1 Introduction

In earlier meetings of the Pericope group several participants have urged for a more systematic concentration of research on one particular manuscript because they felt that paragraphing was an impressionistic affair, not strictly controlled by an authoritative tradition. Of course these colleagues admitted that the rabbis aimed at such uniformity since at least the third century BCE,¹ but since it has been demonstrated that they were only partly successful in suppressing the relative freedom with regard to paragraphing which the pre-Masoretic scribes of the scrolls of the Judean Desert seemed to have enjoyed, paragraphing was assumed to be one area in which to some (undefined) extent the scribes of biblical manuscripts were tacitly allowed to follow their own subjective judgment, even though the Halakhah forbade this (see e.g. Tov 1998; 2000; 2004).

It is perhaps appropriate to emphasise once again that in the ancient world scribes were never simple copyists. From the earliest times on they were scholars, an intellectual elite in a largely illiterate world. Their products were intended to influence the public opinion and to propagate new ideas in times when established political and religious institutions seemed to become inadequate. In the modern world they would be regarded as writers, be it plagiarists, because they often used material that was not their own, but modified existing written traditions.² Even when canonisation or official recognition of a certain text recension had taken place, scribes were tacitly granted the freedom to introduce minor changes reflecting their own understanding of the text.³

¹The data have been surveyed by Oesch 1979; 2003.
³See e.g. Tigay 1982; Lieberman 1990; Tov 2004, 26-9.
As one of us has shown, this is also true of unit delimitation in cultic texts from Babylonia, Ugarit and ancient Israel (Korpel 2005). It is evident that the scribes felt the necessity to elucidate the logical structure of the cultic texts they were copying by inserting dots, lines and spaces.

Yet they often failed to achieve perfection in placing markers of logical units. This lack of consistency appears to be typical of all ancient attempts at dividing texts according to some logical principle. The intended structural division may have been lucid enough, but the simple fact is that many people find it extremely difficult to maintain order. If a scribe knew a text well he may have felt little inclination to mark what was obvious to him as an expert reader.4

However, since it stands to reason that the earliest Scripture scrolls already indicated some kind of section division,5 be it perhaps inconsistently, it is a legitimate aim to try to reach back to the earliest attainable stage of the transmission of the text with regard to unit division, as is the commonly accepted custom with regard to the text itself in textual criticism. It is important then to establish whether common traditions may be at the root of differences in paragraphing in non-Ben Asher biblical manuscripts. It is with this aim that we want to present a study of a single interesting manuscript here.

2 The Manuscript B.N. hébreu 80

In his catalogue of Hebrew and Samaritan manuscripts in the National Library of France, Hermann Zotenberg gave a very summary description of the manuscript No. 80, formerly Sorbonne 254 (henceforth in this article: BN),


---

6Zotenberg 1866, 8.