

## ***Te'amim* (טעמים) Are Important**

*Te'amim* (טעמים) serve three purposes in the Bible:

- (1) The *te'amim* indicate the syllable that is to be stressed (in most cases—for the exceptions, see the section “The *te'amim* do not always indicate the stressed syllable” on page 74)—that is, they are *accents*.
- (2) The *te'amim* indicate the melody with which a word is to be chanted when the text is read during the synagogue service—that is, they are *notes*.
- (3) The *te'amim* indicate how words within the verse are connected to each other, breaking the verse into words that are connected to each other (with conjunctive *te'amim*), and words and phrases that are separated from each other (with disjunctive *te'amim*)—that is, they are *punctuation marks*.

The following examples are taken from Joshua R. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible: The Art of Cantillation*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 24:

### Example 1.1 ארבעה ועשרים אלף

In Numbers 25:9 we are told that the number of fatalities in the great plague was ארבעה ועשרים אלף (four and twenty thousand). Was that

“four and twenty-thousand” (ארבעה ועשרים-אלף) (20,004), or

“four-and-twenty thousand” (ארבעה-ועשרים אלף) (24,000)?

The *te'amim* resolve that ambiguity: אַרְבַּעַה וְעֶשְׂרִים אֲלֶף

The word ארבעה is joined to the word ועשרים with a conjunctive accent (*merekha*).

The correct translation is 24,000.

### Example 1.2 ויאמר עבד אברהם אנכי

Without punctuation, this short verse from Genesis 24:34, ויאמר עבד אברהם אנכי, could be read in any of three ways:

- (a) with the major disjunctive accent on עבד:

*A servant said, “I am Abraham.”* וַיֹּאמֶר עֶבֶד אֲבִרְהָם אֲנִכִּי:

- (b) with the major disjunctive accent on אברהם:

*Abraham’s servant said, “It is I.”* וַיֹּאמֶר עֶבֶד אֲבִרְהָם אֲנִכִּי:

- (c) with the major disjunctive accent on ויאמר:

*He said, “I am Abraham’s servant.”* וַיֹּאמֶר עֶבֶד אֲבִרְהָם אֲנִכִּי:

The third version is the Masoretic punctuation.

The following examples are taken from Joshua R. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible: The Art of Cantillation*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 955–57:

Example 8 קול קורא במדבר (Isa. 40:3)

How are we to understand this verse?

קול קורא במדבר פני דרך יהוה ישרו בערב מוסלה לאלהינו:

Here are two ways to parse the first half of the verse:

1. *A voice is calling, "In the wilderness prepare the way for God."* קול קורא במדבר פני דרך ה'
2. *A voice is calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for God."* קול קורא במדבר פני דרך ה'

The first version cited above is the Masoretic text, in which the *preparation* is taking place in the wilderness, not the *calling* (or *crying*). That interpretation also parallels the second half of the verse, where the *straightening* is taking place in the desert.

Here is the full verse with the *te'amim*:

קול קורא במדבר פני דרך יהוה ישרו בערב מוסלה לאלהינו:

Example 10 (Exod. 17:9)

ויאמר משה אל-יהושע בחר-לנו אנשים

וצא הלחם בעמלק מחר אנכי נצב על-ראש הגבעה ומטה האלהים בידִי

To which phrase does the word *מחר* apply? Does Joshua go out today or tomorrow?

Does Moses stand on the mountaintop today or tomorrow?

Punctuation A:

ויאמר משה אל-יהושע בחר-לנו אנשים וצא הלחם בעמלק

מחר אנכי נצב על-ראש הגבעה ומטה האלהים בידִי:

*Moses said to Joshua, "Pick some men for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek.*

*Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand."*

Punctuation B:

ויאמר משה אל-יהושע בחר-לנו אנשים וצא הלחם בעמלק מחר

אנכי נצב על-ראש הגבעה ומטה האלהים בידִי:

*Moses said to Joshua, "Pick some men for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek*

*tomorrow. I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand."*

Punctuation A is the Masoretic interpretation. Joshua's actions are today, and Moses' actions are tomorrow.

## Understanding the Masoretic Use of the *Te'amim*

The preceding section gives a glimpse into the importance of the *te'amim*. There we focused on only *one* of the *te'amim* in a given verse, in one example a conjunctive *ta'am* and in the other examples a disjunctive *ta'am*. However, *every* word has a *ta'am* marked, except for a word connected to the following word with a *maqeph*. Before presenting a fuller discussion of how the *te'amim* in the text operate, a note about *conjunctive* and *disjunctive* is in order. *Conjunctive* is self-explanatory; a word with a conjunctive *ta'am* is connected to the next word. *Disjunctive*, on the other hand, means a break, but not always (and not usually) a *strong* break.

The Masoretes broke verses into phrases with disjunctive *te'amim*. However, most phrases are short. It is possible (and not at all uncommon) to have a one-word “phrase.” Two-word phrases are quite common. More words than two become increasingly rare (in the first seven verses of Genesis 1, shown on the following pages, only *one* three-word phrase appears). Thus, you cannot think of most of these “breaks” in a biblical verse as anything close to a period. At the same time, every use of a specific disjunctive *ta'am* does not always mean the same amount of break. This is similar to English, where the first two commas and the last comma are not equivalent in this phrase: “I ate meat, potatoes, and a fried egg, although I was supposed to be on a diet.”

The basic process that the Masoretes followed was to divide verses into two parts (parts, not halves—the division is often not in the “middle” of the verse) using a disjunctive *ta'am*. Then, each of those two parts could again be divided into two parts, again with disjunctive *te'amim*. If any of the resulting phrases was long enough (more than one word!), it *could* again be divided into two.

The process of binary division makes use of quite specific *te'amim*. There is no randomness in their use, of either the conjunctive or the disjunctive *te'amim*. In the case of conjunctive *te'amim*, you will see that some (and only some) conjunctive *te'amim* can precede a given disjunctive *ta'am*—and, if there is more than one conjunctive *ta'am*, a rigorous order is followed. Similarly, there is also a very specific pattern in what disjunctive *te'amim* can be used in a specific spot.

The table of *te'amim* shows four levels for the disjunctive *te'amim*. The level one *te'amim* are *siluk* and *'etnahta*. The *siluk* appears only at the end of a verse, on the word immediately before the *sof pasuk* (the : at the end of the verse). The *'etnahta* divides the verse into two parts; it appears in almost every verse except the very shortest—the first verse without an *'etnahta* is Genesis 1:13. About seven percent of the verses in the Bible (excluding Job, Psalms, and Proverbs) have no *'etnahta*. Any verse with only two or three words will lack an *'etnahta*. Verses longer than three words with the second part of the verse having four or fewer words may or may not have an *'etnahta*. Otherwise, the verse will be divided into two parts with an *'etnahta*. When the *'etnahta* is used, it is placed on some word from the first word to the next-to-last word of the verse. The structure can be seen in the following schematic.

A vertical bar shows the “middle” of the verse. The ellipses on the right-hand side represent any words that appear before the word under which the *’etnaḥta* is written. Similarly, the ellipses on the left-hand side represent any words that appear before the word under which the *siluk* is written. The left-pointing arrow shows that we are reading the line right-to-left, even though the words are written left-to-right:

: *siluk* . . . | *’etnaḥta* . . . ←

If the resulting two phrases were long enough, the Masoretes could divide each one again. Each phrase above (ending with a level *one ta’am*) can again be divided in two, using a level *two ta’am* on some word. And, if only one phrase was long enough to divide, it could still be divided, even though the other phrase was *not* divided. There was no rule that the number of divisions had to balance.

At this point, with two divisions, we have a sequence like this:

: *siluk* . . . level two *ta’am* . . . | *’etnaḥta* . . . level two *ta’am* . . . ←

By the nature of their use, therefore, the level two *te’amim* tend to be weaker than the level one *te’amim*—but this is not an absolute necessity.

The process of dividing into two can continue—if *any* phrase is long enough. Either of the two parts ending in a level *two ta’am* can be divided by a level *three ta’am*. If the Masoretes decided to divide the *second* part of the two “halves,” however, they used a level *two ta’am*, since those parts *still* end in a level *one ta’am*.

Of course, it’s always easier to have a computer show the structure of the verse, so you don’t have to figure out for yourself the level of each *ta’am*. The Tanakhml.org website has its own verse analyzer that does exactly what we have described above. The three pages following the next page show the analysis of the first seven verses of Genesis. You can generate your own verse analyses by going to <https://www.tanakhml.org> and selecting “Verse Cantillation Structure” from the right-hand pane, then choosing the book, chapter, and verse that you want to analyze from the right-hand pane.

The basic idea behind the practice of dividing verses is parallelism—the same parallelism that you have probably learned about when studying the Psalms. The Masoretic *te’amim* exhibit this parallelism in *every* verse of the Bible. The first part of the verse makes a statement, and the second part complements the first in some way. The parallelism is easiest to note in full verses; the examples that follow are taken from Rabbi Jacobson’s *Chanting the Hebrew Bible*.<sup>76</sup> The four parallelisms given below are in no way an exhaustive list; these are representative examples of parallelisms in the Bible.

In particular, these examples reflect an older—and, thus, well established—perception of parallelism, that it is primarily a matter of the semantic content of parallel lines. Recent studies have conclusively demonstrated that parallelism exists in akk aosects if linguistics. Adele Berlin wrote about the various categories of biblical

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<sup>76</sup> Joshua R. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible: The Art of Cantillation*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 26–31.

parallelism in the introduction to *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*: “Since the goal [of the book] was to provide a linguistic framework for the study of parallelism, most of the book is taken up with linguistic categories of description: the morphologic, syntactic, lexical, semantic, and phonological categories through which parallelism can be understood.”<sup>77</sup> Since the parallelism in the semantic aspect, and to a lesser extent the lexical aspects, are the only ones that can be illustrated easily in translation, we will limit ourselves to the semantic aspect of parallelism below.

The verses are cited from the English Standard Version. Since these examples are full verses, the dividing *ta’am* is an *’etnaḥta*, indicated by a vertical bar, as well as a line break; the ending *siluk* is not marked.

Corresponding Parallelism: the second part of the verse reflects the first, often with a strengthening of the statement.

Genesis 21:1:

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, |  
and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised.

Parallel Actions: The second part of the verse indicates an action that is taking place either simultaneous with or after the first.

Exodus 15:20:

Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her  
hand, |  
and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing.

Analogous Parallelism: In a proverb, the second segment is analogous to the first.

Amos 3:8:

“The lion has roared; who will not fear? |  
The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?”

Elliptical Parallelism: The second phrase reflects only a portion of the first phrase.

Genesis 11:1:

Now the whole earth had one language |  
and the same words.

You can usually see and understand these parallelisms readily in longer verses. But in shorter verses, and especially in the second and further divisions, the idea of “parallelism” might seem to break down. However, the basic statement still applies:

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<sup>77</sup> Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, revised and expanded ed., The Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), xvii. Except for the addition of “The Range of Biblical Metaphors in *Smikhut*” by Lida Knorina, the book is essentially a reissue of Berlin’s book originally published in 1985 by Indiana University Press.

the second part *complements* (or *supplements*) the first part in some way. To see how that works, let's take the first verse of the Bible, with both first-level disjunctives (marked with a single vertical bar) and second-level disjunctives (marked with two vertical bars) indicated:

In the beginning || God created | the heavens || and the earth. |

At the level of the whole verse, the second part of the verse (“the heavens and the earth”) “complements” the first part by providing an object to the verb of the first part—note that the *’etnahta* is in no way equal to a period, or even a comma.

The idea of complementing or completing is also present in each *half* of the verse. In the first half of the verse, “God created” (second part) complements the first part (“In the beginning”) by continuing the statement—the first part tells *when* something happened; the second part tells *what* happened. And in the second half of the verse “and the earth” complements “the heavens” of the first part by indicating the second of two things that were created.