, I highly recommend this book and believe that every theological library should own a copy. Mugridge's reliable, wealth-of-details approach demands a reflective read. While I do not think he succeeds in proving that the majority of early Christian texts were copied by non-Christians, he does

effectively show how most copyists of early Christian texts had skill and an interest in doing their work well and accurately. Or to put this yet another way, whereas Mugridge argues that "there is no firm evidence that the copyists were generally Christians" (2), I would contend with equal conviction that there is no firm evidence that the copyists were *not* generally Christians.

Brian J. Wright, Ph.D.
Adjunct Professor
Palm Beach Atlantic University

Canaan and Israel in Antiquity: A Textbook on History and Religion. Second edition. By K. L. Noll. London and New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013, pp. xvi + 434pp., $43.95 paper.

Over a decade after the first edition, K. L. Noll, Associate Professor of Religion at Brandon University, published a second edition of *Canaan and Israel in Antiquity*. This book is designed to provide a first step into the study of the ancient world of Canaan and Israel for the intelligent reader (1). The book's ten chapters cover an impressive range of material including terminology and methodological issues (chapters 1-3), surveys of historical periods (chapters 4-5, 7-8, 10), and religion in the ancient Near East (chapters 6 and 9). Noll seeks to avoid the complexities of academic debate. Yet readers who give more weight to the biblical text in reconstructing history will frequently find points of disagreement with the author's revisionist perspective.

The first three chapters introduce the reader to the terminology, geography, and chronology of Canaan and Israel, as well as methodological approaches to historiography. Noll describes his work as a "humanist history," which eschews ideological approaches. The burden of this method is the dignity of the people under investigation. The authors ultimate concern is to represent the ordinary lives of ancient peoples to the reader. As a method concerned strictly with the facts, humanist history, as characterized by Noll, has no room for the supernatural, a fact evident in his handling of ancient literature. These chapters contain a helpful introduction to the sources involved in historical reconstruction (texts and archaeology). Notable is Noll's overview of archaeological method.

When considering what constitutes history, Noll looks to the genre of Greek *historia* as the standard. The essence of this genre is the careful investigation of past events using credible sources. Yet since the majority of ancient literature was unconcerned with facts, says Noll, it more often than not could be labeled as folklore (67). The past created by the authors of these texts, bearing little to no resemblance to actual historical events, was not intended to be understood factually. Rather, it was the representation of a fluid process of cultural memory. Noll attributes this conception of history to a common understanding in the ancient world. Genesis 1 and 2, for instance, were designed to be an anthology of Jewish folklore (94). He states that if the compiler of Genesis were alive today he would likely be surprised to find his work included among sacred documents attributed to divine inspiration (94).

The exodus from Egypt is another representative example of Noll's approach to historiography. In his view, these stories do not describe, or attempt to describe, real events (101). He points to inconsistent chronology within the biblical text regarding the date of the exodus. Of course, the chronological difficulties have been long recognized, and various solutions have been put forward. All of this, however, is futile in Noll's view. Even if one could harmonize the chronology of the text with other known events, Noll says that this "would constitute little more than desperation—the desire to create a reliable account of the past from an ancient folklore" (99). This position, however, betrays the very ideological bias that the author seeks to avoid.

The chapters detailing the various historical periods are dense, but very readable. In addition to the transitions from one chronological period to another, Noll discusses Israel's origins, literacy, views on a United Monarchy, economics, the complexity of Judaism in the post-exilic period, and much more. Regarding early Israel, the author notes the difficulty of discerning ethnicity from the material culture. He rejects the simple equation of certain features, such as the absence of pig bones and the presence of Four-Room Houses, with an ethnic group called Israel. Though some regional communities may have identified as "Israel," he states, "the biblical definition of Palestine as 'all Israel'… must be judged entirely artificial" (175).

The chapters on religion in Canaan and the ancient Near East take as their foundation its supposedly evolutionary origin. Religion, says Noll,

resulted from evolved survival strategies, as well as the social and cultural circumstances of societies. Yet contrary to the beliefs of many today, religion was a social reality, not one that was integral to the spiritual life of ancient peoples. Noll rejects the application of words such as "faith" to the religious experience of those in question. Nevertheless, he surveys the primary deities of the ancient Near East, as well as the practices of divination and prophecy. While many points of these sections are instructive, the reader is left with a sense that there was little, if anything, distinctive about Israel's religion.

Noll is to be commended for the breadth of material included in this book. His mastery of the primary source material is impressive by any standard. It is also refreshing to have a readable survey of the various historical periods, including both text and archaeology. Numerous charts, maps, and images aid the reader in visualizing the described content. A final point to be commended is the presentation of both sides of various debated topics. For instance, Noll outlines detailed arguments both in favor and against the United Monarchy. Complex issues, such as the Low Chronology hypothesis, are distilled with remarkable clarity. Though readers may disagree with many of Noll's conclusions, they must first wrestle with his well-researched positions with careful attention.

As mentioned above, however, readers who give more weight to the biblical text will find much to fault with the volume. Many conclusions are presented as self-evident, although many good scholars would disagree. This is reinforced especially in the suggested reading sections at the end of every chapter, which prioritizes the works of "minimalist" scholars. A greater diversity of viewpoints in some chapters could help readers get a more balanced perspective.

Though Noll places the supernatural outside the scope of historical inquiry, he inadvertently makes theological value judgments at points. Those operating from a reflective theological disposition will find such statements dismissive and reductionistic. Noll questions, for instance, why a deity would associate itself with a written corpus (i.e., Scripture). This fact alone, says Noll, indicates that such deity is the subjective creation of those desiring a god invested in human history (78-79). One can respond to this claim in several ways, but according to the text itself, the God of Israel *is* the Lord of history. Israel was not distinctive in claiming a relationship with a god who acted in history, but Israel did argue for the uniqueness of their God. Moreover,

covenants were historical in orientation. The preamble of many covenant agreements from the ancient Near East recount the historical context of the treaty. Though Noll rejects the idea of God as a historian, one may ask what else one may expect. The question comes down to the value of the biblical text in one's system of understanding. This is one area readers of this journal will disagree with Noll.

While there are numerous points of disagreement within each chapter, the overall work is a helpful introduction to the issue at hand. Though the present work has a much wider focus, those interested in the history of Israel would do well to use it alongside other histories, such as Eugene Merrill's excellent work, *Kingdom of Priests* (Baker Academic, 2008). Readers would also do well to first familiarize themselves with the minimalist/maximalist debate to help put the present work in perspective. An in-depth look at this in the context of history writing is Megan Bishop Moore, *Philosophy and Practice in Writing a History of Ancient Israel* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

Andrew King
Ph.D. Candidate in Old Testament
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary