

Introducing Masoretic Accents of the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible Masoretic accent system has several functions: punctuation of the sense, melodic recitation, and accenting individual words.¹ The first of these functions provide a traditional non-authoritative commentary on the consonantal text, along with Masoretic vowel pointing. The present purpose focuses only on this function as it relates to the accent system in the twenty-one books. The main exegetical benefits turn on understanding Masoretic grouping of phrases within verses based upon disjunctive accents. Like many other things, the student should start with the traditional Masoretic punctuation and disjunctions, emending cautiously with sufficient reasons.

Using Miles Cohen’s graphic diagrams to layout disjunctive punctuation within verses provides one way to get started making use of this traditional commentary. The student can use this graphic layout to apprehend how disjunctive accents work together in their relative levels, and visually evaluate the traditional reading. Graphic layouts themselves are not a goal, but merely a tool for understanding the system. Sufficient skill with the graphic layout should translate into a working knowledge of how the accent system functions for punctuation in the case of daily scripture reading and regular exegesis, without need to creating visual diagrams. As with other learning activities, working with visual accent diagrams is only an intermediate goal, and not important of itself.

The main weight should be placed upon what Cohen refers to as level zero and level one disjunctive accents. Lesser disjunctives are worth noting but point toward much subtler logical structure. The basic levels of disjunction can be seen in GKC §15*f*, nos. 1-2 = level 0; 3-5 = level 1; 6-9 = level 2; 10-13 = level 3; likewise, “Table of Accents” in front of *BHQ* divides levels of disjunction by horizontal lines.

Cohen’s visual layout uses vertical lines to mark disjunctive accents, and relative height and level numbers to signal relative relationships of clauses (see Figure 1). Representing Masoretic disjunctive accent ranking can be transferred into translation, / = 0, [] = 1, () = 2, {} = 3 (see Figure 2).²

Figure 1: Cohen-style Diagram of Masoretic Disjunctive Accents



Figure 2: Representing Masoretic Disjunctive Accent Ranking in Translation

[(and the earth) was without form) and void] and darkness] upon the face of the deep / [(and the Spirit of God] moved] upon the face of the waters /

The following examples are somewhat overemphasized for the sake of illustration, since accenting is but one part of commenting on meaning.

- Comparing MT of Isaiah 40:3 “The voice of one who cries, ‘In the wilderness prepare ...’” with LXX “The voice of one who cries in the wilderness, ‘Prepare ...’” (which is followed by Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3). Like many other things, working with accents solves some problems, but also reveals exegetical concerns and questions.

¹ See Cohen 1969, 1-5.

² Or, with punctuation period = level 0, semi-colon = level 1, comma = level 2 (level 3 n/a or reuse comma), e.g., “And the earth, was without form, and void; and darkness; was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God; moved; upon the face of the waters.”

- According to the Masoretes, in Gen 37:10, Jacob said “Will we surely come, I, and your mother your bothers?!?” (הַבּוֹא נָבוֹא אֲנִי וְאִמִּי וְאֶחָיוֹ) but a modern would likely frame it differently, “Will we surely come, I and your mother, and your bothers?!?” The difference between moderns and Masoretes is how moderns view relationship dynamics between parents and children rather than between a man and his household. The Masoretic accenting surprises moderns but helps moderns envision ancient patriarchal social dynamics.
- The Masoretes accent Gen 1:1 as: “[in the beginning] God created / [the heavens] and the earth /” (בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:). But, a second temple Jew with Hellenistic sensibilities, might have wanted to accent it differently to create more separation between the higher spiritual realm and the lower order of creaturely existence, such as (hypothetically): “[in the beginning] God created] the heavens / and the earth /.”
- The Masoretes put a strong disjunctive accent between light and darkness, in Gen 1:4 as: “[and God separated] between the light] and between the darkness /” (וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וְבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ:). but the emphasis could have made a greater disjunctive between the creator’s act and more closely aligned light and dark (hypothetically) as: “[and God separated] between the light) and between the darkness /.” Yet, the Masoretes seem to separate light and dark with accents akin to the narrator’s grammatical separation of these in 1:5, “and God called light ‘Day,’ but darkness he called ‘Night”” (וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ לַיְלָה) (wci, disjunctive vav-noun, pf) (1:5a). Instead it could be narrated (hypothetically): “and God called light ‘Day’ and he called darkness ‘Night”” (וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם וַיִּקְרָא לַחֹשֶׁךְ לַיְלָה) (wci, wci). Thus, it is not the Masoretes who, by means of accents, cleverly created disjunction between light and dark in 1:4, but the accentual disjunction between these in 1:4 corresponds to the grammatical disjunction already present in the narration of the next phrase (1:5a).
- The Masoretes accented 1:2a as: “[and the earth) was formless) and void] and darkness] upon the face of the deep /” (וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם). But, they could have accented the A line like this: “[and the earth was] (formless and void) and darkness) upon the face] of the deep /.” Grouping darkness more closely with formless and void would make sense, but, again, the Masoretic accenting separates darkness, even from formless and void.

Focusing closely upon accenting could lead to interpretive overemphasis. It is important to evaluate Masoretic accenting as a commentary, not unto itself, but in tandem with other contextual elements (like historical culture, grammar, and thematic elements), as these illustrations suggest.³

³ For other examples see Cohen 1972; and Cohen and Freedman 1974.

Summary of the Fundamentals of Accentuation in the Masoretic Text⁴

Principle of Continuous Dichotomy: The verse is divided into two parts, those parts are further divided into two parts, and so on. The process is repeated until each subdivision consists of at most two words.

Principle of Hierarchy of Disjunctive Accents: The disjunctive accent which divides a phrase is of one level lower than the disjunctive accent which marks the end of that phrase.

Accentuation Diagrams: All divisions are represented by vertical lines, the height being determined by the relative importance of the division. The attached horizontal line indicates the range of the phrase terminated by that division (see Figure 1 above).

Disjunctive Accents מַפְסִיקִים

Level Zero:	disjunctive name	symbol	corresponding conjunctive accent	corresponding <i>final disjunctive</i> from lower level
	סְלוּק	◌ֻ	◌ֻ מְרַכָּא	◌ֻ טַפְחָא
	אַתְנַחְתָּא	◌ֻ	◌ֻ מְנַח	◌ֻ טַפְחָא
Level One:				
<i>final</i>	טַפְחָא	◌ֻ	◌ֻ מְרַכָּא	◌ֻ תְּבִיר
<i>normal</i>	זְקַף־קֶטֶן	◌ֹ	◌ֹ מְנַח	◌ֹ פֶשֶׁטָא
<i>biggest</i>	סְגוּל	◌ֹ	◌ֹ מְנַח	◌ֹ זְרַקָא
Level Two:				
	פֶּשֶׁטָא	◌ֹ	◌ֹ מְהַפֵּד ◌ֹ מְרַכָּא	
	תְּבִיר	◌ֻ	◌ֻ דְרַגָּא ◌ֻ מְרַכָּא	
	זְרַקָא	◌ֹ	◌ֹ מְנַח ◌ֹ מְרַכָּא	
	רְבִיעַ	◌ֹ		
	יְתִיב	◌ֻ (same as <i>pashta</i> with different musical value)		

Level Three: ◌ֹ | מְנַח לְגַרְמִיָּה, תְּבִיר, גְרִשִׁים, גְרֵשׁ, תְּלִישָׁא־גְדוּלָּה, פְּזֹר גָּגוּל, פְּזֹר

Conjunctive Accents מַחְבְּרִים

◌ֹ תְּלִישָׁא־קֶטֶן, ◌ֻ דְרַגָּא, ◌ֹ מְהַפֵּד, ◌ֹ קְדָמָא, ◌ֻ מְרַכָּא, ◌ֻ מְנַח

⁴ Adapted from Cohen 1969, 95-99; Cohen and Freedman 1974, 46.

Practice

The student can diagram Ruth 1:1-6 according to the model in Figure 1 above. To make diagrams use basic levels of disjunction in GKC §15f, nos. 1-2 = level zero, 3-5 = level one, 6-9 = level 2, 10-13 = level 3 (it is worth writing this in margin of GKC) (see summary of accent ranking on page 3 above; likewise, “Table of Accents” in front of *BHQ* divides levels of disjunction by horizontal lines).

The student may also wish to convert this into translation using the model in Figure 2 above (i.e., /=0, []=1, ()=2, {}=3).

To check work, see key at <http://scriptureworkshop.com/bh/x/m/>

For further Reading

Also see other titles at http://www.scriptureworkshop.com/bibliography/biblio_bh.pdf.

Carasik, Michael. “Exegetical Implications of the Masoretic Cantillation Marks in Ecclesiastes,” *Hebrew Studies* 42 (2001): 147-165.

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Yeivin, Israel. *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah*, trans. E. J. Revell (Scholars Press, 1985).