An attempt will be made here to re-examine and, subsequently, to reassess the meaning of the term Masorah, especially in its early stages. Going back to its very beginnings, to the times and spheres of activity when and where it originated, will enable, and even compel us to revise the more or less accepted views about the concept. A new explanation of the word will then be proposed, achieved mainly by uncovering its linguistic and functional root. Masorah will be set into the framework, and thus seen from the aspect of the growth and development of biblical interpretation and exegesis—of Midrash. This will lead us to the early days of the Second Commonwealth, to the days of the first Scribes and their collaborators in the work of teaching and expounding the Torah—to the Levites. Thus, Masorah will be seen here accompanying Midrash, in harmony or in conflict, for a period of some fifteen hundred years. From Ezra the Babylonian Scribe in Jerusalem (5th cent. B.C.E.) down to M. Ben-Asher the Masorete from Tiberias (10th cent. C.E.) we will find the art of Masorah “shadowing” the work of exegesis in all its stages, from the early, late-biblical stage of trying to establish a correct and faultless text and to present it in a perfect and beautiful manner of recitation, to the later, talmudic stage—to the time when the Rabbis, disregarding all the linguistic and artistic principles of the first levitic Masoretes, embarked upon dissolving the whole grammatical and stylistic structure of the scriptural text; which then enabled them to use it for their midrashic interpretations. And from here the line then goes to the revival, by the medieval masoretic masters of the earlier, pre-talmudic, ideals. That is back to the methods of understanding and expounding the Bible by securing the two major “levitic” premises—a faultlessly established and beautifully recited text.
MEANING AND ORIGIN OF THE TERM MASORAH

The term Masorah does not occur in biblical or talmudic literature. This form of the noun is only to be found in medieval sources 1). Everything about the term is uncertain—its correct vocalization, its radical letters and its original meaning. Even its actual grammatical form is steadily being confounded with its supposed synonymous form—Masoreth 2). In the course of this discussion it will yet become clear that these two concepts have to be kept apart. As to the vocalization, no less than eight different readings for the masoreth are so far recorded 3). With regard to the root, we are given the choice between רכס or רכוס, only the first of which has also the letter mim as an original radical letter 4). And because of the uncertainty about the root of the term, we also have a great variety of propositions concerning its meaning. Mostly it is rendered by "tradition" or "transmission" (traditional form of the transmitted Text), but others translate it as "bond" (which holds the text together), "limit" (as a fence around the text), "sign" (designating the masoretic signs

1) Hai Gaon (10th cent.) seems to be the earliest source; see J. Mann, Texts and Studies I, p. 137 and p. 695 (facsimile); cf. Diqduque Ha-Te'amin, introduction p. xxvi (from an Italian manuscript) תֹּרֶת הַמָּסָּרָה; see also Ben Yehuda Thesaurus, p. 3113, n.1; on p. 3140, n.1, he quotes as a single talmudic example for מַסָרָה Pal. Yoma 3, a, yet the old manuscript in Leiden and most later editions have here תֹּרֶת מָסָּרָה.

2) See, as one example for many, E. Levi Tiberias, Massoreth Ha-Massoreth, ed. Ginsburg, 1867, p. 102-103, סֵפֶר מַסָרָה; W. Bacher, J.Q.R. iii, p. 786, quotes סֵפֶר מַסָרָה from an old Yemenite version; Diqduque Ha-Te'amin, xxvi, has, from the Leningrad Codex, תֹּרֶת מָסָּרָה (sing. תֹּרֶת מָסָּרָה); Bacher loc. cit. p. 788, mentions there also the possibilities of מַסָרָה מַסָרָה מַסָרָה.

3) Buxtorf Tiberias, pp. 1-4, has, from the Leningrad Codex, תֹּרֶת מָסָּרָה; W. Bacher, J.Q.R., 1867, p. 102.

4) Theodotion (παραδοθεὶς), Targum and Rashi (on Ez. xx 37, with which "Masorah" was identified) derive it from מַסָרָה; cf. Ben Yehuda, 3113 s.v. מַסָרָה and 3140 s.v. מַסָרָה, Bacher, Terminologie I, p. 107-108, "Überlieferung. Es ist das in Ez... vorkommende Wort," and J. Levy, Wörterbuch u. d. Talmudim s.v. מַסָרָה, p. 179.

Aquila, (אָקָיווּך), Hieronymus, Vulgata (vinculis), derive Ez. xx 37 from רכס; so also Ibn Janah, Riqmah (ed. Goldberg), p. 146, and Qimhi; cf. Buxtorf Tiberias p. 4; this derivation is also applied to מַסָרָה (see p. 243, note 1). In the Talmud—Babl. Baba Mezia 8b—we find also מַסָרָה, which undoubtedly means vinculum, (Ps. ii 3), identified with מַסָרָה.

J. Levy, Wörterbuch, p. 176, s.v. מַסָרָה holds masar to stem from רכס; for our suggestion about this verb, see below.