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Biblical Accents: System of Combination

The Hebrew Bible is punctuated with an elaborate system of stylized inflections that delineate subtle nuances of meaning. For centuries this system existed in only oral tradition. The consonantal text was written down, but the vocalization and cantillation had to be memorized. By the 7th century, the Masoretes, who considered themselves guardians of the sacred text, had become concerned that the traditional vocalization and cantillation were in danger of being forgotten. They devised a set graphic symbols, called טעמים *ṭeʿamim* 'accents' (singular טעם *ṭaʿam*), which were superimposed over the text, to represent the cantillation. There were at least three attempts to create a universally accepted system; ultimately, the prevailing system was the one developed in the ben-Asher school in Tiberias between the 7th and 10th centuries. The Masoretes of Tiberias also developed two other sets of symbols: (i) vowels and consonant modifiers and (ii) the Masoretic apparatus—notes for scribes to ensure accurate copying.

The *ṭeʿamim* have several functions. In traditional Jewish services, as is the case in most other religions, sacred texts are chanted, not read. The melodic tradition is considered to be ancient, even divinely inspired, and therefore worthy of preservation in its traditional form. The *ṭeʿamim* serve as an ekphonetic notation system, indicating the proper musical motif to which each word of scripture is to be chanted in the context of public liturgical services. *Ṭeʿamim* do not represent absolute pitches, but rather serve as a reminder to the performer, who has already memorized the musical motif represented by each *ṭaʿam*.

In addition to their spiritual/aesthetic function, the *ṭeʿamim* also serve to clarify the meaning of the text. Diaspora Jews were by and large not conversant in the Hebrew language, and had difficulty reading the sacred texts. By placing (most of) the *ṭeʿamim* above or below the first letter of the syllable that is to be stressed, the Masoretes were providing a guide to proper pronunciation. This was necessary, since *halakha* demanded an error-free rendition of the Torah in public liturgical performance, and syllabic misaccentuation could pervert the meaning of a word (see שלחן ערוך *šulḥan ʿaruḵ*, ערוך השלחן *ʿaruḵ ha-šulḥan*, and משנה ברורה *mišna berura*, אורח חיים *ʾoraḥ ḥayim* §142.). For example, בָּאָה *bāʾā́* stressed on the second syllable means 'she is coming' (Gen. 29.6), while בָּאָה *bā́ʾā* stressed on the first syllable means 'she came' (Gen. 29.9). וְשָׁבוּ *wə-šā́bū* stressed on the penultimate syllable means 'and they will return' (1 Kgs 8.48a), while שָׁבוּ *šā́bū* stressed on the final syllable means 'they captured' (1 Kgs 8.48b). וּמָשַׁחְתָּ *u-mā́šaḥtā́* stressed on the final syllable means 'and you shall

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anoint' (Exod. 40.15a), while מָשַׁחְתָּ *mā̆šáḥtā̆* stressed on the penultimate syllable means 'you anointed' (Exod. 40.15b).

But the *ṭeʿamim* are not merely signifiers of syllabic stress. They serve as an elaborate punctuation system, a means of clarifying the syntax and rhetorical emphasis of each verse of the Hebrew Bible. The traditional orthography of Hebrew had included no punctuation marks. While *ṭeʿamim* have appeared in codices since the 10th century, the original consonantal text, lacking vowels, punctuation, *ṭeʿamim*, as well as chapter and verse numbering, is maintained to this day in handwritten scrolls used in liturgical services.

There are two basic types of punctuation marks: disjunctive *ṭeʿamim*, which indicate a pause or separation, and conjunctive *ṭeʿamim*, which indicate a connection. The meaning of an ambiguous phrase can be clarified by the placement of *ṭeʿamim*. For example, the phrase אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים אָלֶף *ʾarbāʿā̆ wə-ʿeśrīm ʾālep* lit. 'four and twenty thousand' (Num. 25.9), could be read as '24,000, i.e., four-and-twenty thousand' or '20,004, i.e., four and twenty-thousand'. Just as the hyphen is useful for indicating which words should be joined together in English, in the biblical text, the conjunctive *ṭaʿam* מֵרְכָא *merḵa* indicates that its word is joined to the word that follows, while the disjunctive *ṭaʿam* טִפְחָא *ṭippeḥa* indicates a slight separation from the word that follows: אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים אָלֶף *ʾarbāʿā̆ wə-ʿeśrīm ʾālep* '24,000, i.e., four-and-twenty thousand'. In written English, punctuation marks are generally placed after a word, while in Biblical Hebrew the punctuation is generally superimposed on the word itself. While in English there is only one conjunctive punctuation mark, the hyphen, in Biblical Hebrew there are eight. While in English there are three essential levels of disjunction (period, semi-colon, comma), in Biblical Hebrew there are four levels with eighteen symbols.

The opening clause of Isa. 40.3, קוֹל קוֹרֵא בַּמִּדְבָּר פַּנּוּ דֶּרֶךְ יְהוָה *qōl qōrē bam-miḏbā̆r pannū dereḵ YHWH* is ambiguous. Is it 'A voice is calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD" '? Or is it 'A voice is calling in the wilderness: "Prepare the way for the LORD" '? The Masoretic Jewish reading accords with the former; the *ṭaʿam* זָקֵף גָּדוֹל *zaqep̄ gadol* on the word קוֹרֵא *qōrē* 'calling' is a stronger disjunctive than the זָקֵף גָּדוֹל *zaqep̄ gadol* on the word בַּמִּדְבָּר *bam-miḏbā̆r* 'in the desert'. Hence the JPS 'A voice rings out: "Clear in the desert a road for the LORD!" '. But the Christian reading accords with the latter punctuation, hence the KJV 'The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD'. For Christian interpreters it was important that Isa. 40.3 be understood as a prooftext for the following verse from the New Testament, itself based on the Septuagintal translation of Isaiah: "John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the LORD.' " (John 1.23). John was calling in the desert; with only a slight change in punctuation, the prophecy of Isaiah could be interpreted as referring to John (Jacobson 2002:955).

The punctuation of a biblical verse is derived from a process of continuous dichotomy (bifurcation; for different analyses see Janis 1987; Haïk-Vantoura 1991; and Weil 1995). Each verse is segmented into two component parts, and then each segment of the verse is further subdivided (always into two subdivisions) until there remain only one or two words in the lowest level division. Many verses comprise two 'parallel' clauses; the first segmentation marks the dividing line between the two clauses. Each clause typically begins with a verb; within each clause, the next subdivision will be marked before the final complement of the verb (i.e., any word, phrase, or clause that gives information about the verb, e.g., subject, object, or adverb). In the example below, the primary dividing point is between the two clauses. The termination of the first segment is marked with אֶתְנַחְתָּא *ʾetnaḥta* and the second with סִלּוּק *silluq*.

וַיְבָרֶךְ יַעֲקֹב אֶת־פַּרְעֹה // וַיֵּצֵא מִלִּפְנֵי פַרְעֹה
wa-yḇā̆reḵ yaʿ ă qōḇ ʾeṯ-parʿō // way-yēṣē
verb subject object // verb
mil-lip̄nē p̄arʿō
adverbial phrase
'And Jacob greeted Pharaoh // and he went out from before Pharaoh' (Gen. 47.10).

Each primary segment is then subdivided. This secondary division, occurring before the final complement of each verb, is marked with טִפְחָא *ṭippeḥa*. The remaining words are marked with

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conjunctives: the conjunctive before טִפְחָא *ṭippeḥa* is מֵרְכָא *merḵa*, the conjunctive before אֶתְנַחְתָּא *ʾetnaḥta* is מוּנַח *munaḥ*, and the conjunctive before סִלּוּק *silluq* is מֵרְכָא *merḵa*.

וַיְבָרֶךְ יַעֲקֹב / אֶת־פַּרְעֹה // וַיֵּצֵא / מִלִּפְנֵי פַּרְעֹה
wa-yḇāreḵ yaʿăqōḇ / ʾeṯ-parʿō // way-yēṣē / mil-lip̄nē p̄arʿō
(for a detailed analysis of the relationship between syntax and *ṭeʿamim* see Jacobson 2002; → Biblical Accents: Prosody; Biblical Accents: Relation to Exegetical Traditions).

The following chart displays the hierarchical levels of the disjunctives. When disjunctives repeat within any level, the one closer to the beginning of the segment is a higher level:

Level 1: אֶתְנַחְתָּא *ʾetnaḥta*, סִלּוּק *silluq*
Level 2: טִפְחָא *tippeḥa*, זָקֵף קָטֹן *zaqēp̄*, זָקֵף גָּדוֹל *zaqēp̄-gadol*, שַׁלְשֶׁלֶת גְּדוֹלָה *šalšelet gedola*, סֶגוֹל *segol*
Level 3: תְּבִיר *teḇir*, יֶתִיב *yetiḇ*, פַּשְׁטָא *pašṭa*, זַרְקָא *zarqa*, רְבִיע *reḇiʿ*
Level 4: לְגַרְמֵהּ *legarmeh*, גֵּרְשַׁיִם *geršayim*, גֵּרֶשׁ *gereš*, תְּלִישָׁא־גְדוֹלָה *teliša-gedola*, פָּזֵר־גָּדוֹל *pazer-gadol*, פָּזֵר *pazer*
(for more detail and alternative terminology see Jacobson 2002:397–398).

Conjunctive *ṭeʿamim*: מוּנַח *munaḥ*, מֵרְכָא *merḵa*, מֵרְכָא־כְפוּלָה *merḵa-ḵep̄ula*, מַהְפַּךְ *mahpaḵ*, דַּרְגָּא *darga*, קַדְמָא *qadma*, גַּלְגַּל *galgal*, תְּלִישָׁא *teliša*
(for a chart delineating which conjunctives precede each disjunctive, see Jacobson 2002:399).

Three books of the Hebrew Bible use a different set of symbols: Psalms, Proverbs and (most of) Job. Since the hierarchical levels are more complex, the chart below merely distinguishes between the disjunctives and the conjunctives:

Disjunctives: סִלּוּק *silluq*, שַׁלְשֶׁלֶת גְּדוֹלָה *šalšelet gedola*, רְבִיע מֻגְרָשׁ *reḇiʿ mugraš*, רְבִיע *reḇiʿ*, עוֹלֶה וְיוֹרֵד *ʿole ve-yored*, אַתְנָח *ʾatnaḥ*, מַהְפַּךְ־לְגַרְמֵהּ *mahpaḵ-legarmeh*, צִנּוֹר *ṣinnor*, רְבִיע *reḇiʿ qaṭon*, רְבִיע גָּדוֹל *reḇiʿ gadol*, דֶּחִי *deḥi*, פָּזֵר *pazer*, אַזְלָא־לְגַרְמֵהּ *ʾazla-legarmeh*

Conjunctives: מֵרְכָא *merḵa*, מוּנַח *munaḥ*, עֲלוּי *ʿilluy*, מַהְפַּךְ *mahpaḵ*, אַזְלָא *ʾazla*, שַׁלְשֶׁלֶת קְטַנָּה *šalšelet qetanna*, צִנּוֹרִית *ṣinnorit*, טַרְחָא *ṭarḥa*, גַּלְגַּל *galgal*

(for a more in-depth analysis of the *ṭeʿamim* in the three books, see Breuer 1982, Wickes 1970, and Price 1990).

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Biblical Hebrew: Linguistic Background of Masoretic Text

The Hebrew texts of the Bible were composed at various periods before and after the Babylonian exile (581 B.C.E.), a few archaic passages being dated by some scholars to as early as the second half of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. The earliest biblical manuscripts are found among the Qumran scrolls, which date from the 3rd century B.C.E. to the 1st century C.E. The printed editions that are in use today are based on a form of text found in medieval manuscripts that derives from a school of scholars in Tiberias known as the Masoretes. The term 'Biblical Hebrew' is generally used to refer to the form of the language that appears in the printed editions and it is this form that is presented to students in grammatical textbooks. The first task in describing Biblical Hebrew, therefore, must be to establish to what extent this Masoretic form of the language corresponds to the form it had at earlier periods when the various books of the Bible were composed.

The Tiberian Masoretes, who were active over a period of several centuries in the second half of the 1st millennium C.E., developed what can be termed the Tiberian Masoretic tradition, which was recorded in numerous biblical manuscripts. This was a body of tradition that gradually took shape over two or three centuries and continued to grow until it was finally fixed. The activities of the Masoretes ceased at the beginning of the 2nd millennium C.E. (→ Masora, Tiberian; Masoretic Treatises). During the same period, circles of Masoretes are known to have existed also in Iraq (→ Masora, Babylonian). It is the tradition of the Tiberian Masoretes, however, that had become virtually the exclusive Masoretic tradition in Judaism by the late Middle Ages and has been followed by all printed editions of the Hebrew Bible.

The Tiberian Masoretic tradition is recorded in numerous medieval manuscripts. The majority of these were written after 1100 C.E. and are copies of older manuscripts that were made in various Jewish communities. The earlier printed editions are based on these late medieval manuscripts. The most authoritative of these early editions was the so-called second Rabbinic Bible (i.e., the Bible text combined with commentaries and translations, known as מקראות גדולות *miqra'ot gedolot*) edited by Jacob ben Ḥayyim ben Adoniyahu and printed at the press of Daniel Bomberg in Venice between 1524 and 1525. These early Rabbinic Bibles appear to have been based on more than one manuscript (Penkower 1983). This came to be regarded as a *textus receptus* and was used as the basis for many subsequent editions of the Hebrew Bible.

A small number of surviving manuscripts are first-hand records of the Tiberian Masoretic tradition. These were written in the Near East before 1100 C.E., when the Masoretes were still active. They are, therefore, the most reliable witnesses of the Tiberian Masoretic tradition. They all come from the end, or near the end, of the Masoretic period, when the Masoretic tradition had become fixed in most of its details. After 1100 C.E. the fixed tradition was transmitted by generations of scribes. Some of the modern editions of the Bible are based on these early manuscripts, e.g., the *Biblia Hebraica* from the third edition (1929–1937) onwards (the latest edition being the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*, 2004–), *The Hebrew University Bible* (*The Book of Isaiah*, vols. 1–3, ed. M. Goshen-Gottstein, Jerusalem, 1975; 1981; 1993), the editions by A. Dotan (1973; revised 2001) and M. Breuer (1977–1982), and the modern edition of the Rabbinic Bible by M. Cohen (known as *Ha-Keter*, Ramat-Gan, 1992–) (→ Manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible in the Middle Ages).

The Tiberian Masoretic tradition can be divided into the following components (Khan 2012):

(1) The consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible.
(2) The layout of the text and codicological form of the manuscripts.

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