

A Tribute:



Noel Kenneth Weeks 1943 – 2020

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Dr Noel Kenneth Weeks passed away on 8 March 2020. His memorial service at the Shire Christian School celebrated many aspects of his life: father and husband, teacher, scholar, and his ministry.¹ The large crowd in attendance was testimony to the impact Noel had on those who encountered him in both his personal and professional lives. This tribute is written by two of his students who gained so much from his lessons, supervision, and personal connections; and it will concentrate on Noel Weeks' academic life.

Noel Weeks spent the majority of his career as Senior Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Sydney (1971–2004) where he taught courses in Ancient Near Eastern history and religions, historiography, and Akkadian language. Noel served as Honorary Lecturer until 2012, and then as Honorary Associate at both the University of Sydney and at Macquarie University for the remainder of his life.

Noel was an outstanding teacher and scholar who saw many of his students pursue PhDs successfully. In addition to his work as an historian, Noel was equally a theologian and a philosopher. As one of the present authors said of Noel Weeks in the Preface of his published PhD: 'The concise and thoughtful manner in which he could inspire a path of inquiry, crystallize a series of thoughts, or rip to shreds an unfounded argument has been appreciated by and been of benefit to all of his students' (Jackson 2008: xi).

Noel Weeks was a remarkably generous man. In addition to his lecturing duties, he regularly taught interested students Amarna-Canaanite, Sumerian, Hittite and Hurrian outside of term time and always free of charge. He spent hours speaking with students about their papers, sharing ideas and encouraging them to pursue areas of interest further. He had a kindness and patience for students that is rarely seen.



*Figure 1: A Young Noel Weeks upon his graduation.
Photo: courtesy of the Weeks family.*

From Zoology to Assyriology via the Old Testament

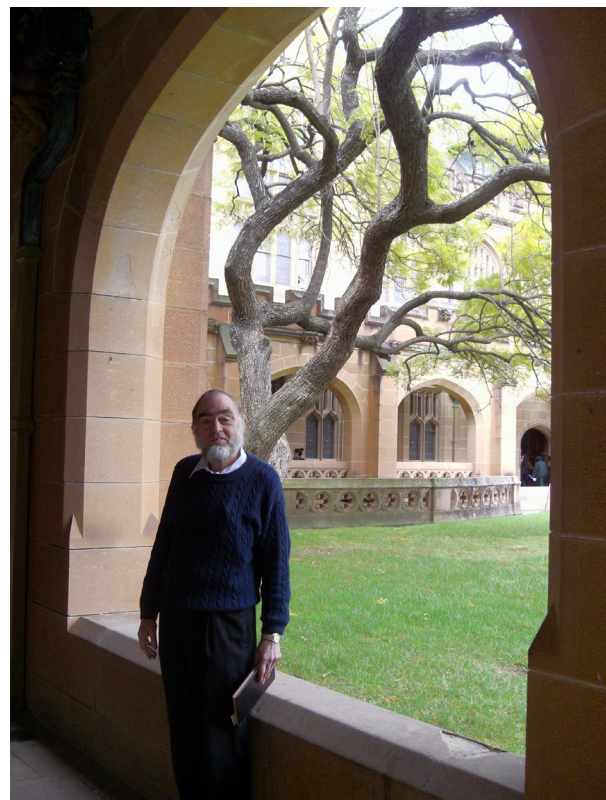
Noel Weeks was born in Grafton in northern New South Wales in 1943. His family recount stories of him running around town barefoot, only wearing shoes on one day of the year: the Jacaranda Festival. Noel's undergraduate study was in zoology at the University of New England in Armidale, in which he was awarded First Class Honours. It was during this time that Noel became a Christian and with this came a change of direction from zoology to theology, and from regional New South Wales to Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, USA. Noel received a BD and a ThM, and discovered a deep interest in the Hebrew Bible. One suspects that Noel would have enjoyed a satisfying academic career with an impact on many students regardless of whichever field he pursued. However, Ancient History and Ancient Near Eastern studies in Australia are incredibly fortunate that Noel found his interest in the Hebrew Bible during his studies in America.

Such was Noel Weeks' interest in the Hebrew Bible that he remained in the USA and enrolled in an MA/PhD programme in Mediterranean Studies at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. There he received training in the languages of the Ancient Near East, such as Akkadian, Sumerian, Egyptian, and Ugaritic, as well as courses in Near Eastern history and comparative Bible. In the later 1970s, Noel spent time at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem where, in addition to his own research, he read Assyriology with Hayim Tadmor and learnt Arabic well enough to read the daily paper.

Scholarship

As students of Noel's we were entertained by many stories from his time at Brandeis and Jerusalem, but more importantly much of his education here shaped his understanding of the methodology of Assyriology and Ancient Near Eastern history. Noel Weeks brought much from his own studies to the benefit of his students. Reputedly, one of his lecturers from this time, Cyrus H. Gordon, used to charge his doctoral students that if they kept writing the same old popular scholarship that they need not return and visit him. Gordon was arguably the leading Ancient Near Eastern and Hebrew Bible scholar in North America after Albright and was one of the first scholars to decipher and understand the Ugaritic language. Interestingly, Noel's thesis, actually critiqued Gordon's own scholarship, even though he was an examiner. This reflected an important maxim that Noel had picked up from Gordon himself: 'Any fool can amend a text, but it takes a true scholar to solve it as it stands.' Influenced by these early studies, two areas of essential advice Noel always gave apprentices in his class were: 1) always look at what is written in the ancient text, not what the secondary literature says about it; 2) attempt to uncover the hidden assumptions behind the secondary scholarship to better protect against it influencing the way you read the texts.

Two other influences on Noel Weeks' scholarship reinforced these two lessons. The first piece of advice was



*Figure 2: Noel Weeks near the famous Jacaranda Tree in the Main Quadrangle, The University of Sydney.
Photo: courtesy of the Weeks family*

also developed during his training in zoology, which led him to ask ‘what is the evidence?’ for any question put before him. The second piece of advice was also heavily influenced by Noel’s time at Westminster Theological Seminary, particularly his apologetics classes under Cornelius Van Til. Van Til’s emphasis on the importance of presupposition in scholarship struck a chord with Noel. He had recognised the difficulty in wrestling with the scientific approach which often saw the scholar forming their reading of the evidence according to the prevailing presuppositions.² This situation was also relevant to the constant struggle of historians to separate their reading of the observable past from their presuppositions. This tension between the inevitable role of presupposition and the importance of an authentic reading of the evidence led to the overall theme throughout much of Noel’s scholarly work, which often explored the way modern ideas had shaped scholarship’s reading of the Ancient Near East. While pointing out that most scholarly theoretical frameworks oversimplified a more complex reality evidenced in the sources, in his own scholarship Noel Weeks often asked whether there was a better paradigm that was more compatible with the actual evidence for the ancient Near East and/or the Bible.

Noel Weeks never published his PhD thesis on Nuzi (1972), but his journey during these years is indicative of his methodology. The thesis was supervised by the Nuzi specialist, Ernest R. Lachman, but its origins lay in the influence of Cyrus Gordon and his diffusionist thesis that saw a common background of the cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean (see e.g. Gordon 1965). By the end of his thesis work, Noel found that the diffusionist model, as far as it concerned Nuzi and the Bible, was false and that models brought from outside did not explain the Nuzi data. Nuzi had to be unique in terms of the existing data (see Weeks 1975–1976). Interestingly, Noel Weeks’ findings coincided with the movement away from the hitherto dominant Albright School in North America, which sought to confirm the biblical account of ancient Israel through archaeology (see Machinist 1996).

Throughout his career, Noel Weeks used a close reading of the evidence to challenge the existing models that dominated Ancient Near Eastern studies and interpretations of the Bible.³ He was not a pure empiricist, and critiqued empiricism as a theoretical model due to its limits. He used to speak of such an approach as like having all the pearls and no necklace to string them on. He emphasised the evidence as paramount in history, and critiqued those who forced it into pre-existing assumptions or theoretical models; again he used the analogy of this approach being like having the string with no pearls to place on it. Though Noel certainly had his own set of presuppositions, he worked hard to ensure that this did not lead him to try and make the evidence say more than it actually did, being comfortable with less than certain, tentative conclusions. His articles contained significant critiques, such as that of the roaming nomadic model for



Figure 3: Noel Weeks at home characteristically writing lectures by hand.

Photo: courtesy of the Weeks family

understanding the appearance of new peoples in the Near East, whether that stemming from the influence of the Enlightenment fascination with nomads that goes back at least to Anne Robert Jacques Turgot and Adam Smith, or the anti-Semitic version in Hugo Winckler that linked nomadism to Semitism (Weeks 1985). Another assumption he critiqued was that there were inherent connections between myths and ritual practice in Egypt and the Near East (Weeks 2015). In his article on the care of officials in Old Kingdom Egypt (Weeks 1983), he also questioned the anachronistic presumption of a church-state rivalry as a key dynamic in ancient Egyptian history. Most recently, Noel challenged the assumed systematisation of Mesopotamian religion (Weeks 2019b).

Noel Weeks’ two major monographs were his greatest statements on methodology. The first was his *Admonition and Curse* (2004), which examined the relationship between systems of governance and treaty practice in Egypt and the Ancient Near East. Previously, scholars such as Meredith G. Kline (1963), and Kenneth A. Kitchen’s studies in the 1970s (see now Kitchen and Lawrence 2012) had turned the data to fit a scheme with the Mosaic Deuteronomy at its centre. Noel Weeks argued, however, that the data was more complex and that the overarching assumption in the previous studies was that an international treaty form hovered above the respective cultures and histories.⁴ The overlap between the Hittites and the

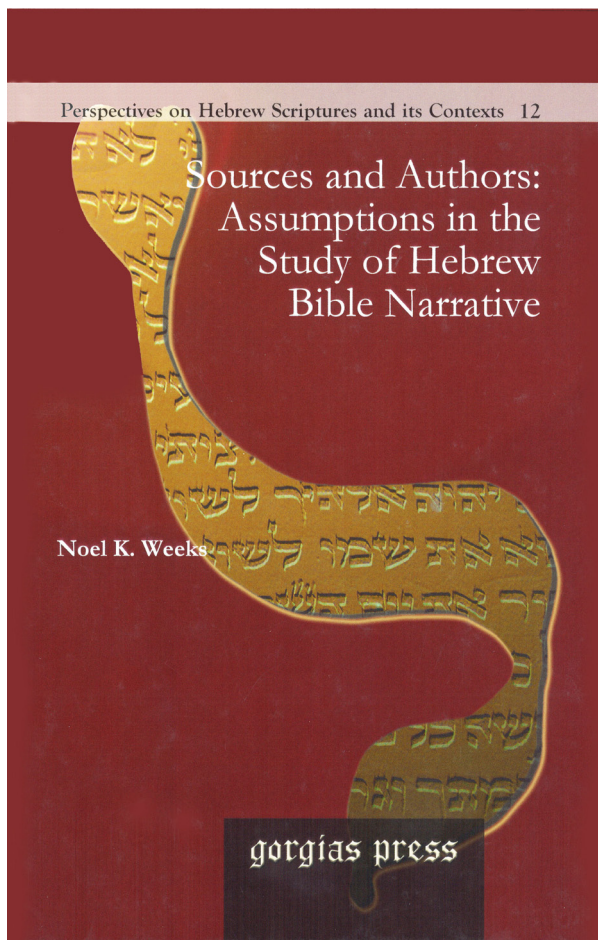


Figure 4: Noel's last book *Sources and Authors* (2001 New Jersey: Gorgias Press).

biblical treaty practice is a point where separate cultures have what seems a shared cultural system. The reasons for their taking this up are diverse. The Bible does not imitate Hittite practice, rather it utilises older forms because they fit its ideological context, just as the Hittites found a way of making treaties and historical records work together for quite different reasons. The Egyptians, on the contrary, were willing to use international treaty forms under Hittite pressure pragmatically, but did not use them for imperial purposes in their dominions, as evidenced in the Amarna Letters. Assyria shows the fascinating phenomenon of integrating treaty into its predominant paradigm of power, but then when it no longer had the power, attempted belatedly to rewrite the paradigm.

In *Sources and Authors* (2011), Noel Weeks examined scholars' presuppositions more explicitly. The traditional Documentary and Developmental Hypothesis saw the Bible through the framework of a culmination of Enlightened and Romantic theories of the development of religion. That is, religion arose out of primitive superstition, was then refined more in the direction of ethical monotheism, before being captured by the priesthood. Noel saw that much of the scholarly literature on

the history of the biblical text had been interpreted to fit this thesis. The Enlightenment, with its conflict with the church, saw priestly dominance as the great threat to freedom of religion. Therefore Chronicles, with its interest in the Levites and the priests, had to be a late phenomenon. On this particular point, Noel Weeks argued that the evidence points more to Chronicles' interest in priests and organisation in general as a concern for the weakness of the sacerdotal element in Israel at the time of the Return. Scholarship has tended to assume from this point that the earliest elements of the biblical text must be unsophisticated and lumped together under the influence of priestly reverence for tradition so that contradictions were ignored, hence the importance of the duplicate narratives to the Documentary Hypothesis. Noel argued instead that if one assumes the sophistication of the biblical author of whole documents and forgets the theory of late priestly dominance, one can better explain the same data. Namely, that apparent redundancies and contradictions are devices for literary effect rather than evidence of an inability on the part of the ancient authors to produce a sophisticated text.

Ministry and Theology

Noel Weeks' interests were wide-ranging. In addition to his Near Eastern scholarship, he contributed enormously to the Christian Schools movement in Australia, other forms of Christian ministry, and theology. Noel published the influential volume *The Christian School* (1988), was the founding Chairman of the Sutherland Shire Christian School's board from 1971 (with which he kept an association until his passing), lectured at the National Institute of Christian Education, and advocated against undue government interference in education. In addition to publishing *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (1988) and *Gateway to the Old Testament* (1996), Noel was a sought-after speaker regarding his favourite topics and their overlap: theology, the Bible, the Ancient Near East, and Science. This took him around the world from Vancouver to South Africa, and in recent times, back to his *alma mater* at Westminster Theological College to deliver the Gaffin Memorial lecture. He applied the same close reading of evidence along with critical analysis of current assumptions in this work. His interest in both theology and the Near East is also reflected in his role as Chairman of MERF (Middle East Reformed Fellowship) from 2005 until his passing.

Final thoughts

Noel Weeks was a gifted and generous scholar, yet he was humble. Noel's son, Keith Weeks, shared with the authors that Noel taught his family not to think too highly of his scholarly achievements. Keith went on:

That was difficult not to do, because he really was very gifted. But he understood the limits of his own understanding and human understanding in general, which was born out of his faith in an all wise, all knowing God. I still remember him addressing some Christian university students

and quoting Jeremiah 9:23–24 ‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom...but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me.’ And then he said something like, ‘It’s very easy in a university context to take pride in learning and knowledge, but what matters most is the knowledge of God.’

Noel treated all his students with respect, provided support for them regardless of their circumstances, and had tremendous patience for, and confidence in, his students to develop over time. For many students, he was an important figure in their adult lives, and he will be dearly missed. He was an inspiration to so many and a role model for all.

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Books

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- 1976 *Early River Civilizations*, Rushcutters Bay: Pergamon Press.
- 1988a *The Sufficiency of Scripture*, Edinburgh and Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust.
- 1988b *The Christian School: An Introduction*, Edinburgh and Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust.
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- 2004 *Admonition and Curse: The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter-Cultural Relationships*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 407, London and New York: T&T Clark International.
- 2011 *Sources and Authors: Assumptions in the Study of the Hebrew Bible Narrative*, Perspectives on Hebrew Scripture and its Contexts 12, New Jersey: Gorgias Press.

Edited books

- 2007 (with J. J. Azize), *Gilgamesh and the World of Assyria: Proceedings of the Conference held at Mandelbaum House, The University of Sydney, 21–23 July 2004*, Ancient Near Eastern Studies Supplement 21, Leuven: Peeters.

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- 1972 Of Silence and Head Covering, *Westminster Theological Journal* 35(1), 21–27.
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- 2019a Problems with the Comparative Method in Old Testament Studies, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 62(2), 287–306.
- 2019b Systemisation in Ancient Mesopotamian Religion, *Buried History* 55, 31–42.
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Endnotes

- 1 The memorial service was live streamed and can still be viewed at: <http://acl.asn.au/thanksgiving-service-for-dr-noel-weeks/>. The authors would like to thank the Weeks family, especially Noel’s wife, Jan Weeks, and his son, Keith Weeks, for their help and support in writing this tribute. All photos were supplied by the Weeks family.
- 2 Noel Weeks lectured on the influence of Thomas Kuhn (1962) on inductive reasoning in science and history. The process of the paradigm shift was of particular interest to him.
- 3 Fitting was Engle’s (2005) review of *Admonition and Curse* in which he commended Noel’s ‘breadth of scholarship with his treatment and personal translation of treaty/covenant texts from Egypt to Hatti that is truly noteworthy.’
- 4 This point also has been taken up in Weeks 2010 and 2020.