INTRODUCTION

There would hardly seem to be a single contemporary reader of biblical literature who would not agree, both with the statement that a number of authors were responsible for any given biblical book, and with the existence of a doubt as to whether the extant text is identical with the original work as it emerged from the hands of its author two thousand and five hundred years ago or even earlier. It is an accepted truth that generations of readers and copiests who were involved in the transmission of the biblical literature left their mark upon it. At times this mark took the form of an error which fell into the text and which no one had intended to become a part of Scripture (even if there are those who would argue that it would have been better had these been removed from the text, it is impossible today to deny the fact of their existence). At other times, later readers or copiests acted upon various tendencies of correction, updating, or adjusting, which were found in the reworking of the text and which likewise became an inseparable part thereof.

It would follow that still in the second century [CE] and even in the third, those transmitting a text were able to change and rework a verse according to the requirements of the context, the subject under discussion, and common sense. One may assume that during earlier periods access to the text was so free that corrections frequently assumed the form of actual corrections to the text. One should emphasize that we are not referring in this context to ideological revision, that is, to reworking of texts so as to adjust them to the religious outlooks of the periods of the editors. The existence of such revisions is unquestioned. (Seeligman, [1979], 281).

It is not surprising that the reader who has freed himself from the axioms of tradition, which in certain cases were sanctified and given the force of faith dogmas,¹ will agree with the assumption, not only that the present text is a composite, having a long and complex history, but that in light of this reality it is impossible to reconstruct the original of the work as it came from the pen of its author. In practice, any such reconstruction is no more than one of many possible conjectures.² For example, examination of the manner in which the author of the book of Chronicles utilizes his sources conclusively

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¹ See the answers given to the question, “And who wrote them?” in b. B. Bat. 14d-15a, and Spinoza’s struggle (1961, 95-125) to refute these statements.
² Compare Gordis [1981], and more recently Greenstein [1986], 83-84.
proves that the tendency to preserve the text was not characteristic of this stage of the biblical text’s history, and that the existence of such a tendency is evidently a distinct sign that the sanctification of the text and the work of the Massoretes only occurred at a later stage.

The relation to a range of authors and to an extended process of copying and reworking, which prevents the reconstruction of the original text, shifts the center of gravity from the act of composition to that of editing. In light of this reality, it seems to me that the biblical work may be defined as a collective one, and its editors as those responsible for its shaping and fashioning throughout the generations. Accordingly, any biblical text is understood as a text reflecting, not only the message which its author was interested in transmitting to his readers, but as carrying within itself the collective significance placed upon it over the course of the years of its transmission prior to its identification as a sacred text—that is, so long as it was still possible to add to it or to remove from it.

From this point of departure, an attempt has been made in this study to wrestle with the question: what are the assumptions, considerations and rules which need to accompany modern readers of this complex and pregnant work? In the initial stage of my discussion I will refer to examples from the entire gamut of biblical literature, but further on I will focus primarily upon the book of Judges as the object of editing, attempting to show that the book is organized according to editorial principles which were preserved throughout the course of generations, thereby conveying a certain integrity to most of its sections. The purpose of this discussion is to uncover the compositional principles which served many of the book’s editors, who adopted them, whether consciously or unconsciously, and acted on their basis. The uncovering of these principles may explain, not only the choice and organization of the majority of those materials which were gathered within this editorial framework, but also the manner of their fashioning, clarifying their contribution to the construction of meaning. Such an examination will also contribute to our understanding the editing of other biblical books, particularly those belonging to biblical historiography.