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Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible

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Karel van der Toorn. *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*.
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Reviewed by Robert L. Maxwell

Karel van der Toorn, president of the University of Amsterdam and author of numerous books dealing with aspects of the Bible and ancient Israel, claims to have been writing an introduction to the Bible when he discovered that he was writing an altogether different book—an exploration of scribal culture in the Near East as a means to better understand the making of the Hebrew Bible. The developments he studies will be particularly interesting to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, since he explores the generations surrounding the Babylonian exile, including the time of the migration of Lehi and his family from Jerusalem.

Van der Toorn's general hypothesis is that a scribal elite connected with the Jerusalem temple formed and in many cases composed the text of the books now known as the Hebrew Bible several centuries before the Common Era. He concludes that, although the canon was not settled at this time, the "notion of the closure of the prophetic era" (262) did solidify during this period. In other words, the heavens had closed as far as those in control of the literature of ancient Israel were concerned, so the only authoritative writings would be those that could be demonstrated to have come from an earlier period when God was still communicating with humans. As Van der Toorn points out, having strict criteria for authoritativeness, one of which was the antiquity of the writing, is not the same thing as closing the canon; but it certainly led the way to this eventuality.

The work begins with a chapter titled "Books That Are Not Books," a discussion of books and writing in the ancient Near East. Van der Toorn claims that "the notion of the Bible as a series of books" (9) is misleading because the books of the Bible were not books in the modern sense; rather, the "books" were written versions of oral compositions; they were not linear (again because of their oral origin) and were not designed to be read as unities. The chapter likewise includes a lengthy argument that the scrolls on which these texts were written weren't books in the modern sense because

of their physical form. This argument may seem unnecessarily pedantic. Reflection on the behavior of readers of the Bible today will show that the books of the Bible are not treated as unities even in the current era—most readers read selectively, dipping in and excerpting stories or proof texts. Few attempt to read the Old Testament, or even single books within it, in a linear fashion.

In the same chapter, Van der Toorn makes the point that previous to the Hellenistic era, around the third century BC, private possession of a copy of the Torah by individual Jews was exceedingly rare. There was simply no trade in books before that time. Written texts were indeed copied and preserved, but at least in Israel this practice served more of an archival function: the preservation of records for temple and palace libraries and archives. This information may have considerable bearing on the questions of why Lehi's family did not have copies of the scriptures, why Nephi and his brothers had to go to such lengths to get a copy (and indeed why Laban might have resisted the idea of parting with his copy—housed in a vault), and why those other migrants to the New World, the Mulekites, evidently emigrated without any writings at all even though they were of royal descent.

The second chapter deals with authorship in antiquity. Van der Toorn claims that modern notions of authorship do not hold for antiquity, particularly in the ancient Near East. With respect to the Bible in particular, the people involved were looked on, he says, as “mere channels for a heavenly voice” (29). An author was not viewed as a creative genius as is common today. Therefore, previous to the Hellenistic era, anonymity prevailed in the world of literature. Authors almost never “signed” their work. Van der Toorn points out that none of the historical books of the Old Testament contain any reference within the text to the author (the prophetic books are discussed below in his seventh chapter). Here, in chapter 2, he discusses the common ancient practice of an author remaining anonymous by writing under a name other than his own, either ascribing authorship of a text to his patron or pretending to be a famous figure from the past. As examples of the former, he examines the Mesopotamian law collections, which are said to be the work of the king (for example, the Laws of Hammurabi). As examples of the latter he cites pseudepigraphical texts from the Hellenistic period claiming authorship by ancient figures such as Enoch, Noah, Baruch, and so on. Leading into his next chapters, Van der Toorn builds a case that the “authors” of books in ancient Israel, that is, those who wrote down, edited, and even composed certain parts of the texts, were scribes, a professional class.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the evidence describing scribes and their milieu in the ancient Near East. Van der Toorn first discusses the vast amount of evidence we have concerning scribes from Mesopotamia and Egypt. We happen to know quite a bit about scribal practices and education in these two cultures because the scribes left behind numerous writings that survived in the context of whole libraries. Van der Toorn must build on this comparative evidence because, in the case of the biblical scribes, there is almost no evidence at all; aside from the Bible itself, few Israelite texts and no libraries have survived from the period (Qumran notwithstanding). The texts of the Bible (including the Apocrypha) are essentially the only evidence we have, and these texts say precious little about their own composition. That little evidence, however, Van der Toorn mines to the core, and he concludes that the scribes behind the Bible were attached to the temple (rather than the royal palace, which also employed scribes) and belonged to the clergy. He associates these scribes with the Levites, who by this period were separate from the priests (the descendants of Zadok). He also posits that these Levite scribes were the forebears of the “scribes” of the New Testament.

The main thrust of chapter 5, “Making Books,” is that “the involvement of scribes in the process of literary production exceeded that of mere copyists. They had an active part in the formation and the transformation of the tradition” (110). Taking as evidence the relationship of the scribe Baruch to the prophet Jeremiah, he notes that in almost no cases do we see prophets themselves writing down texts, and he somewhat facetiously admits that “the phenomenon of a prophet dictating to a scribe is not pure fantasy” (111). Anyone who thinks of the practices of Joseph Smith and his use of many scribes and clerks can agree.

However, Van der Toorn points out that scribes did more than transcribe the words they heard: they also transformed the text to a greater or lesser degree. To explore this concept he examines texts (both biblical and extrabiblical) that exist in different versions but all claim to be the same text. Scribes were also compilers of disparate texts, and they sometimes expanded those texts. Van der Toorn demonstrates this concept of expanding texts by an examination of the two extant versions of Jeremiah. The Greek (Septuagint) translation, which is older than the Hebrew version represented in the Masoretic text, is one-seventh shorter than the Hebrew. The older Qumran texts of Jeremiah correspond to the Septuagint, not the Masoretic version, showing that the Masoretic text has been added upon. As examples of scribal adaptations of existing texts, Van der Toorn cites some fairly convincing studies asserting that certain sections of Proverbs and Psalms are adaptations of existing Egyptian wisdom texts.

Chapter 6 is a close analysis of the book of Deuteronomy, which Van der Toorn shows to contain plausible evidence of three separate editions, each expanding on the earlier edition over the two hundred years following the discovery of the book during the remodeling of the temple during the reign of Josiah. Van der Toorn suggests that—given the reverence and respect this text would have commanded—the revisions that these editions entailed corresponded with the need to write out new scrolls when the old wore out. The motive would have been a wish to make the text reflect the ideas and insights that had developed over time, and the warrant would have come from the fact that the scribes worked under priestly authority (following Van der Toorn’s belief that these scribes worked within the culture of the temple). Because of the need to carefully control the text, Van der Toorn believes, there was only one master copy containing the authentic text, which was kept at the temple. When this copy wore out, an opportunity existed to make minor or major changes to the text. This evidence, together with the internal evidence in Deuteronomy cited by Van der Toorn, makes a plausible case for the development of Deuteronomy over several editions. The idea that changes may have been made over time to biblical texts and that different versions of texts existed, such as the creation accounts, is not foreign to Latter-day Saints.

Chapter 7 turns again to the book of Jeremiah, which contains some of the best evidence for the scribal work of the Bible, since Jeremiah’s scribe, Baruch, and his activities are explicitly mentioned. Van der Toorn demonstrates that preexilic prophetic books were of a composite nature; that is, they consisted of disparate sayings of prophets collected together by scribes. This practice is demonstrated in the Bible by the frequent juxtaposition, often without transition, of prophecies about different subjects from different periods. Such a manner of collection will seem familiar to Latter-day Saints, given the similar process of recording and gathering the revelations found in the main book containing Joseph Smith’s prophecies, the Doctrine and Covenants. Using Baruch and his relationship to Jeremiah as a test case, Van der Toorn shows evidence of the procedure: the composer of the collection of Jeremiah’s prophecies was a professional scribe in the entourage of the prophet; what he wrote down were recollections of the oral sayings of Jeremiah; and the final version was a recollection from a later period, since the original scroll was destroyed (Jer. 36:20–23) and the work had to be rewritten.

The final two chapters of the book develop Van der Toorn’s proposition that, after the exile, notions of revelation changed among the Israelites: direct revelation became a thing of the past and communication from God would henceforth come from study of the inspired and authoritative

texts of earlier generations. He believes that this change in point of view occurred when Israel was transitioning from an oral to a written culture and that it was complete by the Hellenistic age. By the second century BC, books had taken the place of the prophets.

The very interesting and in many ways plausible notions proposed in this book are marred by the scant evidence on the subject, as well as some of the treatments of that evidence. In chapter 4, for example, during his discussion of scribal culture and education in ancient Israel, Van der Toorn admits, “Our knowledge about the scribal curriculum in Israel is almost nil. . . . Any reconstruction involves a certain amount of speculation” (98). He then suggests that Psalms 25 and 119 were possibly used in this curriculum because they are acrostics. A page later, he states, “The use of psalms as teaching material for beginners supports the view that the scribal school was connected to the temple” (99). Although this may be possible, he presents no evidence that the Psalms were employed in this specific way, and yet he uses such a view to support his theory explored elsewhere that the scribes were connected to the temple rather than the palace.

Readers might also be interested in seeing the evidence behind Van der Toorn’s assertions that Deuteronomy and Daniel are pseudonymous works written at a later time under the names of famous national heroes (34–35). Evidence for these assertions exists, and it would have been a scholarly courtesy to present enough of that evidence and allow readers to approach these theories and analyses themselves. Readers not familiar with this extensive literature must accept or reject the claim on Van der Toorn’s word alone.

The presentation of evidence, along with the limited evidence available, may be seen as a weakness throughout this book; nevertheless, many of Van der Toorn’s insights seem plausible and are worth considering by any reader interested in gaining better understanding about the development of the Hebrew Bible and the reasons why revelation seems to have ground to a halt in the centuries immediately preceding the time of Christ.

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