1 Introduction

The early prophets of Israel were men of the spoken word (cf. Jer. 18:18); not writers. This is one of the main propositions of Karel van der Toorn in his recently published book about the making of the Hebrew Bible. At first glance this statement does not seem very innovative. Within biblical scholarship it has long been recognised that the prophets were accustomed to delivering their message orally and that the writings which bear their name had seen the light of day only through a lengthy and complicated history. The Book of Isaiah seems to be an excellent illustration of this. In the course of several centuries many hands contributed to the growth and development of this biblical book. Scholarly opinions differ as to how exactly this process of development took place, but until now, within Isaiah research, scholars have unanimously worked under the assumption that the prophet himself had initiated the process. The first stage in the making of the Book of Isaiah is generally connected with the Jerusalemite prophet himself. It is precisely at this point that Van der Toorn draws other conclusions.

Van der Toorn contends that as a rule the pre-exilic prophets themselves neither wrote nor commanded others to write down their words. The commitment of the prophetic message to writing, he believes, is due solely to the work of professional writers, just as is the case with other books of the Hebrew Bible. Van der Toorn traces these writers to the company of the Levites from the Second Temple
Period, defining them as ‘the professionals of writing among the priests’. Because these writers were connected to the temple, their source of information not only consisted of the collective memory of supporters and sympathisers of the prophets, but they could also make use of the temple archives. The temple archives had most likely preserved the written reports of oracles that the prophets had spoken at public opportunities. The prophets themselves had never been interested in recording their message, Van der Toorn contends, because they only regarded their contemporaries as the addressees of their prophetic utterances. Van der Toorn admits the possibility that the prophets had sometimes committed themselves to writing – there are a few indications in biblical texts, such as Hab. 2:2, Isa. 8:1 and Jer. 29:1 –, but the purpose of these incidental writings had always been meant as direct communication to their own contemporaries. According to Van der Toorn the prophets had never intended preserving their words for future generations. This situation only changed with the work of Deutero-Isaiah, typified by Van der Toorn as ‘a prophet of the new stamp’ in that he wrote his message instead of preaching it. The early prophets, however, were no writers themselves, but had been posthumously transformed to that capacity through the headings the Levitical scribes attached to their books. This was a development already visible in the Book of Chronicles (cf. 2 Chron. 26:22).

Van der Toorn derives his arguments concerning the classical prophets primarily from the Book of Jeremiah. The Book of Isaiah only comes up for discussion sporadically. The most remarkable proposition with regard to Isaiah, is Van der Toorn’s suggestion that ‘Isaiah’s’ book, as one of Israel’s classics, was part of the curriculum of the scribal training in Israel. This might explain why Isaiah is

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3Van der Toorn 2007, 92.
4Van der Toorn 2007, 184, 203.
5Van der Toorn 2007, 182-3.
6Van der Toorn 2007, 179.
7Van der Toorn 2007, 181-2: ‘On occasion, then, the pre-exilic prophets did write. Their purpose in writing, however, was confined to communicating a message to their contemporaries. They resorted to written word when they judged an oral delivery less apt to reach their intended audience. Not a single time, though, did they write in view of preserving their words for future generations.’
8Van der Toorn 2007, 203.
9Van der Toorn 2007, 230.