The Masoretic Hebrew Accents in Translation and Interpretation

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The joints or seams of a text as revealed in the Hebrew must determine the units of thought in the translation.

This observation regarding the joints or seams of a text requires that translators pay close attention to the accents utilized in the Masoretic Text. For accuracy and faithfulness to the text it is very important that the translator and interpreter understand the major accents and that their translation and interpretation reflects the divisions of the text which the accents signal.¹ In the following pages I have listed (in order of importance) only the first five to seven (depending on the category) of the major accents. Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar² contains a complete listing of the Masoretic accents.

There are two major categories of Masoretic accents:
   • the disjunctive accents and
   • the conjunctive accents.

As their names indicate, the first creates disjunction or division and the second creates conjunction or connection. The disjunctive accents are dominant in the Masoretic Text because they are employed to show where the thought is broken or where a pause is taken in the reading. The following lists cover those most significant to the beginning translator of the Hebrew Bible. The reader should note that there is a slight variation in the accents when it comes to the poetic books of Psalms, Job, and Proverbs. With that in mind, I have divided the lists into two sections.

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ACCENTS IN THE NON-POETIC BOOKS

Disjunctive Accents

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<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Silluq" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Atnach" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Segolta &amp; Shalsheleth" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Zaqeph" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Tiphchah" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Rebia" /></td>
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1. **Silluq**: Marking the last tone-syllable of a verse (placed just ahead of the soph pasuq).
2. **'Atnach**: Marking the principal division of the verse—the logical mid-point.
3. **Segolta** (like an inverted segol above and following the word) and **Shalsheleth** (with shalsheleth gadol above the final syllable and the vertical stroke legarmeh following the word): Marking a subordinate division before the 'athnach.
4. **Zaqeph gadol** and **Zaqeph qaton**: The latter is stronger than the former and more frequently employed to indicate the subordinate divisions both before and after the 'athnach.
5. **Tiphchah**: Marking the subordinate disjunctive just prior to silluq and 'athnach. Sometimes it takes the place of 'athnach.
6. **Rebia**: Most often this accent marks the quarter points of a verse. Sometimes it identifies a key word or topic for a verse or section of verse. At times it introduces a quotation in dialogue.

Conjunctive Accents

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<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Munach" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Mehuppakh" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Merkha" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Darga" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Azla" /></td>
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</table>

1. **Munach**: The strongest conjunctive accent in the Masoretic Text. It is used fairly often in situations involving the construct state (genitive).
2. **Mehuppakh**: The second strongest conjunctive accent.
3. **Merkha** and **Double Merkha**: The third strongest conjunctive accent.
4. **Darga**: The fourth strongest conjunctive accent.
5. **'Azla**: The fifth strongest conjunctive accent.

Let’s now examine an example of how these accents work together to provide the reader with a more accurate understanding of the relationships between the different parts of Genesis 3:24. First, the verse will be presented as a running text:

וָנֶרֶשׁ אֲחַר הָעָמָד נָשֶׁנֶּם מִפְּלָחְתֵּן אֲחַר הָפְרִינָם לֹא 啊
לָכֵּם הָחָרְבָּה המַחְדַּפִּים לְשֵׁם אַחֲרֵיהֶם עַנְי נְצוּיָהָ: סֵ

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Second, the verse is then arranged by its two major divisions indicated by the 'athanach (the two major accents have been artificially enlarged and enhanced for visibility):

(athanach) נָשֹׁפֶל חַלְחָלֵים לַשְׁרָעָה וָחָשִׁירֵיכָם אֲחַלְחַלֵיכָם אֲשֶׁר לְאַתֲמָה אַתְמָה

(silluq) הַמַּחֲטַףְךָ לָשֶׁם אַתְמָה אַתְמָה אָנִי הַחֲיָה׃

Note that the first half of the verse is very short as compared to the second half of the verse. This indicates that the first three words have the same weight as the last fifteen words. This is consistent with the fact that both halves begin with a wayyiqtol. These are two consecutive imperfects indicating two parts of a sequence of actions. There are no minor or subordinate accents to be noted in the first half of the verse, so we will move on to the third step: sub-divide the second half according to its major disjunctive accents:

(rebia') נָשֹׁפֶל חַלְחָלֵים לַשְׁרָעָה וָחָשִׁירֵיכָם

(zaeqeph qaton) הַאֲשֶׁר לְאַתֲמָה אַתֲמָה הַמַּחֲטַףְךָ

(silluq) לָשֶׁם אַתְמָה אָנִי הַחֲיָה׃

Fourth, in a logical diagram the reader can visualize these relationships to show how they might impact translation, interpretation, and exposition:

A. wayyiqtol וָנָשֹׁפֶל חַלְחָלֵים

B. wayyiqtol object #1 נָשֹׁפֶל חַלְחָלֵים לַשְׁרָעָה וָחָשִׁירֵיכָם

B. wayyiqtol object #2 הַאֲשֶׁר לְאַתֲמָה אַתֲמָה הַמַּחֲטַףְךָ

adverbial modifier: purpose לָשֶׁם אַתְמָה אָנִי הַחֲיָה׃
Diagram of Genesis 3:24 by Masoretic Accents

He expelled the man east of the garden of Eden and the cherubs and the flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life.

Notes:

- Divisions of the chart are determined by disjunctive accents.
- The two major divisions involve the two consecutive divine actions.
- The purpose clause is placed higher in the hierarchy of accents, making it emphatic and the focus of attention. What Adam had been assigned to do (cf. 2:15), God ended up doing. This is the key expository thought in 3:24.
- The sword is the least important of the elements even though it has a double description. Perhaps the point is that the more significant element (the cherubs) were wielding the sword.
- The writer tied “east” to “stationed” by a conjunctive accent (telisha qetanna). That is the key adverbial modifier of the verb—indicating location. The phrase “of [lit., to] the garden of Eden” is put on a par with the direct object (“cherubs”) so that it is actually a dative (or, an accusative?) of specification or reference: “east in regard to the garden of Eden.” Thereby, the direction is not “eastward in the garden of Eden,” but rather “east of the garden of Eden.”
Transformational Grammar Tree Diagram

The following diagram is an attempt to illustrate the relationships in the verse grammatically by utilizing a modified form of a transformational grammar tree.³

```
Verse
  (and)
/     \
Verb phrase  Verb phrase
  /     \        /     \
He Verb He Verb
     \       \     
Verb Object Verb
     \       \     
expelled the man stationed Objects
                / \        / \
                east of the garden of Eden
                /   \     /   \
the cherubs the sword
                / \     / 
flaming whirling
```

Notes:

- There are two halves to the verse that are co-equal grammatically: the two verb phrases.
- The prepositional phrases modify the second verb. One is a locative adverbial modifier and the other is a purpose clause.
- This English diagram does not reflect the word order and emphasis as well as the accent diagram (see previous page). However, it demonstrates the same logical relationships and grammatical hierarchy.
- The similarities of the transformational grammar diagram and the Hebrew accent diagram demonstrate an accurate understanding of the meaning and the accuracy of the Masoretic accents.

³ An excellent introduction to transformational grammar and the use of trees to represent grammatical relationships can be found online: [http://encyclopediathefreedictionary.com/transformational%20grammar](http://encyclopediathefreedictionary.com/transformational%20grammar). Go to the “External links” near the bottom of the page and click on the link entitled “The Syntax of Natural Language,” which is an online textbook on transformational grammar.

⁴ The transformational grammar tree would be far more detailed for this purpose clause and its constituents. I have shortened the format in order to stay within the bounds of the page and to highlight the fact that the purpose clause is the final clause in the verse and is slightly emphasized by its closing position (thus the bold typeface).
ACCENTS IN THE POETIC BOOKS (בנפ

A different set of accents is employed in Psalms, Job, and Proverbs. Those accents are listed in the following two groupings:

Disjunctive Accents (בנפ

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>א</td>
<td>י</td>
<td>ת</td>
<td>י</td>
<td>ע</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1. **Silluq**: Marking the last tone-syllable of a verse (placed just ahead of the *soph pasuq*).
2. **'Oleh weyored**: Marking the principal division of the verse—the logical midpoint.
3. **'Atnach**: Marking the principal division of the second half of a verse when following ‘oleh weyored. In shorter verses, the 'athnach can be the major disjunctive in the absence of 'oleh weyored.
4. **Rebia' gadol**: Most often this accent mark the quarter points of a verse. Sometimes it identifies a key word or topic for a verse or section of verse.
5. **Rebia‘ mugrash**: Marking the next major disjunction.

Conjunctive Accents (ננ

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<td>ת</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. **Merkha and Double Merkha**: The strongest conjunctive accent in the Masoretic Text in Psalms, Job, and Proverbs.
2. **Munach**: The second strongest conjunctive accent.
3. **'Illuy or Munach Superior**: The third strongest conjunctive accent.
4. **Tarcha**: The fourth strongest conjunctive accent. It is distinguished from *tiphcha* by being under the tone-syllable.
5. **Galgal or Yerach**: The fifth strongest conjunctive accent.
6. **Mehuppakh**: The second strongest conjunctive accent.
7. **'Azla**: The fifth strongest conjunctive accent.

5 These are the first letters of the three major poetic books: נ = ילה (Psalms), ב = (Job), and מ = (Proverbs).
6 Ibid., §15h-i.
Now, examine Psalm 1:1 as an example of how the poetic accents work together to provide the reader with a more accurate understanding of grammatical relationships.

First, present the verse as a running text:

\[
\text{אֲשֶׁרְ-רָאִיתָ אֵשָּׁר לַא־הָלָל בְּעָצָה רַעִים וּבְדֵרֵךְ חָוָאִים}
\]

Second, arrange the verse by its two major divisions indicated by the ‘oleh weyored (the two major accents have been artificially enlarged and enhanced for visibility):

\[
\text{אֲשֶׁר־רָאִיתָ אֵשָּׁר לַא־הָלָל בְּעָצָה רַעִים}
\]
\[
\text{בְּדֵרֵךְ חָוָאִים לַא־ﬠָמֵר עֲנָמָה לַא־יָשָׁב}
\]

Third, arrange the verse by all of its major disjunctive accents:

\[
\text{(rebia)}
\]
\[
\text{אֲשֶׁר־רָאִיתָ}
\]

\[
\text{('oleh weyored)}
\]
\[
\text{אֵשָּׁר לַא־הָלָל בְּעָצָה רַעִים}
\]

\[
\text{('athnach)}
\]
\[
\text{בְּדֵרֵךְ חָוָאִים לַא־ﬠָמֵר}
\]

\[
\text{(silluq)}
\]
\[
\text{לַא־יָשָׁב}
\]

Fourth, produce a logical diagram based upon these divisions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic or Theme</th>
<th>A. 1st negative (relative clause)</th>
<th>B. 2nd negative (inverse order)</th>
<th>3rd negative (same order)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st negative</td>
<td>אֲשֶׁר־רָאִיתָ אֵשָּׁר לַא־הָלָל בְּעָצָה רַעִים</td>
<td>בְּדֵרֵךְ חָוָאִים לַא־ﬠָמֵר</td>
<td>לַא־יָשָׁב</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
- The accents indicate that the first negative should remain by itself and be parallel to the other two as a group.
- This helps to explain why a chiastic (inverse) arrangement of phrases is followed in the second negative, but the third negative has the same order as the second. Thus, the indication is that the first negative is the general summary statement and then the next two negatives define it more specifically in two parts in accord with the Hebrew idiom referring to activities outside and inside—a merism.

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7 The Psalms scroll from Qumran’s Cave 11 does not have the text arranged in poetic lines like modern editions of the Hebrew Bible, so the running text is an objective place to begin even in poetry.
• Therefore, exegetically and expositionally, the psalmist did not (at least in the opinion of the Masoretes) refer to three separate and equal actions.

Diagram of Psalm 1:1 by Masoretic Accents

Questions:

• What observations can you make regarding the divisions of the verse based upon the hierarchy of the Masoretic accents?

• Which of these accents were not included in the lists of accents on the preceding pages? What does Gesenius’ Grammar indicate about their degree of dominance?

• What impact do your observations have on translation, interpretation, and exposition?