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# Exegetical Implications of the Masoretic Cantillation Marks in Ecclesiastes

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# Exegetical Implications of the Masoretic Cantillation Marks in Ecclesiastes

## Abstract

A rabbinic tradition preserved in b. Yoma 52a-b suggests that five biblical verses are "undecidable"--that is, it is not clear how they ought to be punctuated. This makes evident a fact that is not often noticed: the Masoretic punctuation of the Bible is sometimes exegetical in character. Simcha Kogut, in his recent book *Correlations between Biblical Accentuation and Traditional Jewish Exegesis*, has shown that the biblical text is sometimes punctuated "against" the *peshat*, the meaning which a "reasonable" reader would assume to have been intended by the author. Such punctuation is a silent commentary. The reason for it is not explained; but it would seem to be prompted by a desire to shape the meaning of the text, often to match it in an interpretation found in rabbinic literature. Choon-Leong Seow's recent Anchor Bible commentary on Ecclesiastes notes over a dozen probable or possible places in that book where biblical scholars have suggested that the Masoretic punctuation does not match the intended meaning of the text. The purpose of this paper is to analyze these cases to determine whether any of these examples were indeed prompted by exegetical concerns.

In several cases, the Targum to Ecclesiastes translates the same word twice--that is, they translated simultaneously in accordance with two different decisions about how the verse should be punctuated. I suggest that, in many cases, the Masoretic decision to place a pause in a location that seems to contradict the *peshat* was similarly made *not* to contradict it, but to add a second possibility. Despite the restrictive quality of the vowels and punctuation marks which the Masoretes added to the traditional consonants, they may, paradoxically, have been actuated by a desire to preserve the indeterminability of the text.

## Disciplines

Biblical Studies | Jewish Studies

## EXEGETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE MASORETIC CANTILLATION MARKS IN ECCLESIASTES

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A rabbinic tradition preserved in b. Yoma 52a–b suggests that five biblical verses are “undecidable”—that is, it is not clear how they ought to be punctuated. This makes evident a fact that is not often noticed: the Masoretic punctuation of the Bible is sometimes exegetical in character. Simcha Kogut, in his recent book *Correlations between Biblical Accentuation and Traditional Jewish Exegesis*, has shown that the biblical text is sometimes punctuated “against” the *peshat*, the meaning which a “reasonable” reader would assume to have been intended by the author. Such punctuation is a silent commentary. The reason for it is not explained; but it would seem to be prompted by a desire to shape the meaning of the text, often to match it to an interpretation found in rabbinic literature. Choon-Leong Seow’s recent Anchor Bible commentary on Ecclesiastes notes over a dozen probable or possible places in that book where biblical scholars have suggested that the Masoretic punctuation does not match the intended meaning of the text. The purpose of this paper is to analyze these cases to determine whether any of these examples were indeed prompted by exegetical concerns.

In several cases, the Targum to Ecclesiastes translates the same word twice—that is, they translated simultaneously in accordance with two different decisions about how the verse should be punctuated. I suggest that, in many cases, the Masoretic decision to place a pause in a location that seems to contradict the *peshat* was similarly made *not* to contradict it, but to add a second possibility. Despite the restrictive quality of the vowels and punctuation marks which the Masoretes added to the traditional consonants, they may, paradoxically, have been actuated by a desire to preserve the indeterminability of the text.

The Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible includes not only the consonants and vowels with which Hebrew readers are familiar, but also a third group of symbols, generally assigned one to a word, called טעמי המקרא or טעמים. In contemporary usage these symbols indicate how the text is to be chanted for the purpose of synagogue reading. Hence they are sometimes referred to in English as “cantillation marks.” Yet they also perform two other functions: to mark the stressed syllable (hence the alternative term “accents”) and, more significantly for the present study, to group the words into phrases—in essence, to punctuate the verse.<sup>1</sup>

A rabbinic tradition preserved in b. Yoma 52a–b suggests that five bibli-

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<sup>1</sup> On the three functions of the טעמים, see I. Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah*, trans. and ed. E. J. Revell (Masoretic Studies 5; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1980), 158.

cal verses are “undecidable” (אין להם הכרעה)—that is, it is not clear how they ought to be punctuated.<sup>2</sup> Midrash allocates to itself a great deal of freedom in this respect. Thus in Gen 27:19, when Isaac asks, “Who are you, my son?” Jacob replies, אנכי עשו בכרך, “I am Esau, your firstborn.” Two rabbinic traditions insist that Jacob did not lie. Instead of the slight pause of the *pashta* in the Masoretic text,<sup>3</sup> they read the phrase as if אנכי had a much stronger disjunctive accent: אנכי! עשו בכרך, “It’s me!—Esau is your firstborn.”<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, this contradicts the Masoretic punctuation of the verse; but sometimes the cantillation marks themselves are exegetical in character. Simcha Kogut is the latest of a number of scholars to show that the biblical text is sometimes punctuated “against” the *peshat*, the meaning which a “reasonable” reader would assume to have been intended by the author.<sup>5</sup> Thus in Gen 24:8, Abraham tells his servant, who has gone back to Mesopotamia to fetch a wife for Isaac, רק את בני לא תשב שמה. The *peshat* understanding of the verse is “only, my son you must not take back there.” But this translation assumes a disjunctive accent on רק, when the existing cantillation marks group את בני רק as a phrase. This permits the rabbinic reading of the verse, “Only my *son* you must not take back there”—but my grandson, Jacob, may go back.<sup>6</sup>

The interpretive grouping of words by the cantillation marks is a silent commentary, for by its nature the reason for it is not explained; but it would

<sup>2</sup> The discussion concludes that the total of five is restricted to the Torah, and thus does not exclude the possibility of such a case in the Prophets, where the verse under discussion (1 Kgs 6:20) is from. The possibility of undecidable verses in the Writings is not addressed in this source. The Torah verses cited as undecidable correspond to Gen 4:7; 49:6–7; Exod 17:9; 25:34 = 37:20, and Deut 31:16. Note that in the latter verse, הנה טבב עמי אברהם וקח להם את אשתו אלהיך גברת הארץ, if the *etnachta* moves to קח, the remainder of the verse makes no sense; hence the suggestion that this verse is “undecidable” is not so much exegetical as it is theological. See the discussion in S. Kogut, *המקרא בין סמנים לפרשנות* [*Correlations between Biblical Accentuation and Traditional Jewish Exegesis: Linguistic and Contextual Studies*] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996), 33, 34, 36.

<sup>3</sup> On the system of cantillation marks and their ranking, see Kogut, *המקרא*, 13–29; I. Yeivin, *Tiberian Masorah*, 157–274; M. B. Cohen, *The System of Accentuation in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Milco Press, 1969). On the problem of the two sets of markings for the Ten Commandments, see M. B. Cohen and D. B. Freedman, “The Dual Accentuation of the Ten Commandments,” *Masoretic Studies* 1 (1974): 7–19.

<sup>4</sup> This tradition is found as early as *Gen. R.* 65:18: “Said R. Levi: I will one day receive the Ten Commandments, but Esau is your firstborn.” (Italics indicate interpretive material added to the biblical verse.)

<sup>5</sup> See recently Z. Goren, *המקרא כפרשנות* [*Biblical Cantillation Marks as Exegesis*] (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me’uchad, 1995), 45–65. Goren’s category of a pause that is moved simply to make reading easier does not appear to apply to the cases discussed in this article.

<sup>6</sup> A similar example is found in Gen 40:5, בתקופת הלילה שנייה, where sense would group the first two words but the cantillation marks group the latter two, providing an occasion for the interpretation, attributed to R. Hiyya bar Abba in *Gen. R.* 88:4, that each one dreamed his own dream and the explanation of the other one’s dream.

seem to be prompted by a desire to shape the meaning of the text, often to match it to an interpretation found in rabbinic literature. Choon-Leong Seow's recent Anchor Bible commentary on Ecclesiastes<sup>7</sup> notes over a dozen probable or possible places in that book where biblical scholars have suggested that the Masoretic punctuation does not match the intended meaning of the text. Seow is a careful reader and, moreover, one who is not given to rash emendation. Hence his work serves as a kind of control for the present study. His suggestions that a cantillation mark is misplaced are independent of the question under review here. To ensure completeness and avoid the pitfalls of relying on the judgment of a single individual, a few possible instances encountered in the course of research have been added to those suggested by Seow. The purpose of this paper is to analyze these cases to determine whether any of these examples were indeed prompted by exegetical concerns, and to identify the sources in which such interpretive punctuation might have originated. If a pattern can be discovered, we will have achieved a greater understanding of the basis for the Masoretic punctuation of the biblical text.

### Ecclesiastes 1:5<sup>8</sup>

וַזְרַח הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וּבָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְאֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ שׁוֹאֵף זֹרַח הוּא שָׁם :

The natural syntax of this verse would seem to link the words וְאֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ and שׁוֹאֵף and this is how most translations, ancient and modern, have taken it: "The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose" (KJV). The MT, however, has a disjunctive accent, *zaqef qaton*, on מְקוֹמוֹ, which leaves the meaning of וְאֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ unclear and complicates the understanding of the remaining words, שׁוֹאֵף זֹרַח הוּא שָׁם. Seow calls this phrase "exceedingly awkward," offering a translation of it as "(It) presses on, it rises there," and joining the many commentators old and new who have essentially moved the disjunctive accent to שׁוֹאֵף.

Syntactically, given the *etnachta* on הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, it is impossible to isolate מְקוֹמוֹ from the words which follow it. The midrash, however, offers an interpretation of the verse which may suggest why a pause at that moment is necessary:

ואל מקומו שואף זרח הוא שם. כיצד נגלגל חמה הולך ברכיע, בקלע של ספינה. אמר ד' שמואל בר נחמני יכול נגלגל חמה [לזרוח] לעלות ולשקע בשעתו, אלא הקב"ה דחק עליו ואומר בשעה פלונית תהא במקום פלוני, מה טעם שואף, דחק ליה.

<sup>7</sup> C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 107.

How does the wheel of the sun move through the firmament? Like the sail<sup>9</sup> of a boat. Said R. Shmuel bar Nahmani: The wheel of the sun might rise and set in its own time. But the Holy One presses it and says, "At such-and-such a time, you will be at such-and-such a place." That is what שואף means: he presses it.

Midrash Zuta Qohelet 1:8<sup>10</sup>

The third-person suffix of שואף, in this interpretation, does not refer to שואף, "its place," but to God, "his place": He, God, presses the sun to the place of *his* choosing.<sup>11</sup> The Masoretic pause here, then, might serve the same purpose as do italics in modern punctuation, to emphasize the suffix in such a way as to demonstrate that the referent has changed. Otzar ha-Midrashim Shmuel ha-Qatan 4 presents a picture of the sun being drawn by two ropes, which perhaps demonstrates how God was envisioned as controlling the sun in its path. We are familiar with a similar image from Greek mythology, where the sun is pulled across the sky in a chariot drawn by two horses. The difference in the Jewish version is that, as in all midrash, the image is controlled by a deliberate reading of a particular feature of the biblical text. In this case, it is the interpretation of the suffix of שואף to refer not to its natural referent, the sun, but to God. It seems to me that the only way to make sense of the disjunctive accent here is to assume that it is meant to point to this less natural reading of the text.

### Ecclesiastes 2:6<sup>12</sup>

עָשִׂיתִי לִי בְרִכּוֹת קַיִם לְהִשְׁקֹת מֵהֶם יַעַר צוֹמֵחַ עֵצִים:

Mordechai Zer-Kavod points out that עָמַח in the Qal is not a transitive verb and suggests that the correct phrasing would be יַעַר צוֹמֵחַ, "a sprouting forest." There are a number of midrashim that cite this verse, but none seem to depend on a strong reading of the way the Masoretes punctuated this verse.<sup>13</sup> Seow considers עֵצִים here an "accusative of specification," which suggests that the Masoretic punctuation might well be acceptable as *peshat*.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, 1380b, lists three words under קָיִם. The meaning "sail" seems most appropriate for a ship, but there is also a meaning "rope." Given the image in the midrash of Shmuel ha-Qatan of the sun being pulled by ropes, it is not clear which meaning קָיִם ought to have here.

<sup>10</sup> Midrashic texts are quoted from the Judaic Classics Library CD-ROM (Chicago: Davka, 1995). The English translations provided are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>11</sup> עָמַח is feminine in modern Hebrew but can be either feminine or masculine in biblical Hebrew; since the verb forms show that it is masculine here, the masculine suffix is not at issue.

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion in M. Zer-Kavod, חֵסֶד מְנוּחָה: קהלה [Ecclesiastes], (*Daat Miqra*; Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1973), ט [9] n. 32.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. *Eccl. R.* 2:9, 11, 12; *Lev. R.* 25:4.

<sup>14</sup> C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 129.

**Ecclesiastes 4:14<sup>15</sup>**

בִּי־מִבֵּית הַסּוּרִים, וְצָא לְמִלְכָּךְ כִּי גַם בְּמַלְכוּתוֹ נִוְלַד רָשׁ:

The American Standard Version of 1901 offers the most literal translation, giving full voice to the disjunctive accent on בְּמַלְכוּתוֹ: “For out of prison he came forth to be king; yea, even in his kingdom he was born poor.” The difficulty in this verse is the apparent suggestion that the one who came forth from prison to be king was born poor “in his kingdom.” One is not born poor into one’s own kingdom, and there is no obvious reason to mention that one was born in someone else’s kingdom. Seow’s suggestion is to assume a disjunctive accent on נִוְלַד and take בְּמַלְכוּתוֹ נִוְלַד as corresponding in grammatical structure to צָא בִּי־מִבֵּית הַסּוּרִים. This makes רָשׁ into a verb form, as in Ps 34:11, yielding a translation like that of the KJV: “whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor.” Contemporary understandings of this verse all seem to require that the two halves of this verse, however they are to be understood, refer to different people. Hence if there is an exegetical reason for the Masoretic punctuation, it should point to a tradition in which both halves of the verse refer to the same person. In a midrash called *Aggadat Bereshit*, there is such a tradition:

ד"א כי מבית הסורים, זה יוסף, שיצא מבית האסורים ומלך, שנאמר שלח מלך ויתירוהו וגומר, שמו ארון לביחור וגו' (תהלים קה כ וכא), אלא כי גם במלכותו נולד רש (קהלת שם ד'). שמלך ולא הנביא את עצמו, אלא כשם שהיה לבו כשהיה חבוש בבית האסורים, שנאמר ויוסף הוא השליט וגו' והוא המטביר (בראשית מב ו), וכי אינו יודע שהוא השליט והוא המטביר, אלא ללמדך שהוא היה בנערותו והוא היה כשמלך, לפיכך שלמה אומר אם רוח המושל וגו' (קהלת י ד).

“For from prison”—this is Joseph, who came forth from prison and ruled, as it says, “The king sent and had him freed...he made him lord over his house” (Ps 105:20 f.). “But in his kingdom he was born poor”—he ruled but did not make himself haughty, but maintained his heart as he had when bound in prison. We know this from the verse “Now Joseph was the vizier...and it was he who dispensed rations” (Gen 42:6). Don’t I already know that he was the vizier and the dispenser of rations? It is meant to teach you that he was the same person when he ruled that he was as a youth. Therefore Solomon said, “If the spirit of the ruler rises up against you, do not leave your place” (Eccl 10:4).

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The difficulty here is that there are a number of midrashim on this verse, in which the one who “comes forth from prison to rule” is Abraham, or

<sup>15</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 184; M. V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 225.

Isaac, or Jacob, or Joseph; but more often these traditions read the two parts of the verse as referring to two different people.<sup>16</sup> The other common interpretation of this verse finds references in it to יצר הרע and יצר הטוב, the “good” and “evil inclinations.” Here, too, the two different parts of the verse refer to the two different inclinations. It is difficult to understand why the Masoretes would have chosen to follow an obscure midrash at the expense of a number of ones which are found in more standard sources, unless their purpose was to demonstrate that this midrash was equally plausible. Moreover, this is a case where the Masoretic punctuation may, indeed, represent the *peshat* interpretation of the verse, in which case we should be hesitant to draw any conclusions.

### Ecclesiastes 5:7 (English 5:8)<sup>17</sup>

כִּי גִבָּה מֵעַל גִּבָּהוֹ שֹׁמֵר וְגִבָּהִים עָלֵיהֶם :

This verse seems quite straightforward. James Kugel, however, has pointed out two difficulties: first, the difference between the prepositions *על* and *מֵעַל* in what would otherwise appear to be the same syntax; second, the fact that *גִּבָּה* in biblical Hebrew does not elsewhere have the meaning attributed to it here of a “high” official.<sup>18</sup> Rather, it refers to one who is overly proud, which does not seem to fit the meaning here. Seow suggests that *שֹׁמֵר* should really be *שֹׁמֵר* (the first *ו* lost by haplography), which would mean that the disjunctive accent would have to be moved back one word, to the second *גִּבָּה*. This yields the translation “for an arrogant one is above an arrogant one, (and) arrogant ones have watched over them all.”<sup>19</sup> The necessity for this particular change in the cantillation, however, is by no means certain, especially as it does essentially nothing to address the difficulties suggested by Kugel. The fact that there is a midrash that follows the existing punctuation need not be significant; the Masoretes (like many modern interpreters) may well have understood this as the *peshat*.<sup>20</sup> Thus, despite Seow’s suggestion,

<sup>16</sup> The very midrash we have quoted from *Aggadat Bereshit* is preceded by references to the three patriarchs, although these references interpret only the beginning of the verse and not the end, which is in question here. Nonetheless, note *Gen. R.* 89:3, 5; *Eccl. R.* 4:9. (Note that references to *Eccl. R.* here are given to the “Judaic Classics Library” CD-ROM text; the printed versions differ. In the Soncino English translation, all texts are numbered matching the biblical chapter and verse, i.e., the example cited here will be found as *Eccl. R.* 4:14.)

<sup>17</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 203.

<sup>18</sup> J. L. Kugel, “Qohelet and Money,” *CBQ* 51 (1989): 35–38.

<sup>19</sup> C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 201. Note that Kugel’s solution involves understanding *גִּבָּה* as from the root *גִּבָּה* and thus demands emendation of *גִּבָּהִים*.

<sup>20</sup> Note that M. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 204b, s.v. *גִּבָּה*, identifies the necessary meaning as current in rabbinic Hebrew. Thus the difficulty may not in fact exist or (at least) may not have existed for the Masoretes. Many



this example requires no explanation.

### Ecclesiastes 5:8 (English 5:9)<sup>21</sup>

וַיִּתְרוֹן אֶרֶץ בְּכֹל הָיָא [הָיָא] מֶלֶךְ לְשָׂרָה נְעֻבָד :

Contemporary translations and commentators generally agree with Seow that מֶלֶךְ לְשָׂרָה נְעֻבָד modifies לְשָׂרָה rather than מֶלֶךְ (as the cantillation marks suggest).<sup>22</sup> The KJV, however, had no difficulty in understanding the phrase in accordance with the apparent intent of the punctuation: “the king himself is served by the field.” There are, to be sure, midrashim which read the verse this way:

מֶלֶךְ לְשָׂרָה נְעֻבָד. מֶלֶךְ זֶה שׁוֹלֵט בְּאוֹצְרוֹת שֶׁל כֶּסֶף וְשֶׁל זָהָב וְאֵינוֹ מְשׁוּעָבֵד אֶלָּא לְיוֹצֵא מִן הַשָּׂדֶה.

This king rules over treasuries of silver and of gold, and is not enslaved except to what comes from the field.

*Sifre Ekev 6*

But others read מֶלֶךְ לְשָׂרָה נְעֻבָד as a phrase, as in Lev. R. 22:2, where מֶלֶךְ is taken to refer to God and לְשָׂרָה נְעֻבָד to Zion. Given the difficulty of the verse and the mixed evidence of the traditional sources, one cannot say that the verse was deliberately punctuated in accordance with rabbinic interpretation.

### Ecclesiastes 5:17 (English 5:18)<sup>23</sup>

הִנֵּה אֲשֶׁר־רָאִיתִי אֵינִי טוֹב אֲשֶׁר־רָפָה לְאֹכֹל־וְלִשְׁתּוֹת וְלִרְאוֹת טוֹבָה

This case is the opposite of 5:7. Here the reading of the verse suggested by the cantillation marks demands an explanation it has never received. Here the translations agree with Seow in moving the disjunctive *revi 'a* from אֵינִי to the following word, טוֹב, or perhaps even as far as רָפָה, yielding this translation: “Only this, I have found, is a real good: that one should eat and drink and get pleasure with all the gains he makes under the sun” (NJPS). Even traditional Jewish commentators regularly ignore the Masoretic punctuation here. I can find no reason for the Masoretes to force such a reading of the verse, nor any rabbinic discussion that appears to depend upon such a reading.

modern interpreters see no difficulty here; e.g., M. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 233.

<sup>21</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 204. He suggests that the text, albeit not the consonants, be emended.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. NJPS, NRSV, NEB; M. Zer-Kavod, *Ecclesiastes*, ל [30] n. 26.

<sup>23</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 208.

**Ecclesiastes 6:10<sup>24</sup>**

מה־שֶׁהָיָה כְּבֹד נִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ וְנִזְרַע אֲשֶׁר־הוּא אָדָם וְלֹא־יִזְכָּל לְדִין עִם שְׁחֵטְקֵי [שְׁחֵטְקֵי] מִמֶּנּוּ:

Seow retains the Masoretic accents in this verse, but is only able to do so by assuming that אֲשֶׁר־הוּא was originally a Niphal verb (the second א was added by dittography).<sup>25</sup> Whitley suggests that the *etnachta* ought to move to אֲשֶׁר־הוּא, and this is how NJPS takes it: “Whatever happens, it was designated long ago and it was known that it would happen; as for man, he cannot contend with what is stronger than he.” The semi-colon after “happen” corresponds to an *etnachta* אֲשֶׁר־הוּא, rather than on אָדָם, “man,” where the Masoretic text puts it. In this case we have two separate midrashic traditions that interpret the verse according to the Masoretic accents:

ראה קראתי בשם בצלאל, הה"ד (קהלת ז) מה שהיה כבר נקרא שמו אמר הקב"ה מי שהתקנתיו מראש שיעשה המשכן כבר קראתי לו שם, מהו ונודע אשר הוא אדם, עד שארה"ד מוטל גולם הראה לו הקב"ה כל צדיק וצדיק שעתיד לעמוד ממנו, יש שהוא תלוי בראשו של אדם, ויש שהוא תלוי בשעריו, ויש שהוא תלוי במצחו, ויש בעינו, ויש בתוסמו, ויש בפיו, ויש באזנו, ויש במלתין (זה מקום הנזם).

“See, I have singled out by name Bezalel” (Exod 31:2). That is what is written, “Whatever is has already been named.” The one whom I arranged from the very beginning to construct the tabernacle—I have already named him. What is the meaning of “and it was known that he was Adam”? While the primeval Adam was still stretched out as a golem, the Holy One showed him each and every righteous person who would eventually descend from him. One might be dependent on the head of Adam, another on his hair, a third on his forehead, and others on his eyes, his nose, his mouth, and his earlobes.

*Exod. R.* 40:3<sup>26</sup>

מה שהיה כבר נקרא שמו זה אדם הראשון שנ' (בראשית ב') ויקח ה' אלהים את האדם, ונודע אשר הוא אדם משל למלך ואפרכוס שהיו נתונים בקרונין והיו מבקשין בני המדינה לומר למלך דומינין ולא היו יודעין אי זהו, מה עשה המלך רחפו והוציאו חוץ לקרונין וידעו הכל שהוא אפרכוס, כך בשעה שברא הקב"ה אדם הראשון טעו בו מלאכי השרת ובקשו לומר לפניו קדוש מה עשה הקב"ה הפיל עליו סינה וידעו שהוא אדם, ואמר לו כי עפר אחת ואל עפר תשוב.

“Whatever is has already been named”—that is Adam, as it says in Gen 2:15, “And the Lord God took the man [אדם].” “And it was known that he was a man [אדם].” A parable of a king and a governor who were riding a carriage, and the people of that country would seek to say “Sire!” to the king and did

<sup>24</sup> See the discussion in C. F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (BZAW 148; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 60, 61.

<sup>25</sup> C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 230.

<sup>26</sup> See also Tanhuma (Warsaw) *Ki Tissa* 12.

not know which one was him. What did the king do? He shoved him out of the carriage, and everyone realized that he was the governor. Similarly, when the Holy One created Adam, the ministering angels mistook him for God and were about to say "Holy" before him. What did the Holy One do? He cast a sleep over him and they knew that he was אדם ("Adam" or "human").

*Eccl. R. 6:9<sup>27</sup>*

The first tradition is connected with Exod 31:2, "See, I have singled out by name [בְּשֵׁם] Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah." According to this tradition, Bezalel was designated at the very beginning of creation for the task he would later perform. בְּקֶרֶךְ גִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ in our verse obviously (from a midrashic perspective) points to this Exodus verse. Once this link has been made, the continuation of the verse, וְנִדְעַ אֲפֹרְהוּ אָדָם, makes clear its complete interpretation: "He [Bezalel] has already been named, and it has been made known that he is [a particular aspect of] Adam." The implication that is logically drawn is that the Tabernacle, too, was part of the original design of creation even before the breath of life was breathed into Adam. Since its focus is the Tabernacle, this tradition is found in midrashim on the Exodus verse, and our verse is merely cited as a prooftext.

The second tradition is found in midrashim on Qohelet, and has the negative view of humanity typical of Ecclesiastes. Again the word אָדָם prompts a connection to the original story of creation. In this case, the second half of the verse—"it was made known that he was human"—depends on the understanding that, when man was created in God's image, the likeness was so good that the angels thought that אָדָם, too, was a god, and began to chant "Holy, holy, holy" before him. Thus the purpose of "making known that he was human" was to prevent the angels from offering him the same praise they offered to God.<sup>28</sup>

Both Exodus Rabbah and Ecclesiastes Rabbah were compiled in the second half of the first millennium of the Common Era, the period in which the Masoretes were active. The fact that two unconnected midrashim both depend upon the unusual punctuation of the Masoretic text might suggest

<sup>27</sup> See also Midrash Zuta Qohelet 6:7.

<sup>28</sup> The parable here, when "unpacked," offers more than is found in the explanation given in the midrash. The midrash merely explains that Adam's humanity was made known to the angels. The prooftext, "The LORD God took the man," continues, "and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it," suggesting that Adam's removal from the place of his creation to a workman's job in the garden was enough to demonstrate the difference between him and God. The parable, in which the governor is thrown out of the carriage, suggests that the occasion on which this was made known was when Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden. This implicitly suggests that, as long as they were in the garden, they were indeed "god-like," enough so as to fool the ministering angels.

that this was a case where the midrashim post-date the punctuation and offer an interpretive explanation for it. But the Targum to this verse adds another level of interest to the question:<sup>29</sup> “What was *in the world*, behold it was already given its name and made known *to men from the day Primordial Man* (i.e., Adam) *existed, and everything is the decree of the Memra of the Lord and a man has no power to stand in judgment with the Master of the World who is stronger than he.*”<sup>30</sup> The word אָדָם is interpreted twice in this translation, first grouped with the previous words as in the Masoretic text (“made known *to men from the day Primordial Man* [i.e., Adam] *existed*”) and then grouped with what follows, as modern interpreters translate the verse (“*and a man has no power to stand in judgment with the Master of the World who is stronger than he*”). Perhaps, then, the Masoretic punctuation deliberately cuts against the grain of what contemporary scholarship views as the *peshat* of the verse not in order to eliminate that interpretation, but to force the reader to take אָדָם the way the Targum did, as a “Janus” word, reading it *both* with what precedes it and with what follows.<sup>31</sup>

### Ecclesiastes 8:10<sup>32</sup>

וּבְכֵן רָאִיתִי רְשָׁעִים קָבְרִים וְקָאוּ וּמִמְקוֹם קְרוֹשׁ יִהְלְכוּ וְהִשְׁתַּבַּחְתּוּ בְּעֵיד אֲשֶׁר בְּרָדְעָהּ גִּם־זֶה הַקֶּבֶל :

Again, according to Seow, “the reading of MT makes no sense as it stands.” He offers the literal translation, “the wicked are buried and they came and from the place of the holy one they went.” NJPS, like Seow, follows the reading reflected in the LXX: “And then I saw scoundrels coming from the Holy Site and being brought to burial” (as if originally קָבְרַי מִבָּאִים). The question here is whether those who “left” (יִהְלְכוּ) are the wicked, as in the translation just given, or those who acted rightly; that is, whether the phrase וּמִמְקוֹם קְרוֹשׁ יִהְלְכוּ belongs with the phrase before it, as suggested by the

<sup>29</sup> P. S. Knobel, ed. and trans., *The Targum of Qohelet*, Aramaic Bible 15 part 3 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 15, dates both the midrash and the Targum to the seventh century. E. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet* (New York: Genesis, 1978), 7, remarks of the Targumim in general that “due to their rich, organic development, [they] virtually defy precise dating.”

<sup>30</sup> P. S. Knobel, *Targum*, 37. Italics represent additions or alterations to the Hebrew text, and Roman type indicates straightforward translation.

<sup>31</sup> I adopt the expression from Cyrus Gordon’s term “Janus parallelism,” in which a single word (e.g., וּבְכֵן in Cant 2:12) means one thing when read in the context which precedes it and something completely different when read in the context which follows it. (C. Gordon’s original discussion appeared in the *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 15 [1978]; for a convenient discussion, see A. R. Ceresko, “Janus Parallelism in Amos’s ‘Oracles against the Nations’ [Amos 1:3–2:16],” *JBL* 113 [1994]: 486.) In “Janus punctuation,” the meaning of the word need not change, but its relationship to the surrounding words is left “undecided.”

<sup>32</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 284; C. F. Whitley, *Koheleth*, 75.

*zaqef qaton*, or with the phrase after it, as in KJV “they that had done right went away from the holy place.” What can traditional Jewish interpretation contribute to this question?

וישמע יתרו, וס'ה ובכן ראיתי רשעים קבורים ובאו ונו' (קהלת ח) וכי יש רשעים קבורים באים ומהלכים, רבי סימון אומר אלו הרשעים שהן מתים ובקבורין בחייהן שנא' (איוב טו) כל ימי רשע הוא מתחולל, מה הוא מתחולל מת חולל.

“And Jethro heard.” This is what Scripture says, “And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come [etc.]” (Eccl 8:10). And are there buried wicked people who come and go [קבורים באים ומהלכים]? Rabbi Simon says, These are the wicked, who are dead and as if buried during their lives, as it says, “All the days of the wicked he profanes”—מתחולל. What is מתחולל?—“dies, profaned.”

Tanhuma (Warsaw) Yitro 1

A Talmudic tradition describes the “wicked” Roman emperor-to-be Titus, when he conquered Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E., deliberately entering the Holy of Holies to defile it:

נשל את הפרוכת ועשאו כמין גרנותני, והביא כל כלים שבמקדש והניחן בהן, והושיבן בספינה לילך להשתבח בעירו, שנאמר: (קהלת ח') ובכן ראיתי רשעים קבורים ובאו וממקום קדוש יהלכו וישתכחו בעיר אשר כן עשו, אל תיקרי קבורים אלא קבוצים, אל תיקרי וישתכחו אלא וישתכחו.

He further took the curtain and shaped it like a basket and brought all the vessels of the Sanctuary and put them in it, and then put them on board ship to go and triumph with them in his city, as it says, “And withal I saw the wicked buried, and they that come to the grave and they that had done right went away from the holy place and were forgotten in the city” (Eccl 8:10). Read not “buried” [קבורים] but “collected” [קבוצים]; read not “were forgotten” [וישתכחו] but “triumphed” [וישתכחו].

b. Gittin 56b

ר"א מרבה בגרים שהם באים ועושים תשובה, וממקום קדוש יהלכו ע"י שהלכו במקום קדוש אלו בתי כנסיות ובתי מדרשות.

The text speaks about converts who come and do repentance, “and they went from the holy place”—by means of going in a holy place. These are the synagogues and schoolhouses.

Eccl. R. 8:13

All three of these midrashim seem to insist that the subject is the “wicked” (whether that means the wicked in general, as in the Tanhuma passage, or Titus in particular, as in Gittin, or the formerly wicked who have converted, as in Ecclesiastes Rabbah) all the way through the verse. Hence

the *zaqef qaton* linking וּמִמָּקוֹם קְרוֹשׁ יִהְיוּ with the previous phrase, so that it is “the wicked” who both “come” and “go,” may have been intended to indicate that the two halves of the verse do not describe separate groups. This interpretation is found in the Targum as well: “And truly, I saw the wicked buried and blotted out of the world and from a holy place where the righteous dwell, they went to be burned in Gehenna and were forgotten by the inhabitants of the city. And as they had done so was done to them. Also this is vanity.”<sup>33</sup>

**Ecclesiastes 8:11<sup>34</sup>**

אֲשֶׁר אֵין נִעְשֶׂה פְתוּם מִעֲשֵׂה הַרְעָה מִהֲרָה עַל־כֵּן מְלֹא לֵב בְּגִיד־הָאֲדָמָה דָּהֵם לְעִשׂוֹת רָע :

Seow is explicit about an understanding implicitly shared by many moderns, that פְתוּם is in construct here with הַרְעָה. He ignores the disjunctive accent on פְתוּם and translates, “since sentence for evil work is not carried out quickly,” against the translation necessary to interpret the Masoretic text as it stands, “since sentence is not carried out, the work of evil is quick.”<sup>35</sup> The Masoretic reading may be based on the following midrash:

אָמַר אֵין נִעְשֶׂה פְתוּם, עַל יְדֵי שֶׁאֲדָמָה חוֹטֵא וְאֵין מִדַּת הַדִּין פּוֹנֵעַת בּוֹ עַל כֵּן מְלֹא וְגו', מִה אֵינּוּן אֲמַרְיִן הָא רּוֹמִיא עַלְלִין הָא רּוֹמִיא נִפְקִין לִית לְהוּן מִפּוֹקִים.

“Because sentence is not carried out”—since a man sins and the attribute of justice does not touch him, “therefore men’s hearts are emboldened to do evil.” What is it that they say? “The haughty<sup>36</sup> go in, the haughty come out, they never make a slip.”

*Eccl. R. 8:14*

The difficulty here, however, is that the key words מִהֲרָה הַרְעָה, v. 11aβ of the Masoretic text, are not explicitly interpreted in the midrash. Thus it is not certain that the midrash does in fact depend on the understanding of the verse indicated by the cantillation marks; there is certainly no necessity for it to do so. Hence the Masoretic cantillation remains unexplained. Note, however, that the form נִעְשֶׂה, an apparent feminine singular, is

<sup>33</sup> P. S. Knobel, *Targum*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 286.

<sup>35</sup> The verse has another peculiarity, though one which goes beyond the bounds of the inquiry set for this study. The word הַרְעָה has a *qamatz*, which Seow suggests as reason for the Masoretic punctuation. But of course the Masoretes were responsible for the vowel pointing as well as the cantillation. Moreover, as Seow himself points out, Esth 1:20 הַרְעָה has a *qamatz* in a phrase where it clearly must be in construct: וְנִשְׁקַל הַתְּנִים הַקָּדָד. Thus this should not have been a reason for the Masoretic punctuation in our verse.

<sup>36</sup> Or: “Romans.” See M. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 820b, s.v. מְזוּקִים.

regularly emended by modern interpreters to נעֻשָה, the masculine form appropriate for פִּתְהֵם.<sup>37</sup> One wonders whether, in the context of the unexpected cantillation mark, this vowel pointing is not a deliberate cue to the reader to think about whether נעֻשָה should not be taken with רָעָה instead of with פִּתְהֵם. We shall see another apparently deliberate “mistake” in the vowel points in Eccl 10:6, below.<sup>38</sup>

### Ecclesiastes 9:1b–2a<sup>39</sup>

...גִּדְאָהֶקָה גִּדְשָׁנָאָה אֵין יוֹדֵעַ הָאָדָם הַכֹּל לַפְּנִיָהֶם:  
2 הַכֹּל כְּאֶשֶׁר לִפְלִ מְקֻרָה אַחַד לַצִּדִּיק וְלַרָשָׁע לַטּוֹב וְלַרְשָׁע וְלַטָּהוֹר וְלַטָּמֵא וְלַזָּכָח וְלַאֲשֶׁר אֵינֶנּוּ זָכָח

Many interpreters think that the last two words of verse 1 belong with verse 2. This judgment, however, tends to rest upon the LXX, where the first word of verse 2 is not הַכֹּל but ματαλότης, הבל. Despite this significant difference, however, the division of the verses is the same in the LXX as in the MT. Given the uncertainty of the suggested revision, however, there is no need to justify the Masoretic cantillation.

### Ecclesiastes 9:10<sup>40</sup>

כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכַחֲךָ עֲשֵׂה

Seow explains, “The Masoretic punctuation suggests that [בְּכַחֲךָ] is to be read with the infinitive [לַעֲשׂוֹת]: ‘Whatever your hand finds to do with strength, do!’ We should, however, follow several MSS, Syr, and Vulg in taking [בְּכַחֲךָ] with the imperative [עֲשֵׂה]: ‘Whatever your hand finds to do, do with strength!’ The point is that one should wholeheartedly do whatever one is able to do.”<sup>41</sup> The standard rabbinic exegesis of this verse reads in accordance with the Masoretic cantillation, giving to the word בְּכַחֲךָ the particular meaning “while you are alive.” The following example makes this clear:

וּשׁ"ה כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכַחֲךָ עֲשֵׂה קְהֵלָה ט' י' , כֹּל מִה שֶׁאֵתָּה יָכוֹל  
לַעֲשׂוֹת מִצְוֵה עַד שֶׁכַּחֲךָ עֲלֶיךָ עֲשֵׂה, לְמַה, מִשְׁאֲדָם בְּטֵל מִן הָעוֹלָם בְּטֵלָה מִחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ,  
כֹּל מִה שֶׁאֵתָּה יָכוֹל לַחֲטוּף מִצְוֹת חֲטוּף עַד שֶׁאֵתָּה בַחַיִּים וְכֵן עֲשֵׂה

<sup>37</sup> The presence of אָךְ should rule out the possibility that נעֻשָה is a masculine third-person perfect form.

<sup>38</sup> On this subject in general, see Y. Breuer, “מחלוקת ניקוד ושטחים בחלוקת פסוקים” [Dissonance between Masoretic Accentuation and Vocalization in Verse Division of the Biblical Text], 191–242 in ספר ההבל לחי' מרדכי ברוייד [Rabbi Mordechai Breuer Festschrift] (Jerusalem: Academon, 1992). Breuer refers to the vocalizers and the punctuators as if they were two separate groups; only at the end of his article (237, 238, with n. 137) does he hint that the contradictions may sometimes be deliberate.

<sup>39</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 298, 299.

<sup>40</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 302.

<sup>41</sup> C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 302.

This is what Scripture says, “All that your hand finds to do בכחך, do” (Ecc 9:10). All you are able to do in the way of commandments while your strength is still upon you, do. Why? Once a person is nullified from the world, his intentions are nullified. As much of a commandment as you can grab, you *should* grab while you are still in life.

*Deut. R.* (Margaliot) 2:27<sup>42</sup>

The assumption here, as in the other texts that follow this interpretation, is that “whatever your hand finds to do” refers to your ability to perform God’s commandments. More significantly for our question, however, is that they all interpret the word בְּכֹחֶךָ, “with your strength,” as meaning “while you are alive.” This explanation, of course, is based on the rest of the verse: “For there is no action, no reasoning, no learning, no wisdom in Sheol, where you are going” (NJPS). The Masoretic text seems to be another case of Janus punctuation, aimed at questioning the *peshat* interpretation (as suggested by Seow), “do them with all your might,” and at pushing the reader to interpret the verse in accordance with the midrashic interpretation. Again we see the Targum translating in accordance with both possible punctuations: “Whatever *charity* your hand finds to do *for the needy* do it with all your strength [בכל חילך], for *after the death* [בחר מוהא ארום] *a man has* neither work nor reckoning nor knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going *and nothing will help you but good deeds and charity alone.*”<sup>43</sup> Such a translation suggests that the Targum regards this as another undecidable verse.

### Ecclesiastes 9:17<sup>44</sup>

דְּבַרֵי חֲכָמִים בְּנַחַח נִשְׁמָעִים מִזְעָקַת מוֹשֵׁל בְּבִסְיָלִים:

Fox suggests that “[t]he disjunctive [*zaqef qaton*]” should be moved forward to בְּנַחַח, making this adverbial expression modify “the words of the wise” rather than the verb “are heard” (as Rashi takes the verse). Other interpreters agree with Fox’s understanding of the words, but not with his reading of the Masoretic punctuation. Thus Gordis explains that בְּנַחַח “has the disjunctive accent, Tiphha” and must be read with דְּבַרֵי חֲכָמִים. Seow, interpreting similarly, remarks, “The Masoretic punctuation supports this interpretation.”<sup>45</sup> If Seow and Gordis are correct, the cantillation marks follow

<sup>42</sup> Similar interpretations are found in Eccl R 9:10, Midr. Zuta Qoh 9:8, Pesikta Rabbati 3:3, Otzar Hamidrashim Yelammedenu 4.

<sup>43</sup> P. S. Knobel, *Targum*, 45.

<sup>44</sup> See the discussion in M. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 300. Thanks to Zvi Betzer for reminding me of this example.

<sup>45</sup> R. Gordis, *Koheleth: the man and his world: a Study of Ecclesiastes*, (Third ed.,; New York: Schocken,



the *peshat* and need no explanation. But *zaqef qaton* is indeed a much stronger disjunctive than *tifsha*. If Fox’s analysis is correct, then again the Masoretes would seem to be forcing the reader to take into account a less likely interpretation of the verse. The Targum, too, may possibly be translating twice here: “The words of the silent *prayer of the sages* are accepted by the Master of the World...”<sup>46</sup> “Prayer” (added between “words” and “sages”) and “silent” (falling in the Aramaic where בְּנִתָּהּ does in the Hebrew text) may both represent בְּנִתָּהּ. If this is so, the Targum and the cantillation marks may both point to a double reading. But this is speculation.

**Ecclesiastes 10:6<sup>47</sup>**

נתן הסכל במרומים רבים ועשירים בעפל יִשְׁבוּ:

The NEB translates as follows: “the fool given high office, but the great and the rich in humble posts.” Yet most commentators and translations follow the Masoretic punctuation. Thus NJPS translates, “Folly was placed on lofty heights, while rich men sat in low estate.” One may suspect that מְרוֹמִים led “naturally” to the midrashic conclusion that this verse was about the Romans (and by extension all oppressors of the Jews) and their greatness. The interpretation in Ecclesiastes Rabbah follows the Masoretic cantillation:

נתן הסכל במרומים רבים, אלו הכשרים דכתיב (ידמיה ל"ט) ויבואו כל שרי מלך בבל וישבו בשער התוך, מהו בשער התוך מקום שמהחכין בו את ההלכות, ועשירים בעפל יִשְׁבוּ, זה סנהדרין שנאמר ישבו לארץ ידמו (איכה ב').

“Folly was placed on lofty heights”—these are the Chaldeans, as it is written, “All the officers of the king of Babylon entered, and took up quarters at the middle gate” (Jer 39:3). What is “the middle gate [שער התוך]”? The place where one decides [מהחכין] the halakhot. “And rich men sat in low estate”—that is the Sanhedrin, as it says, “They sit silent on the ground” (Lam 2:10).

*Ecc. R. 10:7*

By the way the midrash cites the verse, it is clear that they are reading the verse the same way the cantillation marks do. Given that so many interpreters consider this grouping of the words to be the *peshat* interpretation, however, the fact that the Masoretic punctuation groups the words this

1968), 312; C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 311.

<sup>46</sup> P. S. Knobel, *Targum*, 46.

<sup>47</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 314, 315; Y. Breuer, “החלוקה,” 207, 208; S. Kogut, המקרא, 198, 199.

way as well cannot be considered tendentious. There is one fact, however, that suggests that the Masoretes did indeed consider punctuating the verse to read רבים ועשירים. That is the fact that *במרומים* has the definite article but רבים does not. This hints at a certain undecidability, to which the Targum points as well:<sup>48</sup>

The Lord enabled the wicked and the foolish Edom to enjoy good luck and to enjoy prosperity from the highest heavens [מן שמי מרומא] and his armies are proud and numerous [גוהנין וסניאין] while the people of the household of Israel are enslaved under him in exile. Because of the multitude of their sins [סניאות חוביהון], those rich [עחירי] in property become poor and dwell in a lowly state among the nations.<sup>49</sup>

Here we find מרומים [מן שמי מרומא] in its place in the first half of the verse and עשירים [עחירי] in its place in the second half of the verse. But רבים (in Aramaic, סניאין) appears twice: first in the first half of the verse, “proud and numerous,” and again in the second half of the verse, “the multitude of their sins”—that is, those “rich” in property. With this double translation, the Targum is pointing to the undecidability of the verse. I suggest that the Masoretic arrangement, punctuating in blatant contradiction to the vowel points, is aimed at conveying the same message.

### Ecclesiastes 10:10<sup>50</sup>

ויתרון הכשיר חכמה

This phrase is somewhat difficult. The NJPS translation preserves the Masoretic punctuation by adding, Targum-fashion, a few words to make sense out of the phrase: “Thus the advantage of a skill *depends on the exercise of prudence*.” The KJV has silently moved the disjunctive accent back to *yitron*: “wisdom is profitable to direct,” as is clear when this phrase is written in more straightforward syntax: “it is profitable [יתרון] to direct wisdom [הכשיר חכמה].” Seow makes this change in punctuation explicit, offering in the notes the literal translation “an advantage is to make wisdom appropriate” and in the context of his translation “It is an advantage to appropriate wisdom.”<sup>51</sup> This is perhaps the strangest case we shall consider; I can find no

<sup>48</sup> Against the suggestion given here, S. Kogut, *המקרא*, 198, points to היום רבים in Ezek 39:27, where the punctuation is not in question, to show that the punctuators might well have considered this syntax possible in biblical Hebrew. Note also Eccl 3:19, where both the sense and the cantillation marks suggest that *מקרה* (twice) is a construct form, though spelled with the *seghol* of the absolute form.

<sup>49</sup> P. S. Knobel, *Targum*, 48.

<sup>50</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 318.

<sup>51</sup> C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 307.

examples of Jewish exegesis which demand the Masoretic punctuation, whereas several seem to presuppose that suggested by Seow and the KJV. Thus the Targum renders: "...on account of the abundance of the excellence of their wisdom."<sup>52</sup> B. Taanit 8a glosses the phrase in connection with study methodology as follows: "how much more profitable would his efforts be if he had originally systematized his studies [הוכשרו מעטיו]."<sup>53</sup> Here מעטיו takes the place of חקקה; the disjunctive accent our Masoretic text places on הקטיר would contradict this interpretation. I am at a loss to explain the Masoretic punctuation in this case.

### Ecclesiastes 10:11<sup>54</sup>

אם-יִפֶּךְ הַנֶּחֱשׁ בְּלוֹא-לִחַשׁ וְאֵין יִתְרוֹן לְבַעַל הַלָּשׁוֹן:

The reason to suspect the Masoretic punctuation here is the phrase from Jer 8:17, צַפְעָנִים אֲשֶׁר אֵין לָהֶם לַחַשׁ, "Adders that cannot be charmed" (NJPS). Thus Seow suggests disregarding the disjunctive accent on הַנֶּחֱשׁ to make this phrase match the Jeremiah one. This yields the translation, "If a snake that cannot be charmed bites." There are a number of midrashim that allude to this verse. The story of the snake who persuades Eve to eat in Genesis 3, juxtaposed to this verse, seems to have forged a connection between the snake and "evil speech" [לשון הרע]. This is the לָשׁוֹן to which Eccl 10:11 is assumed to be referring. The midrashim on this topic, however, do not appear to turn on the Masoretic punctuation of the phrase.<sup>55</sup> But the Targum does point to an interpretation based on the Masoretic punctuation, rather than that suggested by the Jeremiah verse: "When fiery serpents are stirred up to bite and to cause harm in the world, it is on account of the sins of Israel who do not occupy themselves with the words of Torah quietly. And also there is no advantage for a slanderer..."<sup>56</sup> Here, too, *lashon ha-ra* is at issue. But the phrase "who do not occupy themselves with the Torah quietly [בְּחֹשֵׁי]" seems to be the Targumic expansion of בְּלוֹא-לִחַשׁ. Thus: אם-יִפֶּךְ הַנֶּחֱשׁ, when serpents bite, it is בְּלוֹא-לִחַשׁ, when Israel does not study. Again, the disjunctive Masoretic accent jibes with the interpretation found in

<sup>52</sup> P. S. Knobel, *Targum*, 48. The typography here would seem to be an oversight; it is questionable whether "excellence" ought to be italicized, and "wisdom" should certainly be Romanized.

<sup>53</sup> Similarly חֲכָמִים מְעַטִּין on 7b and *Eccl. R.* 10:10.

<sup>54</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 318.

<sup>55</sup> E.g., *Deut. R.* 5:9, "They asked the snake: What benefit do you get out of biting? He replied, Before you ask me, ask those who use evil speech, as it says, אֵין יִתְרוֹן לְבַעַל הַלָּשׁוֹן. How does he benefit by saying evil speech?" The words בְּלוֹא-לִחַשׁ do not appear to figure in this midrash; hence the question of whether לִחַשׁ is read with what precedes it or with what follows it is not addressed by the midrash.

<sup>56</sup> P. S. Knobel, *Targum*, 48.

the Targum. But it is not certain that the Masoretic cantillation may not represent the *peshat*.

### Ecclesiastes 11:3<sup>57</sup>

אִם-יִמְלֵאוּ הָעֲבָיִם גֶּשֶׁם עַל-הָאָרֶץ יִרְיֶקוּ וְאִם-יִפְּלוּ עַן בְּדָרוֹם וְאִם בְּצִפּוֹן

As currently punctuated, with the slightly disjunctive *pashta* on גֶּשֶׁם, the verse would seem to call for translation as follows: “If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth” (KJV). Seow proposes that we assume a disjunctive accent on הָעֲבָיִם, which would yield the following translation: “If the clouds are filled, they will pour down rain on the earth” (NJPS).<sup>58</sup> In the first example, גֶּשֶׁם is an accusative of means<sup>59</sup> and יִרְיֶקוּ a Qal verb, unique for this root, and used in the “middle” mood; in the latter, גֶּשֶׁם is the object of standard, transitive Hiphil יִרְיֶקוּ. Despite the slight difference in translation, there is from a *peshat* point of view no effective difference in meaning between the two possibilities. Why then did the Masoretes choose the less grammatically likely of the two? *Eccl. R.* 11:3 provides a midrash which parses the verse in the same way as the MT:

ולומדין ממנו, ד"א אם ימלאו העבים גשם אם הנביאים ימלאו נבואה, על הארץ יריקו על ישראל מתנבאין שנקראו ארץ שנאמר (סם מלאכי ג') כי תהיו אחם ארץ חפץ, תירגם עקילם הנר (ישעיה ה') ועל העבים אציה מהמטיר עליו מטר, ועל נביאיא אפקיד דלא יתנבאון לתון נבואתה.

“If the clouds are filled with rain”—if the prophets are filled with prophecy—“they empty themselves on the earth”—they prophesy about [על] Israel, who are called “earth”: “for you shall be a desired land [ארץ חפץ]” (Mal 3:12). Aquila the proselyte translated “I will command the clouds to drop no rain on it” as “I will command the prophets not to prophesy to them.”

*Eccl. R.* 11:3

The midrash clearly reads the verse according to the Masoretic punctuation. It decodes the verse in phrases, and includes *geshem* with the beginning of the verse. Moreover, the midrash itself leads us to the earlier source we

<sup>57</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 336. The fact that the *zaqef qaton* appears to be a stronger disjunctive than the *etnachta* in this verse is generally ignored by commentators. See the discussion in Z. Goren, *שעמי המקרא*, 70–72, which suggests this may be explained by the theory of A. Ettinger, *Eretz Israel* 3 (cited by Goren), that *zaqef qaton* replaces *segol* in some contexts where *segol* matches the use of *oleh v'yored* in the alternative system used for Psalms, Proverbs, and Job as a disjunctive of equal power to *etnachta*.

<sup>58</sup> The slight alteration provides another instance where NJPS fails to follow its stated purpose of being a translation of the MT.

<sup>59</sup> C.-L. Seow refers to it as an accusative of “material”; see GKC 117z and *IBHS*, 10.2.3c.

have by now become accustomed to seeing, the Targum. This time, however, the Targumic influence is somewhat roundabout. To be sure, the Targum of Qohelet also reads the verse according to the Masoretic punctuation: “If the clouds are full of rain, they pour out *their water* [מִיַּדְהֵינָן] on the earth.”<sup>60</sup> Note, however, that the Targum adds the expected object to דְרִיקוּ of the Hebrew verse, keeping that verse grammatically standard. We may have another occasion where the Targum has managed to eat its cake and have it too—simultaneously translating as if מַעַן were the object of יִקְלָאוּ and as if it were the object of דְרִיקוּ. If this is in fact the explanation of the Targum, it marks our verse as another to which at least one Jewish tradition applied the label of “undecided.”

The midrashic quotation from the Targum to Isaiah, however, suggests a more complicated possible background to the Masoretic punctuation. It is a common midrashic trope to liken “Torah” to “water.” The likening of the prophets to clouds, however, is unusual. It is not clear whether the Masoretes here had that comparison in mind, as does the midrash from Ecclesiastes Rabbah, or whether they, like the Targum, are also demonstrating that the proper grammatical reading of מַעַן is indeterminate. Unlike the Targum, the Masoretes did not have the options of adding in a word; hence they may have chosen the less likely pattern of punctuation, since the likely pattern would be obvious in any case.

### Ecclesiastes 12:9<sup>61</sup>

וְהָרַחֵם שְׂתַנְּהוּ קְלִמָּה חֶכֶם עוֹד לְמִדְרָשׁוֹת אֶת־הַקְּלִמָּה

Seow notes that some commentators prefer to disregard the disjunctive accent on וְהָרַחֵם. This is the tack taken by the NRSV: “Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge.”<sup>62</sup> Robert Gordis, following Rashi, cites two comparable Talmudic phrases to lend support to this interpretation; the exegetical implications, he says, have not so far been recognized. “Kohleth was not merely a professional Wisdom teacher whose activity was limited to the scions of the rich; through his writings he taught Wisdom to the *people*.”<sup>63</sup> As punctuated, however, *weyoter* should stand by itself: “And moreover” (KJV), “A further word” (NJPS). Though it is not

<sup>60</sup> P. S. Knobel, *Targum*, 50.

<sup>61</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 383.

<sup>62</sup> It is unclear to me whether or not NEB’s “So the Speaker, in his wisdom, continued to teach the people what he knew” also disregards this accent.

<sup>63</sup> R. Gordis, *Kohleth*, 351, 352, citing b. Pes. 112a and b. Yeb. 113a. The emphasis is in the original. The absence of the comparative ׀ in our verse would seem to refute this reading, especially as the expression with ׀ is found in 12:12.

entirely clear, this is a case where no midrashic explanation for the Masoretic punctuation is to be found; nor is one necessary. Despite the lack of complete agreement amongst all interpreters, the Masoretic punctuation seems to follow the *peshat* here.<sup>64</sup> Thus we need not look for further justification. The Targum, in this case, translates as if there were no disjunctive accent: “*And Solomon who was called Qohelet was wiser than all people and also he taught the people of Israel knowledge.*” But we have not suggested that the MT always punctuates in accordance with the Targum. If the Masoretic punctuation can be interpreted as following the *peshat*, it needs no explanation.

### Ecclesiastes 12:11<sup>65</sup>

דְּבַרֵי חֻקִּים פְּקֻדוֹת

Seow prefers to disregard what he calls “the inexplicable presence of the *Munah* on the first syllable” of *dorbonot* here. Though the Masoretic punctuation of this word may have linguistic implications (which is why Seow addresses the question), there is no evident exegetical reason for it. Hence we will not discuss it here.

### Ecclesiastes 12:12<sup>66</sup>

וְיִתֵּר מִהֶמָּה בְּנֵי הַזֶּהָר

Here we have the opposite case of that in 12:9. The first word of the sentence, וְיִתֵּר, this time has no disjunctive accent and is followed by the comparative מ. Michael Fox would add the disjunctive accent here, accounting for the מ as the preposition following the verb הֶזְהָר.<sup>67</sup> There is in fact a midrashic comment to the verse which follows this path:

דרש רבא: מאי דכתיב (קהלת י"ב) ויתר מהמה בני הזהר עשות ספרים הרבה וגו'. בני הזהר בדברי סופרים יותר מדברי תורה. שדברי תורה יש בהן עשה ולא תעשה, ודברי סופרים—כל העובר על דברי סופרים חייב מיתה. שמא תאמר אם יש בהן ממש מפני מה לא נכתבו—אמר קרא עשות ספרים הרבה אין קץ.

<sup>64</sup> On this verse and 12:12, see N. Lohfink, “Zu einigen Satzöffnungen im Epilog des Koheletbuches,” 131–147 in “*Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit...*”: Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit, ed. Otto Kaiser (BZAW 241; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), esp. 137, 138.

<sup>65</sup> See the discussion in C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 386.

<sup>66</sup> See the discussion in M. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 356.

<sup>67</sup> M. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 356; N. Lohfink, “Zu einigen Satzöffnungen,” 138, points out that this syntax does not appear elsewhere in biblical Hebrew (7 other occurrences of the Niphal of יָהַר, including Eccl 4:13).

Raba made the following exposition: What is the purport of the Scriptural text: "And, furthermore my son, be admonished: Of making many books etc.?" My son, be more careful [הזהר] in [the observance of] the words of the Scribes than in the words of the Torah, for in the laws of the Torah there are positive and negative precepts [which have a variety of different penalties]; but, as to the laws of the Scribes, whoever transgresses any of the enactments of the Scribes incurs the penalty of death. In case you should object: If they are of real value why were they not recorded [in the Torah]? Scripture stated: "Of making many books there is no end."

b. Erubin 21b

Though it is not exactly clear here whether the midrash intends to read "be more careful *of* these [words of the scribes]" or "be more careful *than* with these [words of Torah]," the implied punctuation is clear: וְיִהְיֶה, "moreover," מְהֵרָה בְּנֵי הַסֹּפְרִים. The Targum here appears to move the *etnachta* to בְּנֵי: "And more than these my son, Be careful to make many books of wisdom without end."<sup>68</sup> But this is not the case at issue. As far as the suggested disjunctive accent on וְיִהְיֶה, the Targum avoids it and the *peshat* does not demand it. The MT therefore requires no explanation.

Our survey has not been completely conclusive, since we have had to leave several examples unexplained. But it would seem that the Targum gives us an insight into the perspective of the Masoretes. We have seen several occurrences in this small book where the Targum translated the same word twice—that is, they translated simultaneously in accordance with two *different* decisions about how the verse should be punctuated. I suggest that, in many cases, the Masoretic decision to place a pause in a location that seems to contradict the *peshat* was made *not* to contradict it, but to add a second possibility. Given the Talmudic declaration that only five verses in the Torah are undecidable in this way, one may say that the Masoretes performed their task with quite a gentle touch. They do not seem to have wished to force a particular exegesis upon the reader. Rather, despite the restrictive quality of the vowels and punctuation marks which they were adding to the traditional consonants, they may, paradoxically, have been actuated by a desire to preserve the indeterminability of the text which had enabled Jewish interpreters for more than a millennium to use the Bible as a springboard for their own literary and theological imaginings.

<sup>68</sup>P. S. Knobel, *Targum*, 54.