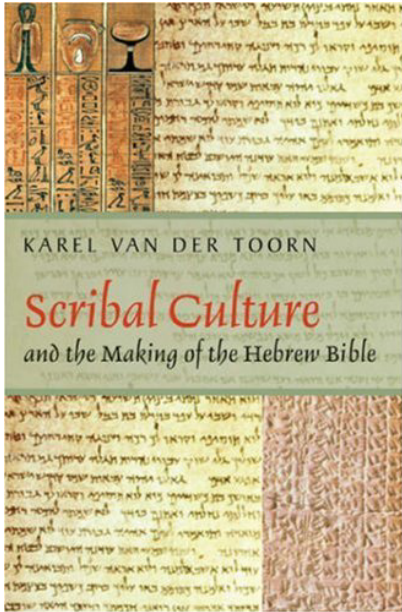


RBL 04/2009



Toorn, Karel van der

Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. Pp. x + 401.
Hardcover. \$35.00. ISBN 0674024370.

Frank H. Polak
Tel Aviv University,
Tel Aviv, Israel

Karel van der Toorn has joined a number of scholars who are occupied by the complicated issues surrounding oral and scribal culture in the Hebrew Bible, such as Susan Niditch, William Schniedewind, and David Carr. The special input of the Dutch scholar is his thorough, first-hand knowledge of Assyriology, which enables him to provide an insightful review of Mesopotamian evidence. But van der Toorn is aware of the pitfalls of patterning. The model provided by comparative evidence “is useful insofar as it puts us on the right track in our investigations,” but the ultimate test remains “how it is supported by the data, of which the largest set is the Bible itself” (53).

The basic thesis of van der Toorn relates to the status of the Hebrew Bible as revealed text. In his analysis, such a view of the text is an innovation: formerly only persons were considered to embody revealed knowledge, such as, for example, a prophet or divination specialist. In late Mesopotamian thought, however, this attribute was carried over to texts that were considered to be revealed by the gods and destined exclusively for the initiated. In his view, the same process affected the Hebrew Bible, to begin with Deuteronomy. This thesis is dependent on a detailed analysis of the position of the scribe and scribal knowledge in ancient Near Eastern and biblical context.

At the outset van der Toorn removes two misunderstandings: the conception of “book” as a book in our sense, whereas in biblical context we are speaking of scrolls containing compositions that grew within the stream of tradition and that can be combined on one scroll for convenience; and the concept of “author,” which is to be modified according to the understanding that the person composing a text is acting within the stream of tradition and represents a guild that has been transmitting similar texts for a long time. In the Mesopotamian tradition, few persons composing a text are mentioned by name, and if they are, such as the author of Erra and Ishum (the Erra Epic) or the Babylonian Theodicy, it is to claim authority rather than personal creativity. Sîn-leqe-unninī, who presents himself as the person responsible for what we call the standard recension of the Gilgamesh Epic, is considered an “editor,” since he composed a revision of a former, old Babylonian, state of this epic. Remarks along these lines, although hardly new, are useful reminders of a truth that one may tend to forget. The Assyriologist also draws our attention to interesting facts on the social context of copying, such as the note on the “junior scribe” (in contradistinction to the head of the scribal family), who copied the Babylonian Flood Epic *Atram-ḫasīs* in his free time, since the dates mentioned in the colophon are Babylonian holidays.

Van der Toorn’s next step is an exposé of the scribe’s learning. In his view, formal education was the privilege of “the ruling classes, the royal family, its entourage, the administrators, the wealthy landowners,” a school often being a private house. From the end of the Kassite period (around 1200), it is argued, schools were attached to temples. The student acquired cultural literacy, which in the first stage of his studies included a working knowledge of various branches of scribal expertise, and in the second stage a specialization in one of the fields of higher knowledge, such as divination, astrology, or exorcism. Students not going through this arduous curriculum would be ready to assume an administrative post, whereas the advanced scholars would be attached to temple or royal court. In van der Toorn’s view, the basic homestead for scribes remained the *bīt mummi*, the temple chancery, where the collegium of scholars had its seat and which included smaller or larger collections of texts. The author stresses that the scribes formed a small, elitistic in-group cherishing secrecy, bent on preserving their privileges, and venerating their craft in a way only found in an oral society.

With regard to ancient Israelite culture, van der Toorn emphasizes that the Bible came into being thanks to the professional scribes. He proposes to examine their world with the help of comparative evidence as a heuristic tool and the epigraphic texts placed at our disposal by archeology, but in the main by careful analysis of the biblical data. Thus he quotes such passages as Jeremiah’s diatribe against the presumptions of the scribes who describe themselves as sages in possession of God’s Torah (Jer 8:8–9; presumed to allude to Deuteronomy) or the tale about Baruch writing a scroll being dictated by Jeremiah.

Apart from the usual functions of the scribe (*sōphēr*) as craftsman and as senior court official, van der Toorn points to Ezra's role as "secretary for Jewish (*sic!*) affairs" and the role of the Levites, whom van der Toorn describes as scribes with Ezra reading from the Torah scroll and explaining it to the people (Neh 8:7–8). The *sōphēr* in this sense is perceived as a scholar of scripture, a sage, rather than a penman, copyist, or government official. Van der Toorn adduces the Levitical scribes of the Persian and Hellenistic era as evidence that the scribal scholars under the monarchy were exclusively associated with the temple, as, in his view, even Baruch was, although his brother Serayah was mentioned in connection with a diplomatic mission to Babylon (Jer 51:59) and thus was related to the royal court (their aristocratic lineage being indicated by their double patronym, son of Neriah son of Mahseiah; Jer 32:12). The author rejects the dichotomy of temple and palace in view of the well-known close relationship between the Jerusalem temple and the royal palace. In view of the Samuel tale (1 Sam 10:25), he highlights the role of the temple as center of written law, as also indicated by the law scroll found in the temple by Hilkiyah and as implied by Hosea's words about God as writer of the Torah precepts (Hos 8:12). In Ezekiel's sayings van der Toorn finds evidence that the temple also was the center of written prophecy (Ezek 2:8–3:4). The educational role of the temple is dependent on its function as center of law and prophetic literature (although the school as such was not necessarily located in or near the temple and might also be situated in the house of a priest or scribal scholar). In van der Toorn's view, this function of the temple school is of particular importance for the production of scribal texts, the second function of the school. The nature of the scribal training helps us to understand the character of biblical literary texts that witness to the educational process, such as the acrostic psalms and such allusions as found in the words of the great prophet of the return (Isa 50:4) or the psalmist (Ps 45:2). The social position of the scribal elite became more prominent in the Second Temple period, as Judaism turned into the religion of the Book and the Levitical scribes, though always subservient to the priestly aristocracy, "held the key to the cultural capital of the nation" (106). But van der Toorn is aware that, unlike the scribal position in Mesopotamia, their privileged position was not as much due to a claim to secrecy of their expertise as to their function as mediators of Torah knowledge.

The next step in van der Toorn's argumentation relates to book production. In Mesopotamia and in ancient Israel alike he discerns a number of scribal roles: transcription of an oral source (always, in his view, molding the wording in accordance with scribal convention [115]); invention (always based on earlier texts and prototypes); compilation of anterior texts; and expansion of existing texts as *Fortschreibung*, such as the Gilgamesh Epic or, in the biblical context, Deuteronomy or Jeremiah. What characterizes these processes is adaptation and integration. With the help of these insights, van der Toorn analyzes the redactional sequences of Deuteronomy, in which four

headings/colophons attest to four stages of redaction. The development of the book of Jeremiah as scribal artifact is represented as textualization on the basis of oral tradition, written prophecies being attested in the eighth-century Tell Deir-Alla inscription, while the Neo-Assyrian collection of prophetic dicta shows that in Assyria prophetic texts were being collected by the temple scribes. Nevertheless, van der Toorn assumes that in Israel the basic collection of prophetic oracles was created from memory by a sympathetic scribe such as Baruch. This textualization was characterized by the creation of scribal expansions, such as the prophetic confessions in the Jeremiah book, by which the scribe created a prophetic identity, and the expansion of the text, as evidenced by comparison with the Greek version.

Thus van der Toorn arrives at his final destination, the explanation of the revealed text of the Bible in the light of ancient Near Eastern scribal practice. What distinguishes the Bible from other scribal collections is its status as divine revelation. In a religious context, this status is exceptional, since revelation is always attached to persons, such as priests and prophets. But van der Toorn senses a change in this fundamental pattern in Mesopotamia, as, for instance, the text of the eighth-century Erra Epic is represented, by the postscript, as Erra's revelation to the scribe, who received it in one stretch in the middle of the night. By the same token, the Enuma Elish is described as a revelation to an ancient scribe. In a former attempt to account for this phenomenon, van der Toorn suggested that this appeal to divine revelation was intended as a response to and refutation of skeptical currents in the aftermath of the turmoil at the end of the Kassite period, as attested, for example, in the Babylonian Theodicy. At present, van der Toorn rejects this theory, since neither social turmoil nor the texts witnessing to such skepticism are restricted to the post-Kassite period. The present volume proposes that the notion of revealed text arose in Mesopotamia as oral communication was replaced more and more by writing and personal knowledge by the collection of tablets in libraries: whereas oral communication is privileged and can be restricted by the communicator, written texts are accessible to everyone, in particular when found in a temple collection. In this situation, the learned scribe defends his claim to privileged information by the pretense of special revelation of the text and by the requirement of secrecy.

Van der Toorn uses this hypothesis to further our comprehension of the notion of a revealed book in Judean context, since the Josianic reform also involved a transition from oral to written discourse. In this context, the revealed book is regarded as the ultimate source of authority, as declared in the heading of Deut 4:44 and the conclusion of 29:28. In addition, van der Toorn notes the public and private mode of revelation in the opening chapters (all Israelites: 5:22; exclusively Moses: 5:28–31) and the manifestations of “book consciousness” (28:58, 61; 29:19–20, 26). In the Second Temple period, the idea of written revelation became the subject of much theological reflection, as Ben Sira equated Law

with Wisdom, and the rabbinic sages represented the Torah as preexistent at creation. In the same vein, van der Toorn describes the position of prophetic literature as written revelation, as indeed presupposed by Dan 8–12 and 1 En. 1–36.

Finally, the scribal model is brought to bear on the notion of canonization. First, van der Toorn emphasizes that in the Second Temple period a canon was a list of the names of books rather than a volume. Rejecting both the hypothesis of a three-stage process rounded off by the rabbinic decision at Jamnia/Yavneh and the model of gradual canonization, van der Toorn investigates the hypothesis of a temple library of canonical books, finding that no signs exist of any limitations on the intake of the library of Assurbanipal, nor indeed at Qumran. A second hypothesis under scrutiny is the curriculum model, which, however, is rejected, since the Mesopotamian education employed mainly technical texts that are highly underrepresented in the Hebrew Bible, whereas the category of literary texts that forms the mainstay of biblical literature is of secondary importance in the Mesopotamian schools. The alternative proposed by van der Toorn is that canonization originates with scribal codification of the Torah in the Persian era, defined as “law” (*dat*) by imperial decision. The emergence of the prophetic books is viewed as a product of much scribal activity in the Persian/Hellenistic period, resulting in a recognized prophetic collection around 200 B.C.E., in a context of increasing tension between the upper strata of society, the priests and the landed gentry, and the general population, including craftsmen and Levites. In this context, prophetic literature is assumed to reflect a call to return to the Mosaic values. On the other hand, van der Toorn relates the closure of the collection to the scribal opinion that prophecy, and thereby the era of revelation, the canonical era, had drawn to a close. If only works by inspired people in the era of revelation were believed to be endowed with divine authority, van der Toorn insists, the criterion for inclusion in the class of revealed scripture, including the Davidic Psalter and Solomonic wisdom texts, basically was chronological. The author indicates that colophons and headings of the present text of many poetic and prophetic books are indicative of scribal creative expansion (Hos 14:10; Ps 1; Prov 1). In the Hellenistic period, scribal circles presumably decided to put the ancestral books at the disposal of the public, as witnessed by the library at Qumran and allusions by Ben Sira. In this view, the Book of the Twelve was edited in the same period as the books of the Writings; both categories were, in van der Toorn’s view, included in the category of “the Law and the Prophets.” The number of books included ultimately in a fixed list of texts in this category differs from community to community. In the view of van der Toorn, the canon of Judaism was finally established by the consensus of the Pharisaic sages. In this analysis, the Hebrew Bible is to be viewed as the product of Israelite and Judean scribal culture.

The synthesis proposed by van der Toorn has to be challenged in many respects. For instance, in spite of his criticism of Graetz’s classical traditional theory of canonization,

the difference between his view and Graetz's analysis is marginal. In vain one looks for a reference to the important work by Sidney Leiman, who shows that in rabbinic Judaism the issue of canonicity had not been definitively settled.

The theory that the attribution of certain texts to divine revelation is related to the transition from an oral to a scribal culture and matches a similar tendency in Mesopotamia seems ill-founded. First, in the Mesopotamian context, van der Toorn can only point to a few exceptional cases that cannot be considered representative of any norm. Second, as van der Toorn himself notes, in Mesopotamia this view relates to a closed in-group defending their privileged status by imposing secrecy. No such tendency exists in Deuteronomic circles. The demand of public reading is at the core of Deuteronomy (31:10–13; 30:11–13).

I also find it difficult to agree that in Israel the scribal guild basically was temple-related. If it is granted that the scribal occupation and scribal knowledge to a large extent were inherited from father to son and that Baruch's brother Serayah was in the royal service, why would we have to presume that Baruch was not? In the Israelite/Judean context the functions of the royal scribes involved expertise in the field of diplomacy, including the knowledge of foreign languages, as demonstrated by the case of Serayah as well as by the tale of the Rabshakeh's confrontation with Hezekiah's officials, who claimed to understand Aramaic (2 Kgs 18:26; Isa 36:11), and the tale of Ahab, who had dealings with Aramean messengers (1 Kgs 20:2–5). Knowledge of this kind hardly would issue from the temple. This subject is of main importance for van der Toorn's discussion, in view of the well-known Neo-Assyrian parallels of Deuteronomic phraseology, in particular in the field of covenant loyalty and the chapter of blessings and curses concluding the law corpus of Deuteronomy. These parallels presume a court context and royal scribal expertise rather than the knowledge imparted by the temple school. The book of Deuteronomy, then, seems to reflect the cooperation of scribal scholars from both royal and temple context.

Another major issue is the relationship between Israelite scribal culture and the oral culture in which it is embedded, as van der Toorn emphasizes a number of times. Though well aware that written texts were intended for oral proclamation, van der Toorn does not consider the question how the culture of the spoken word affects scribal practice. It is admitted that "oral cultures dictate a particular style in written texts" and that "texts were an extension, so to speak, of the oral performers" (14), but the implications of this admission are not examined, apart from the enumeration of "rhythm, repetition, stock epithets, standard phrases, and plots consisting of interrelated but relatively independent episodes" (14). By contrast, in the discussion of Jeremiah's prose orations it is asserted that "as the oral tradition was committed to writing, the oracles of the prophets borrowed their style from the scribes who wrote them down" (198–99). The implicit contradiction

between the different statements is not discussed. Indeed, most references to oral culture serve to indicate the privileged position of the scribal specialist.

Thus, van der Toorn's contribution to scholarship stands out by the importance of the subject matter addressed and the highlighting of Mesopotamian parallels, which goes far beyond previous discussions. Scholars may expect to profit much from the wealth of factual details in his book and its rich Assyriological bibliography. Our insights into Israelite/Judean scribal culture are significantly advanced by this publication, but a full treatment of this problem field is still to be awaited.