

### On Scribes and the Canonization of the Old Testament

Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, 401 p., ISBN 978-0-674-02437-3.

Van der Toorn has a good reputation as someone who uses his expertise as a trained Assyriologist to give a fresh look on the culture and religion of ancient Israel. In this book he focuses on the role of scribes in the ancient Near East. He presents a lot of information about their training and their status in society, especially from Mesopotamia. With regard to the classical texts, like the Gilgamesh Epic, they were the keepers of tradition. But they were not simply copyists, they were also interpreters and – as can be demonstrated from the different versions found of the Gilgamesh Epic – they felt free or perhaps even felt obliged to adapt the ancient texts to new situations. The growing importance of scribes can be derived from the fact that some of them left an individual mark in their work which was as a rule done anonymously. A good example of this is their use of acrostics. This is something you cannot hear when the text is recited, but can only be discerned by someone who is able to read. They commonly used alphabetic acrostics, but some scribes also left their own name in the text in this way.

Van der Toorn suggests that it is worthwhile to look at the making of the Hebrew Bible from this perspective, assuming that the scribes were more than technicians. According to Van der Toorn the scribes, connected to the temple, made copies of the important scrolls. A master copy of every scroll was stored in the temple and this scroll had to be renewed about every forty years. He admits that there is no direct proof for this, but he states that it can be compared to the attested custom of making new images of the gods in the temple. This was a necessary measure, because “unlike the gods, the cult image was subject to decay” (p. 148). This gave the opportunity to revision and expansion as well. So here we get some idea of how the redaction of the ancient texts was done. In the course of time the written tradition became more important than the spoken. An important turn from the oral to the scribal culture was, according to Van der Toorn, the reformation of Josia in which the scroll found in the temple plays a prominent role. Since that point the written records became more authoritative than the spoken

word, especially when they could be traced back to the authoritative speakers and writers of the past, like Moses, David, Solomon, and well known prophets.

Another important element of this scribal culture is the wish to collect important religious texts, like the psalms of prophetic sayings, and to preserve them in the scrolls. There is evidence of pre-exilic prophecies written down on scrolls, like collections or oracles we know, for instance, from Mari. According to Van der Toorn it is likely that the scribes incorporated such records in the temple files and kept these files up to date by adding new material, especially when there was need of new copies. Apparently the system of one authoritative master copy in the temple was not watertight, so that different copies could be in use next to each other. This left its traces in the later textual transmission with, for instance, the big differences between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint version of the book of Jeremiah.

The freedom to collect, revise and expand the texts came to an end in the third century B.C.E. In that Hellenistic period there was a trend in the whole ancient Near East to fix the national literature. The Babylonian priest Berossus wrote a history of Mesopotamia and one century later the Egyptian priest Manetho did the same in Egypt. According to Van der Toorn the temple scribes of Jerusalem responded to that cultural impact of Hellenism by publishing the definitive edition of the prophets, the Psalms and the Proverbs as "the national library of the Jewish people" (p. 259). In connection with these activities the scribes must have decided to publish all the minor prophets on a single scroll. To indicate its final form "they artificially turned their number into twelve by inventing a prophet by the name of Malachi" (p. 252), which is originally not a name but a title, "my messenger" used in 3:1 where God says: "Behold, I am sending my messenger to clear the way before me." Van der Toorn finds traces of redaction of the texts by the scribes in the editorial postscript, the final verses of the book of Malachi referring to Moses and Elijah linking the scroll to the other important written traditions of Israel. He also finds it in the postscript to Hosea (14:10) which like the beginning of the book of Psalms and of Proverbs says to the reader how wise it is to study these texts and that following these words makes the difference between right and wrong.

Van der Toorn offers us a fascinating approach to the Hebrew Bible, although it is not as unique as he suggests. The special role of the scribes in the process of the production of the canonical literature has been studied before. Van der Toorn mentions some of these studies, like the work of William Schniedewind (*How the Bible Became a Book*, 2004) and David Carr (*Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*, 2005), but does not enter into a serious discussion with them. It is remarkable that he does not refer at all to the book by Philip Davies, *Scribes and Schools* (published in 1998). Davies also pays much attention to the role of the elite scribes, but is less speculative than Van der Toorn. According to Davies the driving force behind the canonization was the Hasmonean policy trying to unite the Jewish people. Apparently this did not fit in with Van der Toorn's ideas about the central role of the temple scribes.

What makes the study of Van der Toorn so interesting, is that he brings together the always hypothetical theories about the growth of the Hebrew scriptures with the hard facts of the ancient world of the scribes. What makes Van der Toorn's study less convincing is that he does not seem to take seriously the complexity of the process leading to the text in its final form as it is handed over to us. In a rather provocative way he comes with relatively simple solutions to the vexing problems of the redaction of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, which are still puzzling many contemporary scholars. Taking over the more than sixty year old theory by Pfeiffer about the editions of the book of Deuteronomy and surpassing much of the recent literature on this subject, Van der Toorn makes it difficult for the reader to weigh his contribution to the modern historical-critical approach. Something similar can be said about the treatment of the evidence concerning the book of Jeremiah.

These problems about the way in which Van der Toorn applies his theory to the study of the growth of the books of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah are discussed extensively by John Van Seters, "The Role of the Scribe in the Making of the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 8 (2008), pp. 99–129. In other areas Van der Toorn's theory yields more positive results, namely the formation of the book of the Minor Prophets and also the final redaction of the historical books. In recent years, many studies were published about the evidence of a redaction of the Book of the Minor Prophets indicating

that these twelve prophecies should be read from a certain theological viewpoint. Van der Toorn's description of the work of scribal sages provides a perfect background for this theory. This can be illustrated by the discussion about the many references in the Book of the Twelve to the famous text of Exodus 34:6–7. See on this subject the article of Jakob Wöhrle, "A Prophetic Reflection on Divine Forgiveness: The Integration of the Book of Jonah into the Book of the Twelve," in the [online] *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9 (2009) no. 7, and my "Jonah, Nahum, and the Book of the Twelve: A Response to Jakob Wöhrle" in no. 8, in which more details are given on the theory outlined below. By the repeated reference to this key text from the Torah the different prophetic texts are not only combined with each other, but also related to the Torah. This can be compared to the way the book of Psalms was edited by placing the song about the blessings of the Torah at the beginning. The use of Exodus 34:6–7 may have been inspired by the manner in which it functions within the book of Jonah. This is probably one of the latest books of the minor prophets and therefore the scribes responsible for the making of the scroll of the Minor Prophets had much affinity with its theological message, which was formulated in Jonah 4:2 on the basis of Exodus 34:6–7. Following the line of reasoning by Van der Toorn one could imagine that in the process of producing the canonical scroll of the Minor Prophets, the scribes incorporated references to this central text in a number of special places and in a way which shows their literary skills. A first small signal is given at the beginning of the scroll, in the first chapter of Hosea. The prophet gets three children with a prostitute. Their names are messages to the people of Israel. The name of the middle one (Lo-Ruchama in 1:6) can be regarded as a first reference to Exodus 34. The second reference is found in the middle of the following book of Joel (2:13). Here, again, it is related to a name and its meaning. This applies also to the next reference, in the book of Micah (7:18–19), and even more so when Exodus 34 is taken up again in Nahum 1:3. Here it concerns the name of the Lord (mentioned seven times in 1:1–7, including the name acrostic formed by the final letters of the verse lines in 1:1–3). We could see this as a kind of climax of all the references to Exodus 34. There is extra emphasis on the references at the end of Micah and the beginning of Nahum, because they are so close to each other. Moreover, they are

placed precisely in the middle of the twelve books as they connect the sixth (Micah) and the seventh (Nahum). So the hand of the scribes is discernible at the beginning, at the end and above all in the middle of the scroll. The message is clear: these prophets are messengers of God and the words that are written down here are words of the Lord.

With regard to the book of Judges, Van der Toorn's approach is fruitful here as well. In my opinion there are many indications for a relatively late date of the book in its present form. See for the details my article "From Joshua to Samuel: Some Remarks on the Origin of the Book of Judges," in: J. van Ruiten/J. C. de Vos (eds), *The Land of the Israel in Bible, History, and Theology* (Studies in Honour of Ed Noort; VTS 124, Leiden 2009, pp. 137–149.) The most important argument is that the book of Judges appears to react not only to the book of Joshua but also to the books of Samuel and Kings as a kind of introduction. Next to this there is an impressive number of Greek parallels. Van den Toorn's theory that the making of Bible should be compared to scribal activities like that of Berossus in Babylon and Manetho in Egypt as an effort to publish and preserve a national literature is very helpful here. It seems reasonable to assume that when in the early Hellenistic age the Jewish scribes collected and edited the prophetic and poetic texts and published them as rounded off, authoritative texts as the legacy of inspired men like David and Isaiah, they also wished to offer an authoritative version of the history of Israel, from the creation until the restoration after the Babylonian exile. Apparently they already had the books of Moses and Joshua at their disposal, next to the stories of the kings beginning with Samuel. The scroll of Judges would have been produced to fill in the gap. The scribes had a number of traditional stories about local leaders at their disposal and also added new material that is characterized by the clear relation to Greek themes and stories.

All this indicates that Van der Toorn's well informed and thought provoking study appears to be very helpful and convincing when it comes to the last stages of the process of the making of the Hebrew Bible. With regard to earlier stages there is room for more doubt. In a number of cases he seems to make things look too simple.

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