This volume is a refreshing new look at an aged problem, an old one, indeed: who wrote the Bible? Critical introductions to the Hebrew Bible usually describe its twenty-four books one by one, relating to such topics as content, literary structure, form and style, date of composition or historical background, authorship, and the process by which the individual books came into being. The later issue often entails analysis of the books’ basic components, identifying them and labeling them as sources, fragments, additions, expansions, interpolations, insertions, etc., and arranging them chronologically as to the order in which they were composed, edited and incorporated into the growing work in progress. Everything is done viewing the books of the Bible from within, with only occasional resort to other Biblical books or external historical circumstances, and especially in the effort to fix absolute dates.

Karel van der Toorn’s fascinating and informative volume reviewed here is based on and informed by existing literary-historical analyses such as described above (especially in Chapters 6 and 7 which trace the development of the Books of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah), but adds many new factors so as to move illumination of the Bible’s origins several important steps forward, and in previously uncharted directions. He studies the Bible not as some abstract, incorporeal entity, which somehow came into being of its own power, but as a substantial, physical artifact formed by real people, in real life. In order to do so, he considers the technological realities, life circumstances, flesh and blood people, and social processes which brought the Bible into being. Above all, van der Toorn eschews the modern notion of “book” as descriptive of the Bible’s essence, as well as the present day concept of “author” as characterizing the people who participated in its genesis. The Bible, which reached its final form only in the Hellenistic age is rooted and gestated in the Ancient Near East, and as such is not a single book, nor can it be a book in the accepted sense of the term. Nor is it a collection or library of individual books,
each created by an identifiable author intent on producing a coherent, literary work that will be attributed to him and express his own thoughts. Nor are the Bible and its constituent components divinely authored documents revealed to prophets, written down verbatim, and transmitted accurately to subsequent generations. Rather, the Bible as a whole and each of its twenty-four “books” is a conglomerate embodying first oral and subsequently written material, which evolved slowly and in a complex process as a group project, in which a series of anonymous, faceless skilled artisans, and craftspeople known as “scribes” took part. In van der Toorn’s own words (p. 26) “… the Hebrew Bible is the collection of texts written, studied and copied over the centuries by scribes in the Jewish centers of scholarship. They are the collective property of the scribal community; the Hebrew Bible is their legacy.” Speaking of the Bible as a book is anachronistic. Ascribing its writings to particular individuals, attributing its origin to divine dictation, inspiration or intervention, and accepting it as “canon,” regarding it as authoritative and binding on the community are all accouterments vested onto it at later or final stages of its development.

To establish his contentions, van der Toorn investigates the “scribal culture” of the Ancient Near East—Mesopotamia to a great extent, Egypt to a lesser—to see how writing was done, who did it, and for what purpose. Only by viewing the Bible against this background, he says, can we fully comprehend how it came to be.

The first chapter discusses writing in the Bible’s Umwelt, the Ancient Near East prior to around 300 B.C.E. Literacy was low, cultural lore was transmitted mainly by word of mouth, written texts were essentially cribs for oral performance, and all this influenced their literary style. An interesting foray into the cost of producing tablets, scrolls, or books reveals that before the Hellenistic age, books were not cheap, and even when a book trade started to develop in the Roman period, they remained expensive and largely out of reach for the average consumer. Prior to the invention of the codex (circa 300 C.E.), writing was done on scrolls and this inconvenient form affects the mode of writing, editorial strategies, and how texts were used. The first Jewish books in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek appeared in the Hellenistic era, about 300 B.C.E., only with the proliferation of schools and concurrent rise in literacy.

The second chapter turns to the problem of authorship in antiquity. As a rule, writing was anonymous. Colophons on cuneiform tablets name the scribes who copied the tablets and not the authors of the texts. The Mesopotamian composition known as A Catalogue of Texts and Authors ascribes various texts to gods, mythological, or legendary characters rather than to real people, but even in these cases, the intent of the ascription is to lend authority to the text rather than account for its origin. Even the Erra Epic