

The Masoretic Hebrew Accents in Translation and Interpretation

by William D. Barrick, Th.D.
The Master's Seminary
Sun Valley, CA

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 Grammar*.² 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.

¹ For a preliminary introduction, see Frederic Clarke Putnam, *Hebrew Bible Insert: A Student's Guide to the Syntax of Biblical Hebrew* (Ridley Park, Pa.: Stylus Publishing, 1996), 50-51 (§4).

² A. E. Cowley, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd English ed., ed. by E. Kautzsch (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1910), §15e-i.






ACCENTS IN THE NON-POETIC BOOKS

Disjunctive Accents

1. <i>Silluq</i>	2. <i>'Athnach</i>	3. <i>Segolta & Shalshetheh</i>	4. <i>Zaqeph</i>	5. <i>Tiphchah</i>	6. <i>Rebia'</i>
		 			

1. *Silluq*: Marking the last tone-syllable of a verse (placed just ahead of the *soph pasuq*).
2. *'Athnach*: Marking the principal division of the verse—the logical mid-point.
3. *Segolta* (like an inverted *segol* above and following the word) and *Shalshetheh* (with *shalshetheh 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

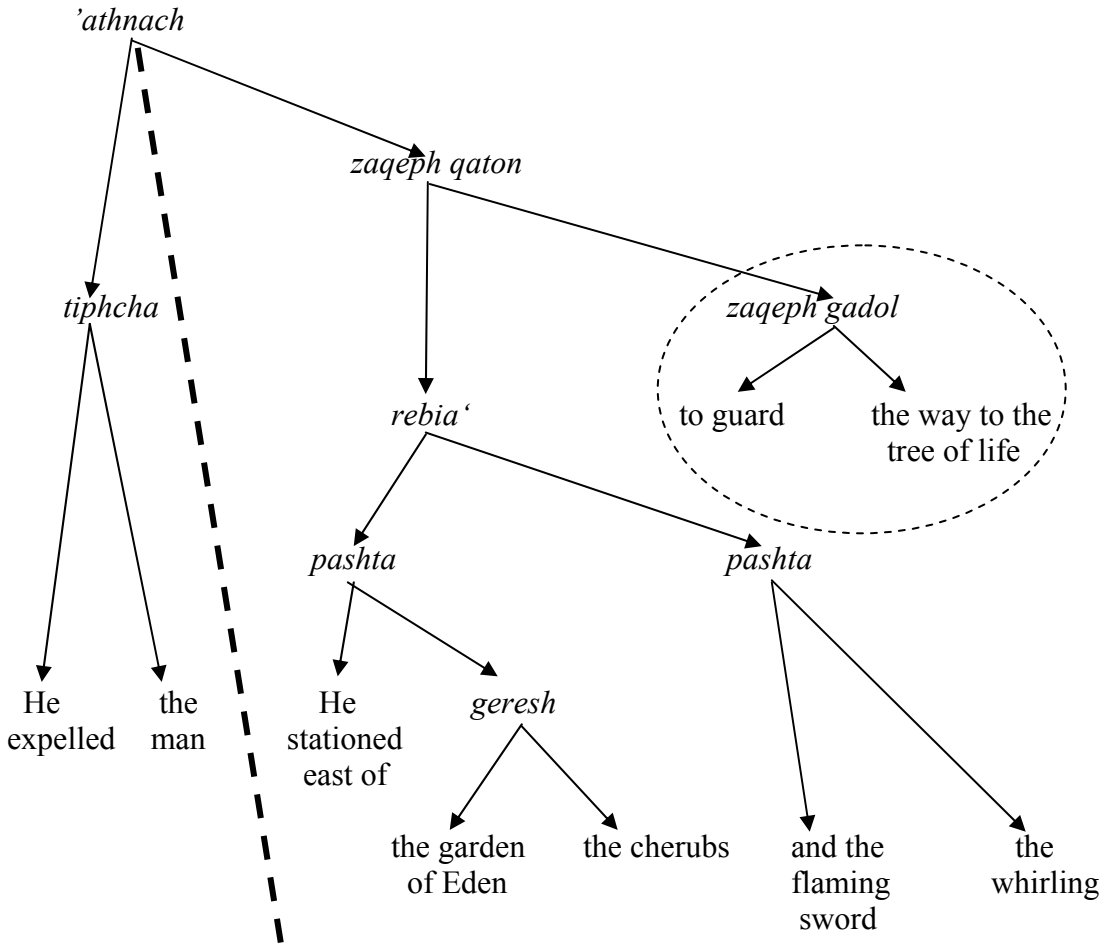
1. <i>Munach</i>	2. <i>Mehuppakh</i>	3. <i>Merkha</i>	4. <i>Darga</i>	5. <i>'Azla</i>
				

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:

וַיִּגְרֹשׁ אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּשְׁכֵּן מִקֶּדֶם לְגִן־עֵדֶן אֶת־הַכְּרִבִּים וְאֵת
 לֶהֱטֵה הַחֶרֶב הַמִּתְהַפֶּכֶת לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת־דֶּרֶךְ עֵץ הַחַיִּים: ׀

Diagram of Genesis 3:24 by Masoretic Accents

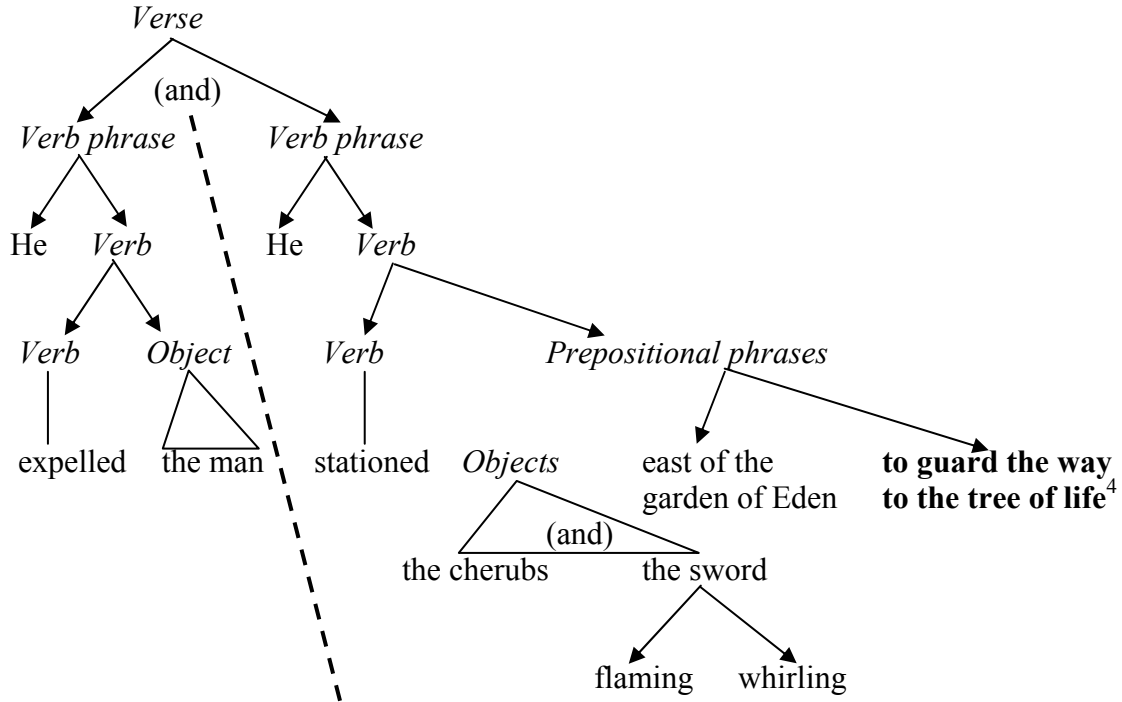


Notes:

- 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



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>. 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 (תא"ם)⁵


A different set of accents is employed in Psalms, Job, and Proverbs.⁶ Those accents are listed in the following two groupings:

Disjunctive Accents (תא"ם)

1. <i>Silluq</i>	2. ' <i>Oleh weyored</i>	3. ' <i>Athnach</i>	4. <i>Rebia' gadol</i>	5. <i>Rebia' mugrash</i>
				

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 mid-point.
3. '*Athnach*: 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 (תא"ם)

1. <i>Merkha</i>	2. <i>Munach</i>	3. ' <i>Illuy</i>	4. <i>Tarcha</i>	5. <i>Galgol</i>	6. <i>Mehuppakh</i>	7. ' <i>Azla</i>
						

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. *Galgol* 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: ת = תהלים (Psalms), א = איוב (Job), and ם = מושלי (Proverbs).

⁶ Ibid., §15*h-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:⁷

אֲשֶׁר־יֵהְיֶה אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִלְךְ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים וּבְדַרְךְ חַטָּאִים
 לֹא עָמַד וּבְמוֹשָׁב לְצִים לֹא יֵשֵׁב:

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):

(‘*oleh weyored*’) אֲשֶׁר־יֵהְיֶה אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִלְךְ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים
 (‘*silluq*’) וּבְדַרְךְ חַטָּאִים לֹא עָמַד וּבְמוֹשָׁב לְצִים לֹא יֵשֵׁב:

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

(‘*rebia*’) אֲשֶׁר־יֵהְיֶה אִישׁ
 (‘*oleh weyored*’) אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִלְךְ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים
 (‘*athnach*’) וּבְדַרְךְ חַטָּאִים לֹא עָמַד
 (‘*silluq*’) וּבְמוֹשָׁב לְצִים לֹא יֵשֵׁב:

Fourth, produce a logical diagram based upon these divisions:

Topic or Theme		אֲשֶׁר־יֵהְיֶה אִישׁ
A. 1st negative	(relative clause)	אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִלְךְ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים
B. 2nd negative	(inverse order)	וּבְדַרְךְ חַטָּאִים לֹא עָמַד
3rd negative	(same order)	וּבְמוֹשָׁב לְצִים לֹא יֵשֵׁב:

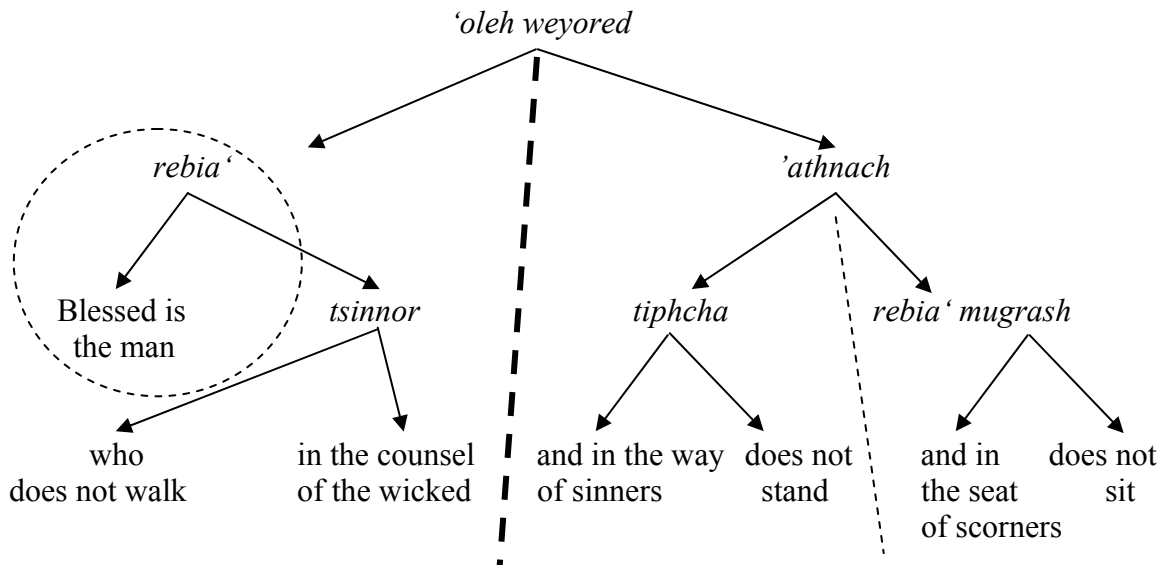
Notes:

- 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 chiasitic (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.

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 expositively, 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?