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**Masoretic Accents
as a Biblical
Commentary**

When one hears the expression "medieval Jewish commentators," the names of Rashi, David Kimḥi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, and Saadya come immediately to mind as the classical biblical commentators of that period. What is generally overlooked, however, is the fact that the Masoretic text, a product of the ninth and tenth centuries, provides yet another commentary to the Bible. By means of the vocalization and accentuation of a verse, the Masoretes often revealed their understanding of that verse as clearly as if they had explained it in words. Many examples of this have been noted by various biblical scholars; probably hundreds remain to be uncovered. Four such verses with several of their accompanying commentaries will be discussed in order to demonstrate the significance of the Masoretic text itself as a biblical commentary.

I. One of the most obvious cases of a Masoretic commentary is found in Is. 45:1:

כֹּה-אָמַר ה' לְמַשִּׁיחוֹ לְכוּרֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר-הֶחֱזַקְתִּי בְיָמִינוֹ לְרֹד לְפָנָיו גּוֹיִם
וּמַתְּנִי מַלְכִּים אֶפְתָּח לְפִתָּח לְפָנָיו דְּלָתִים וְשַׁעְרִים לֹא יִסָּגְרוּ:

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and ungird the loins of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.¹

¹ RSV.

The problem which appeared to many commentators is the association of משיח, a word so laden with deep religious meaning, with the mortal idol-worshipping king, Cyrus.

Kimḥi² and Rashi³ understood that no real problem existed since the root משה is regularly used⁴ in non-Messianic contexts to refer to anointment (literal or figurative), that is, selection for a position or task.⁵ The simple intent of the text is that Cyrus was appointed by God to execute His will.

The concern over the possible misinterpretation of this verse, however, is found already in the Talmud.⁶ Puzzled by the juxtaposition of these two words, the Gemara asks: "וכי כורש משיח היה?" "But, was Cyrus the Messiah?" The solution is found in a new syntactical division of the verse, as demonstrated by Rashi: "כה אמר ה' למשיחו על כורש אשר החזקתי בימינו וגו'." "Thus said the Lord to His anointed one regarding Cyrus, etc." Amongst the medievalists, this rendering is held by Saadya.⁷

An examination of the accents in this verse will reveal that they too represent this Mid-rashic interpretation:

כֹּה-אָמַר ה' לְמִשְׁיחוֹ לְכוֹרֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר-הִחַזְקָתִי בְיָמֵינוּ לְכָד לְפָנָיו גּוֹלִים וְגו'.

Immediately noticeable is the single instance in the entire Bible of Zarqā (ֿ) appearing elsewhere than within a segōl (ֿ) phrase.⁸ It is clear that the accents have been tampered with, and it is possible to attempt a reconstruction of the changes which led to the present text. The simple understanding of the verse, with משיח used as an appellative of Cyrus, would result in what was no doubt the original accentuation:

² Kimḥi means 'to Cyrus, his appointed one.'

³ The root משה is used to indicate titles of greatness.

⁴ E.g., Isa. 61:1.

⁵ Ibn Ezra also suggests this meaning, but offers in addition the Midrashic alternative.

⁶ Megillah 12a.

⁷ Kaḏā qāla-llahu limsīhihi can kūrš "Thus said God to His anointed one regarding Cyrus."

⁸ Norzi, in his sixteenth-century Masoretic commentary Min-ḥat Shai, notes here: "There is no other instance of Zarqā (ֿ) without Segōl (ֿ) following."



The $\underline{S^e q\ddot{o}l}(\ddot{a})$ phrase is divided by $\underline{Zarq\ddot{a}}(\sim)$, in accordance with the principle of continuous dichotomy⁹ and the laws of hierarchy of disjunctives.¹⁰ The words לְמַשִּׁיחוֹ and לְכוּרֶשׁ are connected by a conjunctive.

In the light of the rabbinic Midrash, however, it became necessary to rephrase this verse so that the offensive expression was no longer present. This was done by moving the logical division from its position following לְכוּרֶשׁ to one preceding לְכוּרֶשׁ :



לְכוּרֶשׁ now appears in the $\underline{R^e b\ddot{i}^a}(\ddot{a})$ phrase and receives $\underline{M\ddot{u}n\ddot{a}h} \underline{L^e garm\ddot{e}h}$ (ל) to indicate the necessary division within the $\underline{R^e b\ddot{i}^a}(\ddot{a})$ phrase.¹¹ The word לְמַשִּׁיחוֹ , however, remains a problem. It cannot remain with the conjunctive $\underline{M\ddot{u}n\ddot{a}h}$ (ל), for the purpose of the change was to indicate a division between that word and the following one. But what disjunctive may be used?

Actually, only $\underline{S^e q\ddot{o}l}(\ddot{a})$ is acceptable.¹² The accentors, however, refrained from this accentuation,¹³ for in accordance with their misunderstanding of

⁹ Miles B. Cohen, The System of Accentuation in the Hebrew Bible (Minneapolis: Milco Press, 1969), 12.

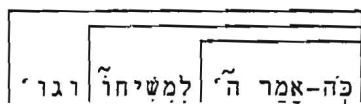
¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56f.

¹² Or possibly $\underline{Z\ddot{a}q\ddot{e}f} \underline{Q\ddot{a}t\ddot{o}n}$ ($\ddot{a}$), *ibid.*, 44f., but this would require replacement of the $\underline{Zarq\ddot{a}}$ ($\sim$) by $\underline{Pa\ddot{s}t\ddot{a}}$ ($\ddot{a}$), as $\underline{Zarq\ddot{a}}$ ($\sim$) cannot precede $\underline{Z\ddot{a}q\ddot{e}f} \underline{Q\ddot{a}t\ddot{o}n}$ ($\ddot{a}$).

¹³ Although manuscripts exhibiting this configuration are found. See William Wickes, A Treatise on the Accentuation of the Twenty-one So-called Prose Books of the Old Testament (London: Oxford Press, 1887; republished, New York: Ktav, 1970), 136; S. D. Luzzatto, Commentary on the Book of Isaiah (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1970), 327f.

the Zarqā(~), one other option was available to them. They did not see Zarqā(~) as a disjunctive which appears in order to indicate a division within the Segōl(˙) phrase; rather, they saw Segōl(˙) as the disjunctive which follows Zarqā(~).¹⁴ That is, in the view of the accentors, it is not Segōl(˙) which permits the occurrence of Zarqā(~), but Zarqā(~) which allows for the appearance of Segōl(˙). Further, they were able to find many instances of Zarqā(~) followed immediately not by Segōl(˙) but by another Zarqā(~).¹⁵ Hence Zarqā(~) was inserted:



Thus, it was possible to re-accent the verse according to the Midrashic interpretation, to produce a configuration of accents which was, at least to the Masoretes on the basis of their understanding of the accents, reasonably acceptable, and to let it be obvious to the reader, because of the anomalous accentuation,¹⁶ that an alteration in the natural arrangement of the accents had been made. The Masoretic text represents here, then, a hybridization of the simple understanding of the verse and the Midrashic interpretation.

II. Is. 40:13 demonstrates again the opting of the Masoretes for other than the simple meaning of the verse:

מִי-תִכֵּן אֶת-רוּחַ ה' וְאֵי־שׁ עֲצָתוֹ יוֹדִיעֵנוּ:

The obvious intent of the verse, as noted by Ibn Ezra¹⁷ and Kimḥi,¹⁸ is a rhetorical question, repeated in the

¹⁴ J. Derenbourg, Manuel du Lecteur (originally published Paris, 1870; republished as Maḥberet Hattigān, Jerusalem: Yosef Hasid, 1961), 77.

¹⁵ Which is in turn followed by Segōl(˙). See *ibid.*, 82f., and Cohen, 52.

¹⁶ Zarqā(~) appearing elsewhere than in a Segōl(˙) phrase.

¹⁷ "The word רוח is in construct with 'the Lord.' 'Who' in the first stich applies also to the second."

¹⁸ "No angel, let alone a mere human, can fix His spirit.... The [single] 'Who' stands in place of two."

second stich with ellipsis of the interrogative: "Who can regulate the spirit of the Lord?// What counselor will instruct Him?"

However, very early this verse appeared troublesome because of the heretical nature of the mere suggestion that there might be a being whose power is superior to that of God.¹⁹ The threatening verse was rendered harmless by reading the first stich as a question and answer: !'ה' מי תכן את רוח? "Who fixed the wind? The Lord did!" Saadya²⁰ and Rashi²¹ punctuate the verse in such a manner, and it is also apparent that this is the reading of Targum Jonathan.²²

The accents also indicate the question-answer reading of this verse. So, whereas the simple understanding, as a rhetorical question, would result in:

יְדִיעֶנּוּ	וְאֵשׁ עֲצָתוֹ	מִי-תִכְנֶן	אֶת-רוּחַ ה'
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instead we find:

יְדִיעֶנּוּ	וְאֵשׁ עֲצָתוֹ	מִי-תִכְנֶן	אֶת-רוּחַ ה'
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with the disjunctive Tiphā (,) ²³ separating the genitive construction.²⁴

The same theological problem exists in the second stich. It is possible to leave the accents as they are and to read: "Who is the confidant to whom

¹⁹ Mordecai Breuer, The Biblical Accents as Punctuation (Jerusalem: Hamador Hadati, 1958), 142.

²⁰ "Who fixed the wind? The Lord did."

²¹ "Who fixed the holy spirit in the mouth of the prophets? The Lord did."

²² Who fixed the holy spirit in the mouth of the prophets? Was it not the Lord?!"

²³ Norzi notes: "All the editions show Tiphā (,) on the word רוח. 'The Lord' is an answer to a question and is not in construct with רוח."

²⁴ The configuration found only in the Letteris edition, מִי-תִכְנֶן אֶת-רוּחַ ה', is at best difficult. Though the division follows the simple sense of the verse, it is hard to explain the absence of 'Etnahtā (א) altogether in a verse of this type. See Cohen, 30ff.

the Lord will reveal [His plans]?"²⁵ But some printed editions²⁶ indicate that there were Masoretes who felt it necessary to rework even this stich:

מִי-תִכְנֶן אֶת-רְוּחַ ה' | רֹאשׁ עֲצָתוֹ יוֹדִיעֵנִי

reading explicitly: "Who is the one to whom the Lord will reveal His plans?"

The interpretation found in the accents is admittedly quite difficult. First, the appearance of מִי with an indefinite accusative is very unusual. Second, the parallelism of the verse is destroyed. Third, it is hard to apply the interrogative מִי also to the second stich when an answer to the question has intervened in the first stich. Nonetheless, the Masoretes, along with several other commentators, chose this explanation, preferring a difficult reading of the verse to the slightest suggestion of a theological heresy.

III. In Is. 40:5 we find a case where the interpretation of the accents is the one accepted apparently without question by the commentators, although another rendering is at least as satisfactory and is possibly preferable.²⁷ The verse consists of three clauses, with the major dichotomy placed after the first:

וְנִגְלָה כְבוֹד ה' | וְרָאוּ כָל-בָּשָׂר יַחְדָּו | כִּי פִי ה' דִּבֶּר

The third clause then becomes the accusative of the verb וְרָאוּ . Kimḥi²⁸ and Targum Jonathan²⁹ understand the sense to be: "The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and the people will realize together that [the prophet] spoke the word of the Lord."

²⁵ As does Luzzatto, 304.

²⁶ E.g., *Biblia Hebraica* (Stuttgart, 1937) and C. D. Ginsburg's Bible (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1894).

²⁷ See RSV; *The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1917); *The Complete Bible - An American Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); et al.

²⁸ "They will then know that these consolations which the prophets have spoken, were spoken on the authority of the Lord."

²⁹ "And all flesh will know as one that what he had spoken was according to the word of the Lord."

It is possible, however, by re-accenting, associating the middle clause with the first clause rather than the third, to teach a different understanding of the verse:³⁰

וְנִגְלָה כְבוֹד ה'	וְרָאוּ כָל-בָּשָׂר יַחְדָּו	כִּי פִי ה' דִּבֶּר
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When the verse is divided in this manner, 'כְבוֹד ה' becomes the object of וְרָאוּ: "The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." It is easy to understand why the Masoretes³¹ and the major commentaries all steered clear of this interpretation, whose anthropomorphic depiction of God is theologically difficult in rabbinic Judaism.

IV. Is. 53:2 illustrates once again how the accents are used to change the entire intent of a verse. Logical division of the verse produces two separate thoughts, each consisting of two parallel stichs, and the following accentuation results:

וַיַּעַל כִּיּוֹנָק לְפָנָיו וְכִשְׁדָּשׁ מֵאֶרֶץ צִיָּה	
לֹא-תֹאֵר לוֹ וְלֹא הָדָר וְנִרְאָהוּ וְלֹא מְרָאָה וְנִחְמְדָהוּ	

The 'Etnahtā (א), indicating the major dichotomy, is placed at the end of the first thought, and the verse is rendered:

³⁰ Luzzatto, 302.

³¹ Only the Letteris edition differs, reading 'וְנִגְלָה כְבוֹד ה'. This reading, not supported by reliable editions or manuscripts, is a clear printer's error, for Tiphā (,) within a Zāqēf Qāḏōn (') phrase is not admissible according to the laws of hierarchy of disjunctives (Cohen, 41ff). It is intriguing that for this verse and for the previous example, Is. 40:13, where the accents are crucial in understanding the verse, the Letteris text (which is generally dependable in its accents) has very difficult readings.

For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.³²

The idea is that there is nothing attractive about him that we should be drawn to look at him.³³

The Masoretic text, however, divides the verse very strangely:

	וְיַעַל כִּיּוֹנֶק לְפָנָיו	וְכִשְׁדָּשׁ מֵאָרֶץ צִיָּה	לֹא-תֵאָר לוֹ וְלֹא הָדָר
וְנִרְאָהוּ וְלֹא-מְרִאָה וְנִחְמְדָהוּ			

The commentators, faced with this unusual accentuation, were still able to explain this verse (albeit in quite a strained manner), despite its unlikely phrasing, in accordance with the obvious intent of the text as given above. Kimḥi and Ibn Ezra explain that a second לא is elliptical and render the last phrase: "We see he has no beauty, and we do not desire him." Rashi expresses it as a question: "When we see he has no beauty, how could we desire him?"

But, by forcing the intent of the obvious meaning of the verse upon that verse now with its contrived Masoretic punctuation, the commentators missed entirely the significance of the unusual punctuation. For the strange location of the major dichotomy indicates an intentional attempt to upset the balance of the verse. The first three phrases are now set against the fourth: "For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of the dry ground - he had no form or comeliness; [nonetheless, despite all this,] we look at him! He has no beauty, yet we desire him!" The objective of the change in punctuation is clear. It was unthinkable that the Servant of the Lord could be subjected to such degradation; thus, the meaning of the verse is completely altered to depict instead an image of wonder. This intent of the accents was no doubt the same one underlying Targum Jonathan's rendering of the verse: "...His countenance was one of holiness, such that all who saw him would take notice of him."

³² RSV.

³³ Luzzatto, 357.

The accentors, then, found a way to remove the scorn and the derision from association with the Servant of the Lord (even at the expense of the sense of the verse and its context) and to replace it with a positive statement.³⁴

A fine insight into the minds of the accentors can be gained from Luzzatto's explanation³⁵ of the frequent coinciding of the approaches of the Targum and the Masoretes to the interpretation of various biblical verses:

We have seen in several places that the vocalization and the Targum have a common intent. But, what was possible for the author of the Targum to do³⁶ was not possible for the vocalizer to do.³⁷ Nevertheless, he did not refrain from doing what he could in order not to place a stumbling block before the blind.³⁸

Although Luzzatto made this statement in reference to the vocalization of the Masoretic text, it is evident from his comments elsewhere³⁹ that he holds a similar view regarding the intent of the accents.

The Masoretic emendations shown here are roughly analogous to the phenomena known as *תקוני סופרים* "emendations of the Scribes."⁴⁰ What the Soferim did to the consonantal text to eliminate anthropomorphisms, unpleasant statements, or possible misinterpretations, was done in a much more limited fashion by the Masoretes. The changes in accentuation and vocalization may be, like the *תקוני סופרים*, superficial and obvious or subtle and disarming. The changes seem to be designed to produce a text which is not blatantly offensive to the medieval mind, often apparently even at the expense of the straightforward understanding of the text.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 343f.

³⁶ Since he was preparing an essentially new text.

³⁷ Since he had a fixed text to work on.

³⁸ I.e., mislead the casual listener as to the intent of the verse.

³⁹ E.g., Luzzatto, 357.

⁴⁰ For an analysis of the "emendations of the Scribes," see Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 28-37.