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The Exegetical Value of the  
Masoretic Accents**

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## ***Reading with the Masoretes: The Exegetical Value of the Masoretic Accents***

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**Abstract:** The Masoretic accent system provides biblical exegetes with a reading companion that can clarify and confirm the sense of the text. This historic reading tradition covers the entire corpus of the Hebrew Bible. Understood according to its hierarchical structure, this system offers interpreters assistance at various levels of exegesis. Beginning students will benefit from the way the accents indicate clause boundaries. Intermediate interpreters have the opportunity to understand how the reading tradition groups clauses syntactically. Advanced scholars possess the ability to see the semantic highlights that the Masoretes built into their patterns of accentuation. Thus, at every level of study, the Masoretic accents prove to be a valuable reading partner. This article exposes the historical rise and hermeneutical principles that brought about the accent system. Building on that foundation, various examples from the book of Judges illustrate the usefulness of the tradition for Hebrew exegetes.

**Key Words:** accents, Masoretic Text, exegesis, Hebrew syntax, Semantics, Book of Judges

### **Introduction**

God's word spoken by the prophets proved true. His word of judgment brought about the humiliation, defeat, and exile of his rebellious and idolatrous people (Jer 25:11; 52:3). His word of promise moved the king of Persia to decree their return and the rebuilding of the temple (Jer 25:12; Ezra 1:1). Yet, these people needed instruction so that they would not fall into the same deadly disobedience of their forefathers. During the many years of exile, God had been making preparations to meet this need. His hand was resting upon a man—Ezra, the priest and scribe—because Ezra had set his heart to study the torah of Yahweh, to do it, and to teach it among God's people (Ezra 7:10). Such teaching involved reading the text, providing interpretation, and giving the sense (Neh 8:8). This meant that Ezra and his fellow scribes had to be masters of the text & reading tradition, masters of instruction, and above all, men mastered by the text.

Can modern exegetes tap into the rigor of that generation 2,500 years removed? The Tiberian Masoretes claim to have captured the ancient reading tradition in

writing more than a millennium ago. Native speakers of a language may easily read a consonantal text, but this becomes more and more difficult for second-language speakers. In order to guard the reading tradition, the Masoretes devised an ingenious method to indicate both the proper pronunciation and syntactical groupings without altering the text. Whether or not we accept their claim that their encoded tradition extends back to Ezra, these men preserved a venerable reading of the Hebrew text. Though often overlooked, the Masoretic accent system provides biblical exegetes with a reading companion that can clarify and confirm the sense of the text through highly-predictable patterns. I will present this thesis according to three frames of reference: the history, the hermeneutic, and the “how-tos” of the accent system. I hope to demonstrate the useful nature of this tradition (1) by briefly describing how it comes to us through history, and (2) by detailing the underlying hermeneutical principles that make it work. I will then (3) examine various examples from the book of Judges in order to illustrate how this reading tradition is useful for exegesis at various levels of Hebrew proficiency.

### **A Brief Historical Background**

We must first establish a historical context for this reading tradition in order to lay a strong foundation for its exegetical utility. Aharon ben-Asher, the great Masorete of the Aleppo Codex, points back to Ezra and his contemporaries as the initiators of the Masoretic tradition.<sup>1</sup> Israel Yeivin summarizes the historical development:

It appears that the first to work on Masoretic matters were the soferim—the pupils of Ezra the Scribe in the early second temple period. Their work extended into the period of the Talmud (300–600 CE). After this the period of the Masoretes began, and their work continued until the final establishment of the received Tiberian tradition, including its vocalization and accentuation, in the tenth century. To some extent the work of clarifying the textual tradition, and preserving it according to the tradition of the Masorah, has continued up to our time.<sup>2</sup>

Trained men faithfully passed down the reading tradition for many centuries until it was recorded over the consonantal text. Even after they began to be written down, scribes continued to orally pass down both the vowels and accents.<sup>3</sup> Thus, trained men passed down the proper reading of the text from Ezra’s time, nearly 1400

1. Russell T. Fuller and Kyoungwon Choi, *Invitation to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017 (forthcoming)): Accents §1.

2. Israel Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah*, trans. E.J. Revell, (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980): 131–132.

3. Joshua Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible: The Art of Cantillation*, (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002): 363.

years, until Aharon ben-Asher definitively put it down in the consummate Tiberian Codex, the Crown of Aleppo.

While multiple systems of vocalization and accentuation existed, the tradition of the Tiberian Masoretes developed the greatest precision.<sup>4</sup> The Tiberian tradition began around A.D. 600–800 and climaxed with the work of Aharon ben-Asher in A.D. 915.<sup>5</sup> The Tiberian system comprises three elements building on the consonantal text:

1. symbols for the vowels above and below the text along with other diacritical marks;
2. symbols commonly called accents to indicate word stress, musical trope, and syntax;
3. the Masoretic notes to ensure accurate transmission of the text.

Though consonantal scrolls remained the mainstay for synagogue worship, this four-dimensional text became the pedagogical, scribal, and liturgical touchstone.<sup>6</sup> The accents form a vital part of this ancient tradition and stand ready to serve modern interpreters who understand their hermeneutical framework.

### **Hermeneutical Sensibilities**

The Hebrew name for the accents, תְּעֻמִּים (*te'amim*), means “sense” or “taste.” Scholars universally recognize three functions of the accent system that all play a part in conveying the sense of the text.<sup>7</sup> First, and most basic, the accents indicate word stress. Generally speaking, the accent falls on the stressed syllable of the word; hence the name, “accent.” Some accents come only before a word (pre-positive) or after a word (post-positive), but often the Masoretes doubled such accents—once in

4. Yosef Ofer, “The History and Authority of the Aleppo Codex,” in *Jerusalem Crown: Companion Volume*, ed. Mordechai Glatzer, (Jerusalem: N. Ben-Zvi Printing Enterprises, 2002): 27.

5. William Wickes, *A Treatise on the Accentuation of the Twenty-One So-Called Prose Books of the Old Testament* (מִירְפָּס אִיכ יִמְעַט), Harry M. Orlinsky, ed, The Library of Biblical Studies, (New York, NY: KTAV Publishing House, 1970): 7; Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah*, 12.

6. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible (Complete)*, 13.

7. Elan Dresher has published a notable exception to this claim. He argues that the accents do not mark the syntax of a verse but rather the prosody (reading rhythm). While he acknowledges that syntax and prosody share a huge common domain, he maintains that examples exist where the author is clearly marking prosody and not syntax (see Bezalel Elan Dresher, “The Prosodic Basis of the Tiberian System of Hebrew Accents,” *Language* 70.1 (March 1994); Bezalel Elan Dresher, “Biblical Accents: Prosody,” ed. Geoffrey Khan, *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, vol.1 (Boston: Brill, 2013). Two considerations must be raised against this assertion. First, the musical dimension of the accents often plays a dominant role in determining the precise accent used in a given phrase. The ancients would rarely read a text silently, and when read aloud they would often chant the words to a melody (Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible [Complete]*, 173). Thus, reading a text aloud was not the same as everyday speech. Second, there is a clear hierarchy in the accent system. While every accents exhibits conjunctive or disjunctive features, within the disjunctive category each accent holds a rank relative to the others. Stronger accents (e.g. Etnachta, Zaqef) control greater portions of the text and offer a more pronounced syntactical break (see Wickes, *Accentuation of the Twenty-One Prose Books*, 29).

the proper position and once on the stressed syllable.<sup>8</sup> This function of the accents provides minor exegetical assistance in disambiguating identical verbal forms (e.g. Gen 29:6, 9; 1 Kgs 8:48).

Second, the accents indicate the melody to be sung on each word. Contrary to modern, Western music notation, each symbol stands for a musical trope, a unique melodic pattern, rather than one individual note. A.W. Binder notes that, “The style of Biblical chant is half-musical and half-declamatory, the reader always being mindful of the meaning of the text and welding it to the tropes.”<sup>9</sup> Joshua Jacobson comments that, “The *te‘amim* serve to flesh out the bare bones of the scriptural text with an element of expressivity.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, as the musical tropes bind themselves to the text, the words take on a more lifelike expression. Though the trope melodies have changed over time, they function to express the sense of the text when read aloud.<sup>11</sup>

Third, in addition to indicating word stress and musical trope, the accent hierarchy conveys the sense of the text by defining the syntactical breaks of the verse. This function resembles a rather elaborate form of punctuation.<sup>12</sup> The Masoretes paint these breaks in layers: syntactical, clausal, and semantic.<sup>13</sup> The conjunctive or disjunctive nature of the accents group words into independent clauses (syntactic use). The hierarchy of the accents builds relationships between these independent clauses (clausal use). And at times the Masoretes chose to use the strongest accents to highlight special points of interest (semantic use). Russell Fuller writes, “The syntactic and clausal represent the usual, the expected, the routine; the semantic represents the fascinating, the interesting, the unexpected.”<sup>14</sup> These three layers of syntactical sense marking provide the exegete with a wealthy companion for reading the text.

### **The Utility of the Masoretic Accents**

All three functions of the accents (word stress, musical tropes, syntax) are co-extensive with the text. They offer an ever-present, historically-rooted, self-consistent commentary. The modern reader and interpreter of biblical Hebrew could not ask for a better friend. Second-language learning experts point out that “L2/FL readers ‘will not be able to read as well in the foreign language as in their first language until they

8. The Koren Bible provides all occurrences of these pre- and post-positive accents in duplicate form so that they mark word stress while maintaining their traditional position.

9. Abraham W. Binder, *Biblical Chant*, (New York: Sacred Music Press, 1959): 15.

10. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible (Complete)*, 9.

11. Numerous modern interpretations of the tropes exist: Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Moroccan, Egyptian, Syrian, Baghdadian, and Yemenite. Each of these cantillation systems exhibits elements of its historical and geographic development. Yet, the similarities between these systems point to common Palestinian origin (see Binder, *Biblical Chant*, 14).

12. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible (Complete)*, 23.

13. Fuller and Choi, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Accents §9.

14. Fuller and Choi, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Accents §9.

have reached a threshold level of competence in that foreign language.”<sup>15</sup> Frankly, very few students of biblical Hebrew ever aim so high as to read the Bible with native level competency, though this is a worthy goal. Yet the friendly voice of the accents calls out to beginning readers and more advanced exegetes alike. He offers to serve as a native language resource to anyone who follows his instruction. He identifies clauses, interprets their relationships, and indicates points of literary interest.

### Identifying Clauses [Beginner]

How many beginning students only learn to read Hebrew word, after word, after word? Of course any language learner will begin this way. But when readers approach a text for a second, third, and fourth time, they need to develop a reading fluency and expressiveness. High quality audio recordings accelerate this process dramatically. But when the student has read and reread a few dozen chapters with these training wheels, they would benefit from learning to locate word stress and phrase limits on their own. The accents tutor beginning readers in correct pronunciation and delimiting phrases.

#### Example 1. Judges 7:4

And he said to Gideon,	וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־גִּדְעוֹן	7:4a
“The people is still too many.	עוֹד־הָעָם רַב	7:4b
Take them down to the water	הוֹרֵד אוֹתָם אֶל־הַמַּיִם	7:4c
and I will sift them for you there.	וְאֶצְרָקְנֵם לְךָ שָׁם	7:4d
And it shall be when I say to you,	וְהָיָה אֲשֶׁר־אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ	7:4e
‘This one will go with you,’	יָזֶה יֵלֶךְ אִתְּךָ	7:4f
he shall go with you;	הוּא יֵלֶךְ אִתְּךָ	7:4g
and whoever I say to you,	וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר־אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ	7:4h
‘This one will not go with you,’	יָזֶה לֹא־יֵלֶךְ עִמָּךְ	7:4i
he shall not go.”	הוּא לֹא יֵלֶךְ:	7:4j

Word processors offer modern students and educators a simple venue for learning how the accents separate clauses. Pasting a copy of the text into a new document, students are able to insert a line break after each clause. Such line breaks will correspond with the disjunctive accents provided in the text. Beginning students may keep the text flush to the right hand side of the page. More advanced students will find benefit in using indentations to express relationships between these clauses.<sup>16</sup> Such exercises teach students to recognize clause limits, they learn the major disjunctive

15. Jo Ann Aebersold, and Mary Lee Field, *From Reader to Reading Teacher: Issues and Strategies for Second Language Classrooms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 27.

16. For a good example of such text flow layouts, see chapters 37–40 of *A Modern Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009): 283-335.

accents, and they end up with a highly readable text format. Even if students only pay attention to the strongest disjunctives (e.g. Etnachta and Zaqef), such practice still makes strides towards natural reading capabilities. Thus, when students have acquired a general familiarity with these symbols, they become welcome sign-posts in the wilderness of an unexplored passage.

### Interpreting Clause Relationships [Intermediate]

When students have mastered some of the basics of reading a Hebrew text (i.e. proper pronunciation and rightly delimiting clauses), they will need to begin asking questions about how such clauses are related. Conjunctions and grammatical forms often signal the relationship of phrases and clauses. But the exegete needs to also examine clauses without clear conjunctions, or ones bound by the ever-present *Vav*. The Masoretic accents sketch out these relationships. Like literary cartographers, men of old have faithfully mapped out the syntax according to four hierarchical realms.<sup>17</sup>

The Masoretes structured these realms according to strict rules. The lords of each realm employ near and far subordinates. The near subordinate is always present, and the far subordinate may or may not be present. If the far subordinate acts in the verse, then he necessarily exercises more power than his near counterpart. All accents of lower realms function within the domain of the higher accents. Examples bear this out in every verse of the Bible.

#### Example 2. Judges 4:9

וְתֹאמַר	4:9a	⤴	↑
הֲלֹךְ אִלַּי עִמָּךְ	4:9b	⤴	↑
אָפֶס כִּי לֹא תִהְיֶה תִפְצָרְתָּךְ עַל־הַדָּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אֵתָהּ הוֹלֵךְ	4:9c	⤴ (Domain of Zaqef)	
כִּי הִגִּיד־אֲשֶׁה יִמְכַר יְהוָה אֶת־סִיסְטָא	4:9d	Domain of Etnachta	
וּתְקַם דְּבַנְיָה	4:9e	⤴	
וּתְלֹךְ עִם־בְּרַק קְדוּשָׁה:	4:9f	Domain of Siluq	

As this example from Judges 4:9 illustrates, Etnachta rules over four main clauses (a–d) while Siluq rules over only two (e–f). Siluq and Etnachta are both first level accents subordinate to Sof Pasuq. Within the domain of Etnachta reside level two accents (e.g. Zaqef and Tipecha), level three accents (e.g. Revia, Yetiv, and Pashta), and level four accents (e.g. Geresh). These level three and four accents also reside immediately within the domain of Zaqef (4:9c). This illustrates what Wickes

17. These four levels of hierarchy refer only to the 21 narrative books (א"ב). The poetic books of Job, Proverbs, and Psalms (א"ח) have three levels of hierarchy because verses tend to be much shorter. For detailed descriptions of the hierarchical levels see Fuller and Choi, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax, Accents*; Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible (Complete)*; William Wickes, *Accentuation of the Three*, 24–50; Wickes, *Accentuation of the Twenty-One Prose Books*, 29–55.

calls, “the law of continuous dichotomy.”<sup>18</sup> Each ruler employs administrators over his domain who rule their own sub-domains. In this example, lexical conjunctions amply indicate the logical relationships between clauses. But the accents provide a powerful confirmation that readers have read the sign posts correctly.

### Example 3. Judges 4:21

וּתְקַח יַעֲלֵ אֲשֶׁת־חֹבָב אֶת־יַתֵּד הָאֵהָל	4:21a	⊔	↑ ⊔
וּתְשֶׂם אֶת־הַמַּקְבֵּץ בְּיָדָהּ	4:21b	⊔	↑ [Revia]
וּתְבוֹא אֵלָיו בְּלֵאט	4:21c	⊔	(Domain of Zaqef)
וּתְתַקַּע אֶת־הַיָּתֵד בְּרַקְתָּו	4:21d	⊔	
וּתְצַנַּח בְּאַרְזָךְ	4:21e		Domain of Etnachta
וְהוּא־נִרְדָּם	4:21f	⊔	↑
וַיַּעַר	4:21g	⊔	(Domain of Tipecha)
וַיִּמַּח:	4:21h		Domain of Siluq

This example illustrates a text that only uses *Vav* as the conjunction. Etnachta marks the end of the heroine’s actions (a–e), which are broken into units by multiple layers of accents (i.e. Zaqef and Revia). The domain of Siluq marks off the result of her actions towards the villain (f–h). Within this larger domain, Tipecha delimits a nominal clause and its coordinate description (f, g). The grammar relates that these clauses describe the situation leading up to the heroine’s actions. The clause in 4:21g might easily be mistaken as a sequential action in the story, since it uses the same *Vayiqtol* (*wayyiqtol*) form as 4:21h. Helpfully the Masoretes have paired this clause with the preceding nominal clause, thus separating it off from the steady flow of subsequent actions.

These two examples illustrate how the syntactical and clausal function of the accents provide clear signals to the interpreter. The Masoretes either break or group clauses at various hierarchical levels. These groupings convey the sense of the text and prevent alternative readings. These interpretive aids prove useful to exegetes at every stage of reading proficiency. And when an exegete grows more familiar with the typical patterns used by the Masoretes, they begin to see a whole new set of interpretive signals.

### Indicating Literary Interest [Advanced]

Exegetes often overlook the accents in their study believing that the system is too irregular. How can interpreters trust a system so full of irregularities? Even William Wickes, credited with writing the most comprehensive treatment of the accents in the English language, writes that “. . . with due allowance for disturbing causes, we shall

18. Wickes, *Accentuation of the Twenty-One Prose Books*, 29.

still be able to accept the accents as reliable helps for the exegesis of the text.”<sup>19</sup> Most of the time the Masoretes employ the accents in a syntactical or clausal manner—very regular, very predictable. But, on occasion, the Masoretes also employ the accents in a semantic manner. Such semantic uses often indicate points of literary interest. Hence, accent “irregularities” should actually be granted more attention, not less.

The Masoretic use of Etnachta after direct speech passages provides a clear example of both a regular Masoretic pattern and divergence from this pattern.<sup>20</sup> In verses containing direct speech ending mid-verse, the Masoretes generally utilize Etnachta to mark the end of the direct speech. The end of the verse (Sof Pasuq) cuts off direct speech 70% of the time in the book of Judges (152x total). The remaining 30% of recorded direct speech ends somewhere in the middle of a verse. Etnachta marks this narrative feature 25% of time (55x); other accents mark this feature 5% of the time (11x). Therefore, when direct speech ends in the middle of the verse, the Masoretes choose to use Etnachta to signal this significant narrative feature 83% of the time. Their intentionality in deploying this pattern becomes clearer in verses with more than two main clauses.

#### Example 4. Judges 15:1

וַיְהִי מִיָּמַיִם בַּיּוֹם קָצִיר-חֹטְטִים	15:1a	⤴	↑ [Revia]
וַיִּפְקֹד שְׂמֹשׁוֹן אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ בְּגִדֵי עֵזִים	15:1b	⤴	(Domain of Zaqef)
וַיֵּאמֶר	15:1c	⤴	[Intro of Direct Speech]
אֲבָאָה אֶל-אִשְׁתִּי הַחֲדָרָה	15:1d		Domain of Etnachta
וְלֹא-נִתְּנָה אֵבִיהָ לְבוֹא:	15:1e		Domain of Siluq

The five clauses in Judges 15:1 provide a perfect example of Etnachta signaling the end of direct speech. Typically, Etnachta resides as close to the middle of the verse as possible. Here that location would be at the end of 15:1b. While a strong accent breaks the verse at that point, the Masoretes reserve the strongest break for the end of direct speech (15:1d). This regular feature of the text prevents the reader from slurring the direct speech into subsequent lines. In 15:1e the narrator switches characters to describe the action of Samson’s father-in-law. Were it not for Etnachta signaling the end of the direct speech, the reader may assume Samson continues speaking to the end of the verse. Thus, the Masoretes did not use just any disjunctive accent to signal the end of direct speech; they consistently use Etnachta for this purpose.<sup>21</sup>

19. Wickes, *Accentuation of the Three Poetical Books*, 5.

20. The research provided here represents a portion of my forthcoming dissertation being completed at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (May 2017).

21. I provide numerous other examples of this Masoretic pattern in my dissertation. Here are a few of the clearest examples from the book of Judges: 3:20; 8:20, 21, 25; 15:6; 19:8—though the pattern is not confined to any one book.

But the Masoretes occasionally choose against their regular pattern of using Etnachta to conclude mid-verse direct speech. For this to occur, another interpretive dimension of the text needs to exert a stronger influence on interpretation than punctuating the end of direct speech.

**Example 5. Judges 16:30**

וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁמְשׁוֹן	16:30a	⚡	↑ [Intro D.Speech]
תַּמּוֹת נַפְשִׁי עִם־פְּלִשְׁתִּים	16:30b	⚡	(Domain of Segol)
וַיֵּט בְּכַף	16:30c	⚡	
וַיִּפֹּל הַבַּיִת עַל־הַסְּרֻזִּים וְעַל־כָּל־הַעַם אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ	16:30d	⚡	Domain of Etnachta
וַיְהִיו הַמַּתִּים אֲשֶׁר הָמִית בְּמוֹתוֹ	16:30e	⚡	(Domain of Zaqef)
רַבִּים מֵאֲשֶׁר הָמִית בְּתַיִּו:	16:30f	⚡	Domain of Siluq

Judges 16:30 illustrates an instance where literary interest may be taking precedent over the regular Masoretic pattern. This verse climaxes the Samson narrative which began all the way back in chapter 13. The final act of Samson’s judgeship over Israel, the toppling of a pagan temple, results in more enemies being destroyed than throughout his entire bloody career (16:30e, f). Samson’s direct speech in 16:30b concludes with Segol, not the expected Etnachta. Segol, the strongest accent within Etnachta’s domain, sufficiently creates a pause in the reading so that the quotation is not slurred. This action frees up Etnachta to draw attention to the climactic moment. In fact, the very divergence from the typical Masoretic pattern draws further attention to this event. Thus, a divergence from the typical Masoretic pattern does not constitute an irregularity but an intentional interpretive signal.<sup>22</sup>

**Conclusion**

These highly predictable Masoretic accent patterns, and intentional divergence from the patterns, can clarify and confirm the sense of the text. Not only do the accents provide multiple layers of information: word stress, musical notation, and syntactical relationships, but they also benefit readers at every stage of development. This truly remarkable system assists readers in delimiting clauses, discerning the relationship between clauses, and occasionally highlighting the points of literary interest. As a second-language learner I have had to learn the hard lesson of humility again and again. Pursuing language fluency truly requires child-like character and tiger-like

22. For more examples like this see Judges 11:38 (logical transition); 16:12 (syntactic construction); 19:28 (semantic pause). Another very regular pattern occurs with Etnachta preceding הַחֵזֶק (*ve'atah*, “and now”) in the middle of a verse. Examples of divergence from this pattern include Genesis 50:17, Judges 17:3, 18:14 (priority of another pattern); Genesis 32:10, 2 Samuel 24:10 (division of clauses); Exodus 3:18, Judges 6:13 (semantic high points). My forthcoming dissertation will also detail two more patterns—framing of conditional clauses, and *Vav* of contrast.

tenacity. And part of that child-like character requires accepting help on a regular basis. The Masoretic accents stand large in the text as a pervasive and reliable reading companion. Learning to read with the Masoretes may prove more fruitful than we formerly imagined.