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The Cantillation of the Psalms

By Joshua R. Jacobson

Cantillation is the art of chanting a biblical text in the context of a synagogue service . Traditional cantillation is performed by a soloist in free rhythm using an ancient system of musical motifs. The motifs are notated in the text using a system of ekphonetic symbols, called *te'amim*, devised at the Ben Asher academy in Tiberias more than 1100 years ago, and eventually universally accepted in all Jewish communities. These symbols represent more than just the musical motifs; they also serve to indicate the proper pronunciation of each word and to punctuate the syntactic structure of each sentence.

The *te'amim* are found in all twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible, but they are arranged differently in three of those books: Proverbs, Psalms and Job.[1] No one is certain why the *te'amim* are different in these three books.[2] Perhaps it is because of the compact, epigraphic nature of the text. Indeed, these three books, known by their acronym, ספרי אמ"ת (standing for **א**יוב, **מ**שלי, **ת**הלים), are often referred to as the "poetic books."[3]

Biblical poetry is characterized by a style known as parallelism[4], and this style is most consistently notable in the Three Books. Each verse is divided into two balanced halves or "hemistichs," the second echoing the content and/or the structure of the first. As Prof. James Kugel has observed, the second half of the verse often "sharpens" or expands on the idea posited in the first half.[5] To illustrate, let us examine this well-known verse from Psalm 145. בְּכָל־יוֹם אֲבָרְכֶךָּ וַאֲהַלְלָה שִׁמְךָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד׃. "Every day I will bless You, and I will praise Your name forever and ever." The second hemistich takes the idea of "I will bless You" and expands it into "I will praise Your name." Likewise, "every day" is expanded in the second hemistich into "forever and ever."

Traditional performance practice of Psalms in many synagogues and churches is based on this parallel structure. In this practice, known as "psalmody," the entire Psalm is treated as a strophic composition, with the same musical pattern applied to each verse. Furthermore, each of the two hemistichs is allotted its own unique melodic pattern, with a half cadence at the end of the first hemistich and a full cadence at the end of the second.

The first hemistich begins with an appropriate opening pitch, the "initium," which then rises or falls to the "running tone" ("tonus currens" or "tenor"), a pitch that is repeated as many times as is necessary to accommodate the syllables, and then rises or falls (sometimes through a brief melodic formula) to the "mediant" pitch, its half-cadence marking the first resting point. The second hemistich then begins with its initium, its tonus currens and its "finalis," or full cadence. This pattern is then applied to each verse of the Psalm. With some variations, this pattern

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1. The book of Job comprises both poetic and prose sections. The *te'amim* for the concise poetic verses, 3:2-42:6, are the same as those used for Psalms and Proverbs. The *te'amim* for the narrative sections with longer verses, 1:1-3:1 and 42:7-17, are consistent with those used for the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

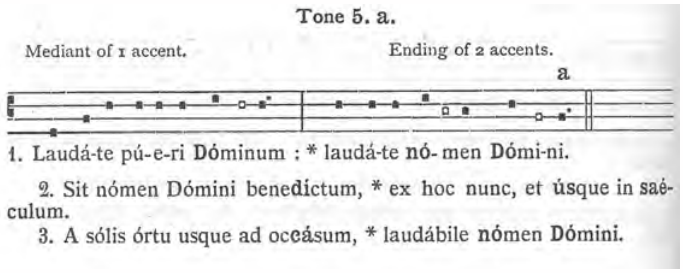
2. In the (pre-Tiberian) Babylonian notation system, the three books in question were punctuated no differetly from the other twenty-one books.

3. In this article, I will refer to them as the "Three Books."

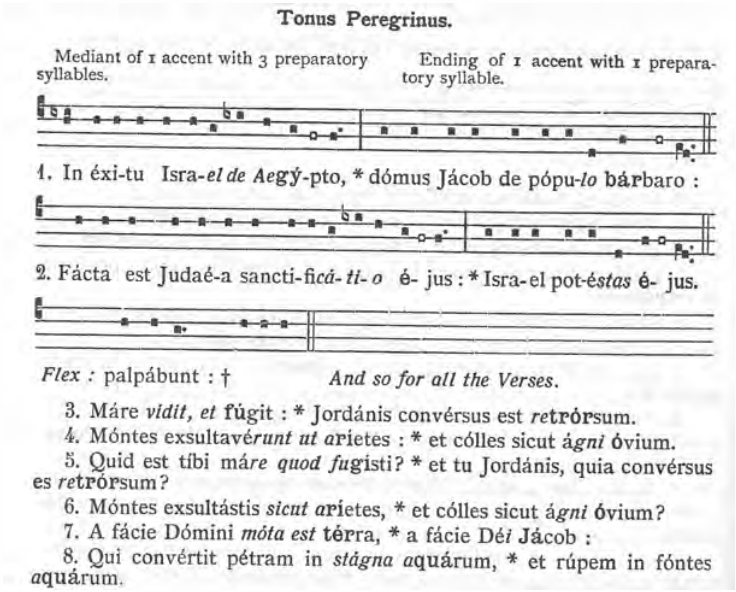
4. This same parallel sctructure also characterizes the poetry of other ancient Middle Eastern cultures, yet is absent from Indo-European literature of the same period (Werner, "The Origin of Psalmody," *Hebrew Union College Annual 25, 1954:* 331-333).

5. James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981: 8.
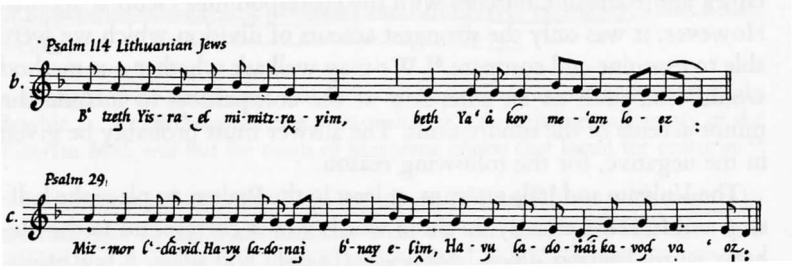
can be seen in numerous traditional chants from both Jewish and Christian traditions, as can be seen in the following examples.



Ex. 1. Gregorian Chant for Psalm 113 "Laudate pueri Dominum" (first three verses).[6]
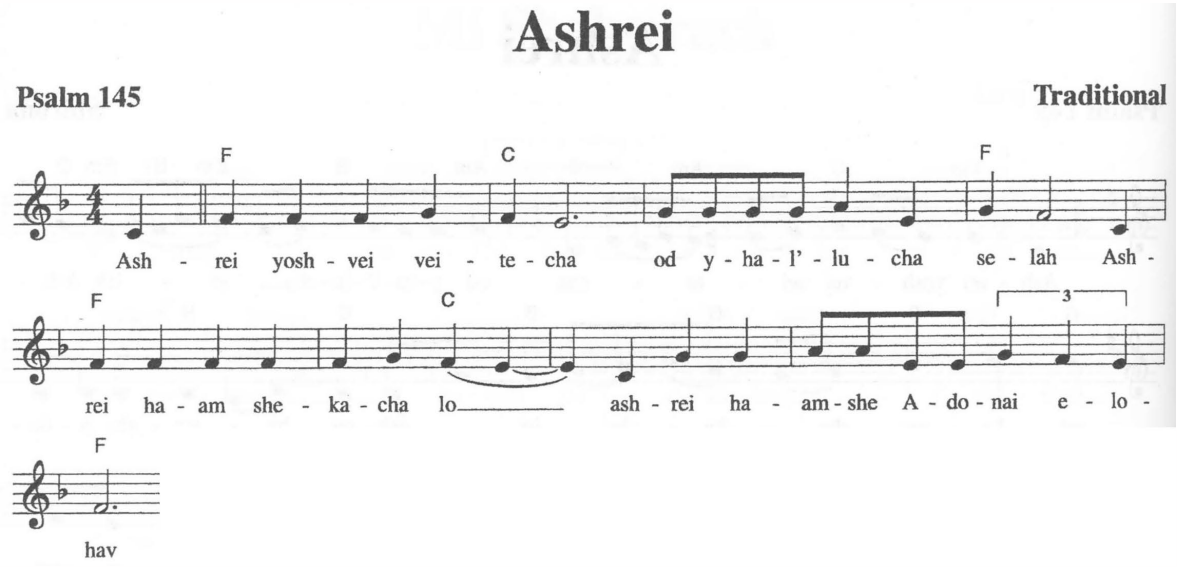


Ex. 2. Gregorian Chant for Psalm 114 "In exitu Israel."[7]
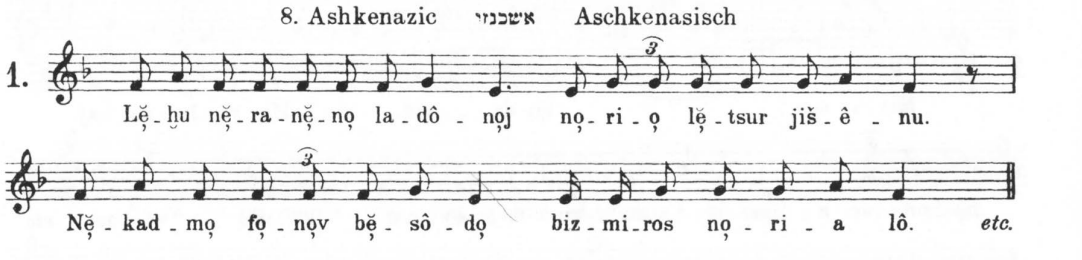


Ex. 3. Lithuanian Jewish psalmody for Psalm 114 and Sephardic Oriental Jewish psalmody for Psalm 29.[8]

6. *Liber Usualis*, Great Falls, Montana: St. Bonaventure Publication, 1997: 150.
7. Ibid., 160.
8. Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1959: 419.
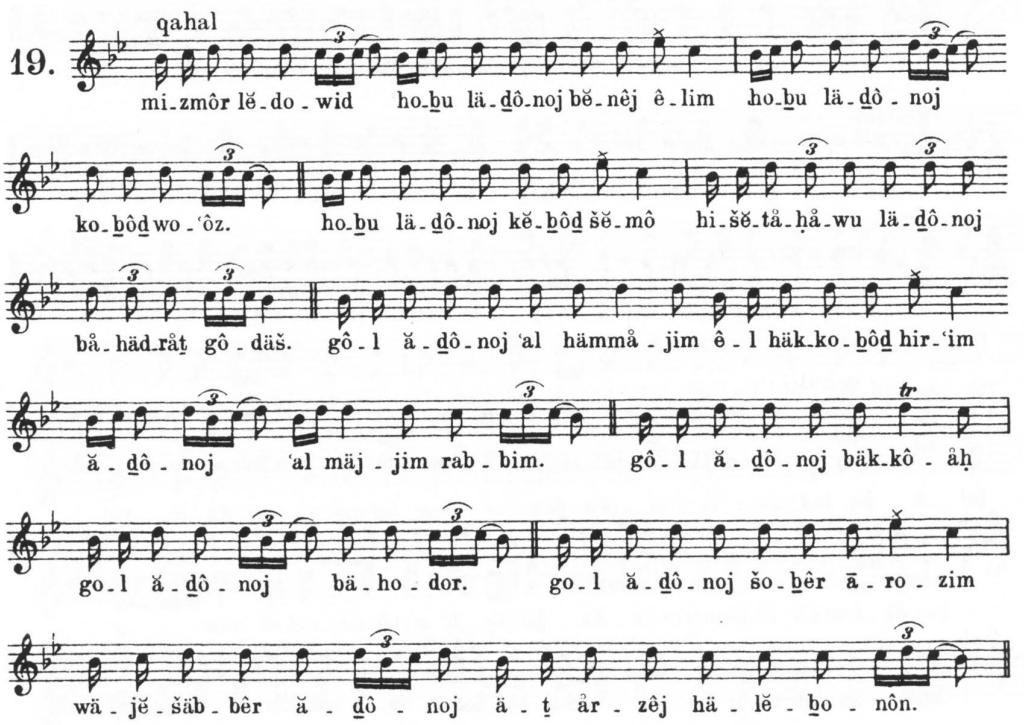


Ex. 4. Traditional Ashkenazic psalmody for the "Ashrei" (excerpt).[9]



Ex. 5. Ashkenazic psalmody for Psalm 95:1-2.[10]
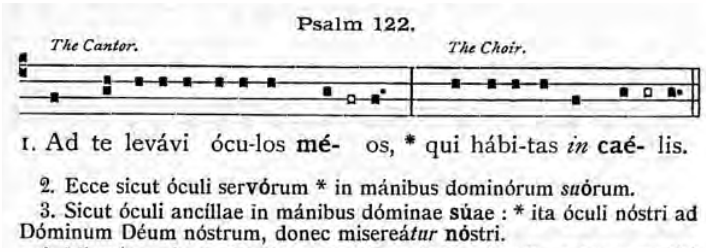
9. *Zamru Lo, The Next Generation: Congregational Melodies for Shabbat*, ed. Jeffrey Shiovitz. New York: The Cantors Assembly, 2004: 290.

10. Abraham Z. Idelsohn, *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*. *Volume II: Songs of the Babylonian Jews*. Berlin: Benjamin: Harz, 1923: 68.



Ex. 6. Yemenite psalmody for Psalm 29:1-5.[11]

Another performance practice derived from parallelism is antiphony. In the performance of Church psalmody, often the priest will chant the first hemistich and the choir will respond with the second (see ex. 7).
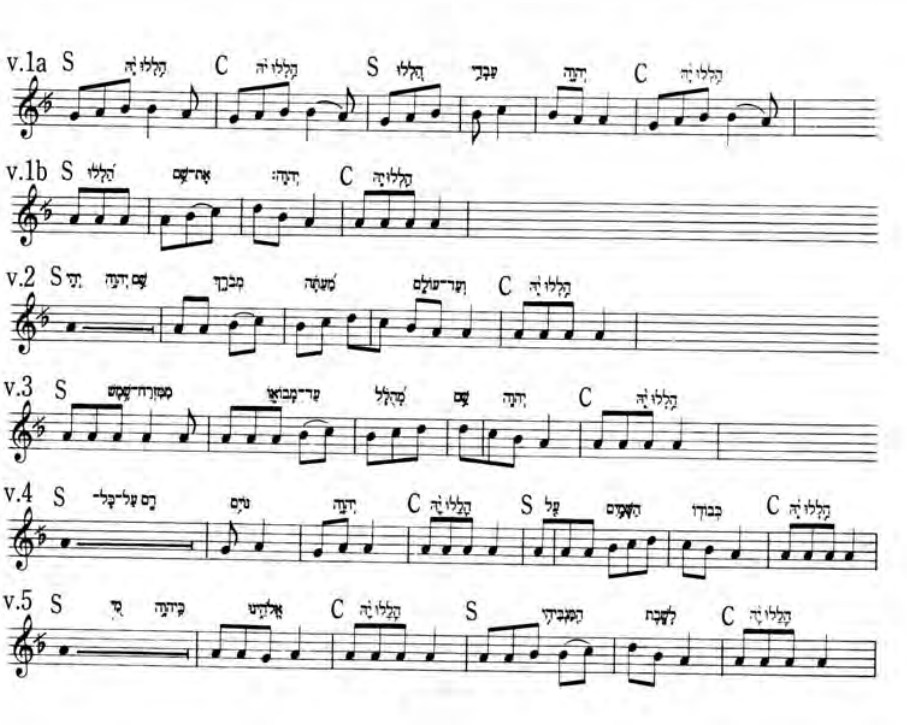


Ex. 7. Gregorian chant for Psalm 123:1-3, "Ad te levavi."[12]

The Talmud provides evidence of a different kind of practice in performance of the Hallel Psalms (113-118). When an adult chants the Hallel, the congregation responds to each line with a refrain. When a child chants Hallel, the congregation responds by repeating what the child had just chanted.[13] Vestiges of this practice can be found in contemporary Yemenite performance of the Hallel. In the example below the word "halelluyah" is chanted as a congregational refrain after each phrase of Psalm 113 that is chanted by the leader.

11. Abraham Z. Idelsohn, *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*. *Volume I (1914): Songs of the Yemenite Jews.* Berlin: Benjamin Harz, 1925:13.

12. *Liber Usualis*, 1997:1733.

13. b. *Sota* 30b, *Tosefta Sota* 6:2, y. *Sota* 24b (5:4), *Midrash Mekhilta* Exodus 15.



Ex. 8. Yemenite antiphonal performance practice.[14]

The presence of a congregational refrain is attested in an ancient copy of Psalm 145 found in the Qumran caves[15]. The doxological refrain ברוך ה' וברוך שמו לעולם ועד (Blessed be God and blessed be His Name forever and ever) has been inserted after each verse of the Psalm.

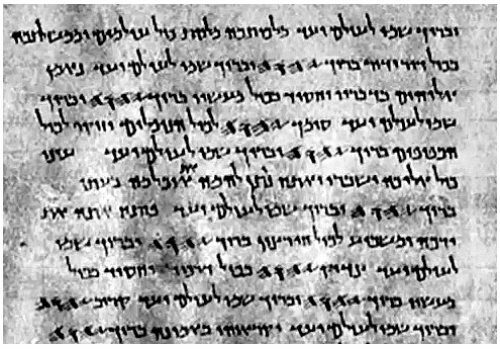


Fig. 1. Ancient copy of Psalm 145 found in Qumran Caves.[16]

But psalmody is not cantillation. In the practice of cantillation a unique musical motif is assigned to each word, while in psalmody a generalized musical outline is assigned to each phrase. In fact, the musical realization of the *te'amim* for the Three Books has been almost completely lost and forgotten. Judaism ordained regulated cyclical cantillation in the synagogue of the complete Torah, as well as selected portions of the *nevi'im* (*haftarot*), and *ketuvim* (Esther, Lamentations, Song of Songs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes). But there was no corresponding tradition of

14. Reinhard Flender, *Hebrew Psalmody: A Structural Investigation.* Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1992, ex. 12. ("S" indicates solo; "C" indicates congregation.)

15. Psalm 145 (excerpt) from 11QPsa. (http://e-homoreligiosus.blogspot.com/2011/07/reverence-for-tetragrammaton-in-11qps.html)

16. Psalm 145 (excerpt) from 11QPsa (loc. cit.).

cantillating the Psalms. Psalms that were included in the liturgy were chanted in psalmody, as described above, or using appropriate *nusah*, or set to new music performed by cantor, congregation or choir. Even those congregations (primarily Mizrahi) that have traditions of chanting the complete book of Psalms, especially in times of communal trouble or illness, chant them in rapid psalmody, rather than using the *te'amim*.[17]

Let us turn our attention now to the *te'amim* for the Book of Psalms. While they may at first look strange to us, we can recognize several symbols that are familiar to us from cantillation of other books of the Bible. It will be instructive to compare a passage from Psalm 105 that reappears almost identically in 1 Chronicles.

Psalm 105:1-15	1 Chron 16.8–22
הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה קִרְאוּ בִשְׁמוֹ הוֹדִיעוּ בָעַמִּים עֲלִילוֹתָיו:	הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה קִרְאוּ בִשְׁמוֹ הוֹדִיעוּ בָעַמִּים עֲלִילֹתָיו:
שִׁירוּ־לוֹ זַמְּרוּ־לוֹ שִׂיחוּ בְּכָל־נִפְלְאוֹתָיו:	שִׁירוּ לוֹ זַמְּרוּ־לוֹ שִׂיחוּ בְּכָל־נִפְלְאֹתָיו:
הִתְהַלְלוּ בְשֵׁם קָדְשׁוֹ יִשְׂמַח לֵב ׀ מְבַקְשֵׁי יְהוָה:	הִתְהַלְלוּ בְּשֵׁם קָדְשׁוֹ יִשְׂמַח לֵב מְבַקְשֵׁי יְהוָה:
דִּרְשׁוּ יְהוָה וְעֻזּוֹ בַּקְּשׁוּ פָנָיו תָּמִיד:	דִּרְשׁוּ יְהוָה וְעֻזּוֹ בַּקְּשׁוּ פָנָיו תָּמִיד:
זִכְרוּ נִפְלְאוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה מֹפְתָיו וּמִשְׁפְּטֵי־פִיהוּ:	זִכְרוּ נִפְלְאֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹפְתָיו וּמִשְׁפְּטֵי־פִיהוּ:
זֶרַע אַבְרָהָם עַבְדּוֹ בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב בְּחִירָיו:	זֶרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדּוֹ בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב בְּחִירָיו:
הוּא יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ מִשְׁפָּטָיו:	הוּא יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ מִשְׁפָּטָיו:
זָכַר לְעוֹלָם בְּרִיתוֹ דָּבָר צִוָּה לְאֶלֶף דּוֹר:	זִכְרוּ לְעוֹלָם בְּרִיתוֹ דָּבָר צִוָּה לְאֶלֶף דּוֹר:
אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וּשְׁבוּעָתוֹ לְיִצְחָק:	אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וּשְׁבוּעָתוֹ לְיִצְחָק:
וַיַּעֲמִידֶהָ לְיַעֲקֹב לְחֹק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרִית עוֹלָם:	וַיַּעֲמִידֶהָ לְיַעֲקֹב לְחֹק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרִית עוֹלָם:
לֵאמֹר לְךָ אֶתֵּן אֶת־אֶרֶץ־כְּנָעַן חֶבֶל נַחֲלַתְכֶם:	לֵאמֹר לְךָ אֶתֵּן אֶרֶץ־כְּנָעַן חֶבֶל נַחֲלַתְכֶם:
בִּהְיוֹתָם מְתֵי מִסְפָּר כִּמְעַט וְגָרִים בָּהּ:	בִּהְיוֹתָכֶם מְתֵי מִסְפָּר כִּמְעַט וְגָרִים בָּהּ:
וַיִּתְהַלְּכוּ מִגּוֹי אֶל־גּוֹי מִמַּמְלָכָה אֶל־עַם אַחֵר:	וַיִּתְהַלְּכוּ מִגּוֹי אֶל־גּוֹי וּמִמַּמְלָכָה אֶל־עַם אַחֵר:
לֹא־הִנִּיחַ אָדָם לְעָשְׁקָם וַיּוֹכַח עֲלֵיהֶם מְלָכִים:	לֹא־הִנִּיחַ לְאִישׁ לְעָשְׁקָם וַיּוֹכַח עֲלֵיהֶם מְלָכִים:
אַל־תִּגְּעוּ בִמְשִׁיחָי וְלִנְבִיאַי אַל־תָּרֵעוּ:	אַל־תִּגְּעוּ בִּמְשִׁיחָי וּבִנְבִיאַי אַל־תָּרֵעוּ:

17. Flender, *Hebrew Psalmody,* 95-99.

Table 1. Verses from Psalm 105 with corresponding verses from 1 Chronicles.[18]

The last word of each verse in both systems is marked with the strongest disjunctive accent, סִילּוּק. In Chronicles, because of the shortness of the verses, the primary dichotomy is marked with זָקֵף; in Psalms it is marked with אַתְנָח (or אֶתְנַחְתָּא).

But the rest of the *te'amim* in the Psalm may look strange to us. Some words are marked with two *te'amim*. Look at the word בָּעַמִּים in the first verse, bearing both רְבִיעַ and גֵּרֶשׁ. That *ta'am* is called רְבִיעַ־מֻגְרָשׁ and may be used to indicate the subdivision of a hemistich. The word לֵבָו in the third verse has a מַהְפַּךְ and a vertical line that looks like פָּסֵק or לְגַרְמֵהּ. That *ta'am* is the disjunctive מַהְפַּךְ־לְגַרְמֵהּ.

There are some symbols that look out of place. The word מְבַקְשֵׁי in the third verse seems to have a מוּנַח placed over the word rather than under it. That is the conjunctive עֲלֵיו. Also in the third verse, the word הָתְהַלְלוּ has what looks like טִפְחָא but in a prepositive position. That is the disjunctive דֶּחִי.

There are some combinations that look odd. In the fourth verse the punctuation of בַּקְּשׁוּ פָּנָיו תָּמִיד: is at odds with what we would expect in the other books. We expect a conjunctive on בקשו and a disjunctive on פניו. In fact, טַרְחָא is a conjunctive, even though it looks like טִפְחָא. And מוּנַח has been transformed from a conjunctive to a disjunctive, according to one of the many complex rules of transformation that one finds in the punctuation of the Psalms.

In verse 11 we may be surprised to see two words in a row marked with רְבִיעַ in the phrase לֵאמֹר לְךָ אֶתֵּן אֶת־אֶרֶץ־כְּנָעַן. In the corresponding verse from Chronicles we see the expected pattern, רְבִיעַ followed by פַּשְׁטָא. But in the punctuation of the Psalms, these two words are both marked with רְבִיעַ גָּדוֹל, the second רְבִיעַ גָּדוֹל serving as a substitute for the disjunctive דֶּחִי.

The rules governing the puctuation of the Three Books are quite complex, due to the numerous exceptions, also known as substitutions or transformations. I will give just a few examples. In Psalm 105 we saw that the closing word of the first hemistich was always marked with אַתְנָח, and this is the most common way to punctuate the primary dichotomy of a verse.[19] Psalm 1:4 illustrates this punctuation: לֹא־כֵן הָרְשָׁעִים כִּי אִם־כַּמֹּץ אֲשֶׁר־תִּדְּפֶנּוּ רוּחַ׃

However, in longer verses in which the second hemistich comprises five or more words, the last word of the first hemistich is marked instead with עוֹלֶה וְיוֹרֵד.[20] Psalm 123:1 illustrates this punctuation: שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת אֵלֶיךָ נָשָׂאתִי אֶת־עֵינַי הַיּוֹשְׁבִי בַּשָּׁמָיִם׃

In some short verses, the last word of the first hemistich is marked instead with רְבִיעַ.[21] Psalms 150:6 and 21:1 illustrate this punctuation: כֹּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְּהַלֵּל יָהּ הַלְלוּ־יָהּ

לַמְנַצֵּחַ מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד׃

And in a few rare cases, in which the first hemistich comprises only one word (such as the Psalms beginning with הללויה or a one-word superscription such as לדוד), the main division is marked with אַזְלָא־לְגַרְמֵהּ,[22] or פָּזֵר. Psalms 138:1 and 30:1 illustrate this punctuation:

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18. Compare also 2 Samuel 22 with Psalm 18 and Jeremiah 10 with Psalm 79.

19. אַתְנָח markes the main subdivision in 2,011 (80%) of the 2,527 verses of the Psalms.

20. עוֹלֶה וְיוֹרֵד marks the main subdivision in 352 (14%) of the 2,527 verses of the Psalms. This *ta'am* comprises two symbols placed on one word: a מֵרְכָא placed under the first letter of the stressed syllable and a מַהְפַּךְ placed over the first letter of the preceding syllable.

21. רְבִיעַ markes the main subdivision in 131 (5%) of the 2,527 verses of the Psalms. This substitution will occur if the second hemistich comprises only one word or only two short words.

22. אַזְלָא־לְגַרְמֵהּ markes the main subdivision in only 17 of the 2,527 verses of the Psalms. This *ta'am* comprises two

לְדָוִד׀ אוֹדְךָ בְכָל־לִבִּי נֶגֶד אֱלֹהִים אֲזַמְּרֶךָּ׃

מִזְמֹור שִׁיר־חֲנֻכַּת הַבַּיִת לְדָוִד׃

Following the principle of recursive dichotomy, each hemistich is then further syntactically bisected. If the first hemistich is terminated with אַתְנָח then רְבִיעַ מֻגְרָשׁ will usually be used to subdivide the second hemistich.[23] (See Psalm 1:4 above.)

If the first hemistich is terminated with עוֹלֶה וְיוֹרֵד instead of אַתְנָח then אַתְנָח will be used to subdivide the second hemistich. (See Psalm 123:1 above.)

But sometimes סִילּוּק is preceeded by two conjunctives: טַרְחָא and מוּנַח, as in Psalm 1:6—כִּי־יוֹדֵעַ יְהוָה דֶּרֶךְ צַדִּיקִים וְדֶרֶךְ רְשָׁעִים תֹּאבֵד׃. In this case מוּנַח has been transformed into a disjunctive.

The complete set of rules and exceptions and substitutions is quite complex. Those wishing to delve deeper could consult the excellent monographs by Wickes, Perlman, Breuer and Yeiven.[24] Here we will just provide a list of the *te'amim* that are used to punctuate the Three Books. Those who are familiar with the *te'amim* for the Twenty-one Books will notice that some of these *te'amim* are identical, while others are slightly different. The conjunctive טַרְחָא resembles the disjunctive טִפְחָא. Note that there are two forms of שַׁלְשֶׁלֶת, one a disjunctive and one a conjunctive. The disjunctive שַׁלְשֶׁלֶת׀ is marked with a postpositive vertical line, as does the disjunctive שַׁלְשֶׁלֶת׀ used in the Twenty-one Books, even though in the latter case it has no conjunctive equivalent. There are two forms of צִנּוֹר; again, one is a disjunctive and the other a conjunctive.[25] The disjunctive form is distinguished by being marked as a postpositive accent, as is the disjunctive זַרְקָא used in the Twenty-one Books, even though it also has no conjunctive equivalent. These observations suggest that the punctuation of the Twenty-one Books may have developed subsequent to that of the Three Books.

The disjunctive accents:

סִילּוּק, עוֹלֶה וְיוֹרֵד, אַתְנָח, רְבִיעַ, דֶּחִי, רְבִיעַ קָטֹן, רְבִיעַ גָּדוֹל, צִנּוֹר, רְבִיעַ מֻגְרָשׁ, שַׁלְשֶׁלֶת גְּדוֹלָה׀, מַהְפַּךְ־לְגַרְמֵהּ׀, פָּזֵר, אַזְלָא־לְגַרְמֵהּ׀

The conjunctive accents:

מֵרְכָא, מוּנַח, עֹלֶה, מַהְפַּךְ, אַזְלָא, שַׁלְשֶׁלֶת קְטַנָּה, צִנֹּרִית־מַהְפַּךְ, טַרְחָא, גַּלְגַּל

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symbols placed on one word: אַזְלָא placed over the first letter of the stressed syllable and a vertical line placed after the word.

23. Using the principle of recursive dichotomy, the following verse (Psalm 111:9) would be bifurcated at the אַתְנָח, and the first hemistich then bifurcated again at the רְבִיעַ.

פְּדוּת ׀ שָׁלַח לְעַמּוֹ// צִוָּה־לְעוֹלָם בְּרִיתוֹ/ קָדוֹשׁ וְנוֹרָא שְׁמוֹ׃

"He sent redemption to His people; He ordained His covenant for all time; His name is holy and awesome."
But some authors argue that such verses display a symmetrical three-part division. That viewpoint seems to be reflected in the punctuation of the JPS translation cited above.

פְּדוּת ׀ שָׁלַח לְעַמּוֹ/ צִוָּה־לְעוֹלָם בְּרִיתוֹ/ קָדוֹשׁ וְנוֹרָא שְׁמוֹ׃

24. William Wickes, *A Treatise of the Accentuation of the Three So-called Poetical Books of the Old Testament: Psalms, Proverbs, and Job*, 1881; Michael Perlman, *Sefer tehillim mefusak al pi ta'amei ha-mikra*, Tel Aviv: Zimrat, 1982; Mordecai Breuer, *Ta'amei ha-mikra*, Jerusalem: Horeb, 1989; Israel Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah*. Translated and edited by E. J. Revell, Scholars Press, 1980.

25. The conjunctive form is known as צִנֹּרִית, and is combined with a second *ta'am*. E.g. הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי (Psalm 3:8).

This system of notation was developed at the Ben-Asher academy in Tiberias prior to the tenth century. But while the symbols have come down to us intact, their sound, preserved only in oral tradition, has largely disappeared.

The earliest witnesses of Psalm chanting seem to describe psalmody rather than cantillation. Augustine (354–430 CE) describes the singing of Psalms in the early churches of northern Africa as "nearer speaking than singing."[26]

There are a few intriguing documents that suggest that in some Eastern Jewish communities in the middle ages, Psalms were performed not in cantillation, but with elaborate artistry. Rabbi Petahia (late 12th century) of Regensburg, Germany kept a diary in which he recorded impressions of his extensive travels. Of the Jews of Babylon he wrote,

> There is a youth with a pleasant voice who sings the Psalms with his pleasant voice. On the intermediate days of the festival they sing Psalms with musical instruments. Moreover, they have a tradition as to which melodies [are appropriate]. They have ten melodies for the "Asor" Psalms, and eight melodies for the "Al-Ha-sheminit" Psalms.[27]

Petahia's contemporary, Benjamin of Tudela (Spain) was another world traveler who left a record describing his encounters. He relates that Psalm tunes of levitic origin existed in the Baghdad community *circa* 1170. "Rabbi Elazar ben Tsemah is the head of the order, and he traces his genealogy back to the prophet Samuel the Korahite. He and his brothers know to perform the Psalms (*z'mirot*) in the same manner as the musicians were performing them when the Temple was standing."[28]

Ovadiah Ha-ger (born c. 1070)[29] was an Italian Christian priest who converted to Judaism in 1102, and eventually settled in Egypt. The earliest notation of Jewish music is attributed to his hand. His notation of a *piyyut* bears a remarkable resemblance to contemporary Jewish Psalmody, and many scholars have speculated that he may have been transcribing a traditional Egyptian Jewish chant. Even though the lyrics of Ovadia's music are not from the Psalms, this notation may provide us a window to an early practice of chanting that may have been used for psalmody as well.

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26. Augustine, *Confessions. Tr. by Edward Bouverie Pusey. http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/augconf/aug10.htm. 03 June, 2013,* 10:33.
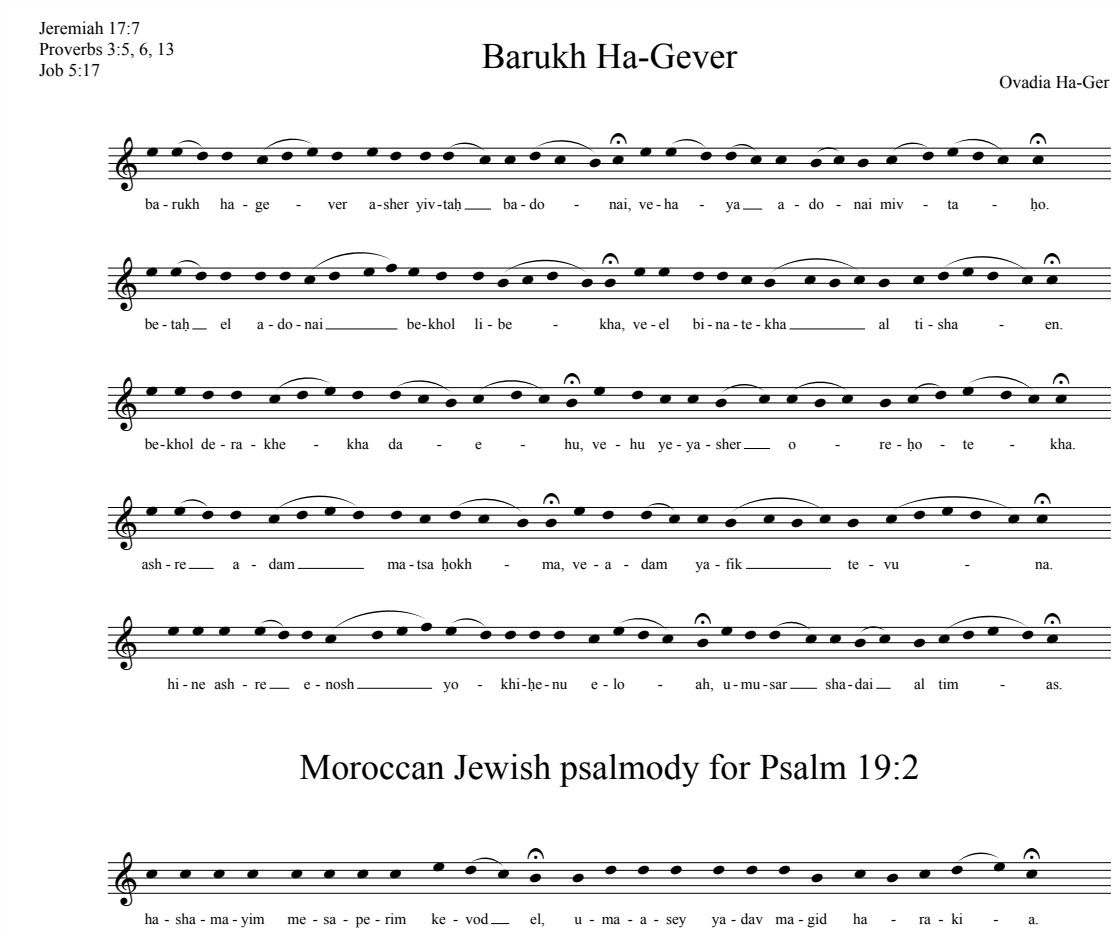
27. ויש בחור שיש לו קול נעים. ואומר מזמור בקול נעים. בחולו של מועד אומרים המזמורים בכלי שיר. ויש מסורות באיזה נגונים. ואל עשור יש להם עשר נגונים. ואל השמינית שמונה נגונים. ועל כל מזמור יש כמה נגונים. (ספר המסעות של פתחיה מרגנשבורג, עמוד 46)

Travels of Rabbi Petachia, A. Benisch, ed., London: Trubner & Co., 1856. HebrewBooks.org. 03 June, 2013.

28. ורבי אלעזר בן צמח ראש הסדר והוא מיוחס עד שמואל הנביא הקרחי. והוא ואחיו יודעים לנגן הזמירות כמו שהיו המשוררים נוגנים בזמן שבית המקדש קיים. (עמור ס')

The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela, Marcus Nathan Adler, ed., Oxford University Press, 1907; Reprint ed., New York: Feldheim, Inc. n.d.

29. Reinhard Flender, "Parallels between the notation of Ovadiah ha-Ger and a psalmodic cantillation transmitted in the oral tradition of the Jews of Djerba." In *Giovanni-Ovadiah da Oppido, proselito, viaggiatore e musicista dell'età normanna: atti del convegno internazionale, Oppido Lucano, 28-30 marzo 2004*, 225-230. Edited by Antonio De Rosa and Mauro Perani. Firenze: Giuntina, 2005.



Ex. 9. Transcription by Hanoch Avenary of Ovadia Ha-Ger "Barukh Ha-Gever" and Moroccan psalmody for Psalm 19:1.[30]

The ealiest transcription of a Hebrew Psalm chant into Western notation is found in *Grammatica Hebraica* from *Quadratum sapientiae, continens in se septem artes liberales veterum* by Johnnes Mader (a.k.a. Johannes Foeniseca), published in Augsburg in 1515. The first two verses of Psalm 1 are printed with the Hebrew words running right to left and the musical notes accomodating that directionality. We may assume the clef to designate F. The chant is extremely simple, traversing only a minor third. Each phrase begins and ends on D (see fig. 2).

30. Alfred Sendrey, *The Music of the Jews in the Diaspora (up to 1800)*. New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1970: 161; Abraham Z. Idelsohn *Hebraïsch-orientalischer Melodienschatz. Volume V: Gesänge der marokkanischen Juden.* Berlin: Benjamin Harz, 1929, no. 17.

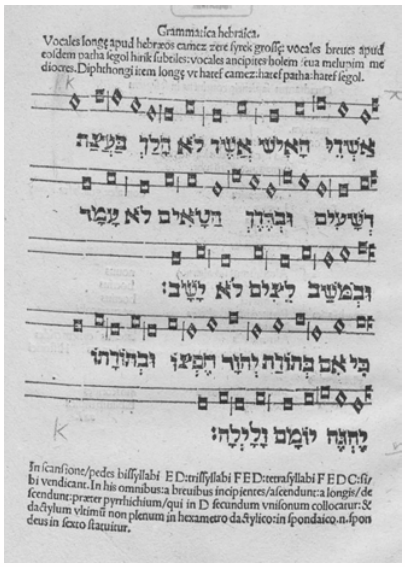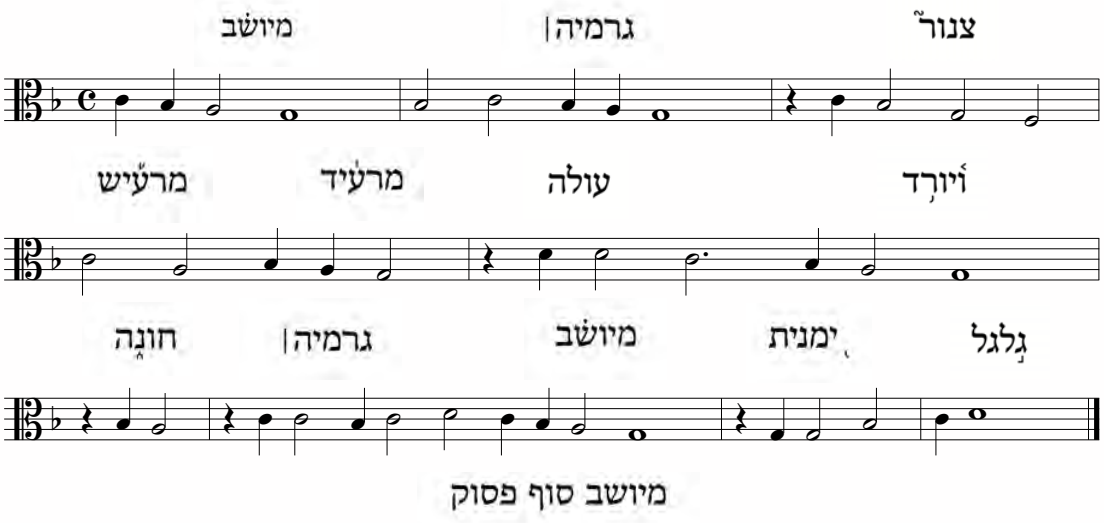


Figure 2. First two verses of Psalm 1, printed with Hebrew and music running right to left.[31]

The earliest transcription of the *te'amim* for a Psalm was notated in *Sefer ha-niggunim* by Jacob Levi Finzi of Casale Monferrato, a book written sometime between 1605 and 1650, but subsequently lost or destroyed (see ex. 10). What did survive is a copy made by Abraham Joseph Solomon Graziano in 1669/1670. Graziano wrote,

> With the help of God. The *te'amim* of Psalms and their melody, from the manuscript of the sage, the author J[acob] L[evi] F[inz]i, in his *Sefer ha-niggunim*, his transcription of musical notes in a big book containing the order of the chant of the liturgical poems according to the cutoms of the Holy Congregation of Ashkenazim, and according to what he received from his rabbi the exalted leader Abraham Segre, blessed be his memory, of Casale Monferrato, as was written by the above mentioned sage, the author of the above mentioned book, *Sefer ha-niggunim*.[32]

31. Johannes Foeniseca (a.k.a. Mader), *Quadratum sapientiae, continens in se septem artes liberales veterum*. Augsburg, 1515. http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/bsb00003168/image_6. 20 June, 2013, p. 2.

32. ב׳ה. טעמי תהילים וניגון שלהם מכתיבת יד החכם המחבר ילפ׳י בס׳ הניגוני׳ וצורות הנוטי׳ מהמוסיקא שלו בס׳ ארוך עם סדר ניגוני היוצרות וקרובץ כפי מנהגי ק׳ק אשכנזים וכפי מה שקבל מרבו ואלופו הקצין כמ׳הר אברהם סגרי ז׳ל מקסאל מונפרא כאשר כתב החכם המחבר הנ׳ל בס׳ הניגוני׳ הנ׳ל.
(Israel Adler, *Hebrew Notated Manuscript Sources up to circa 1840.* Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1989: 24.)



Ex. 10. Transcription by Israel Adler of Graziano's *Ta'amei tehillim*.[33]

Note that the nomenclature of the *te'amim* differs from the standard. Graziano adds several interesting annotations describing the application of the *te'amim*.[34]

We have no knowledge of any further serious attempts to transcribe the cantillation of the Psalms before the twenieth century. In his thorough study of cantillation published in 1881, British scholar William Wickes wrote, "the Jews themselves allow that the musical value of the accents of the three Poetical Books is altogether lost."[35] But in a footnote, Wickes adds, "Such is the testimony of the European Jews. But according to Eben Sappir 55a, the Jews of Yemen have still a particular melody for the three books." *Even Sappir* (1866) is a book by Jacob Saphir (1822–1886) in which he describes his travels to Yemen, India, Egypt and Australia. He writes that the Yemenite Jews "have a separate melody for Torah reading, a separate one for the Prophets, a separate one for the *Ketuvim*, and a separate one for *ta'amey emet* (that were forgotten by the Ashkenazim)."[36]

In *HOM Volume II, Songs of the Babylonian Jews*, Idelsohn writes, "These three Books [Psalms, Proverbs and Job] have notoriously an individual accentual system. … The intonantion, i.e. the modes of the three Books seem among the Ashkenazim to have been forgotten. On the

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33. Adler, *Hebrew Notated Manuscript Sources,* 25. Also cited in Idelsohn *HOM*, vol. 6, p. 234, where it is attributed to Abraham Sagri, 1600.

34. גרמיה אין לו נגון אלא עם מיושב או צנור אחריו, ואם עם מיושב יורד, גם אז אין לו נגון. הכתף ימין עם מיושב או סוף פסוק, אפי' יש טעם מפסיק בינם, יש לו נגון, וכמיושב. ילפ'י.

צנור צריך שיהיה אחריו עולה ויורד אם תרצה לעשותו הנגון.
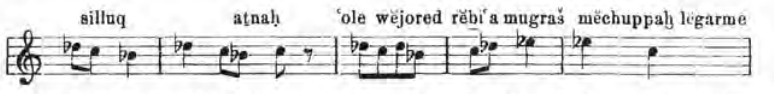
גרמיה וצנור נגונו כמרעיש: ב' גרמיה הנגון לשני: ימנית גלגל או מרכא, הנגון לימנית: ב' גלגלים הנגון לשני. ילפ'י. Adler *Hebrew Notated Manuscript Sources,* 25-26.

35. William Wickes, *A Treatise ...* (1881)*,* 2.
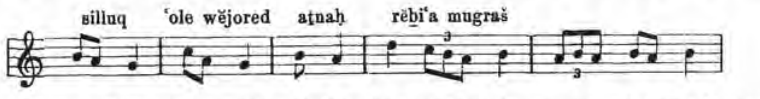
36. ויש להם לקריאת התורה ניגון לבד לנביאים לבד וכתובים לבד וטעמי אמ'ת (שנשכחו מהאשכנזים) לבד. (55א) Jacob Saphir, *Even sappir (Iben Safir)*. Lyck: Siebert, 1866. HebrewBooks.org. 26 June, 2013.

other hand the Babylonians as well as the Syrians and the Sephardim have preserved their modes."[37]

While Idelsohn regularly provides transcriptions of the complete "Zarqa Table" for the cantillation of Torah, *haftarah*, and the *megilot*, for Psalm cantillation he presents his analysis of only five of the *te'amim*. (And two pages later he presents the different melodies used in the cantillation of Job.) Idelsohn is perhaps implying that motifs are assigned only to these five disjunctives, and that some degree of improvization is allowed with the rest of the words, in which case this praxis is closer to psalmody than to cantillation.



Ex. 11. Motifs for the cantillation of Psalms. Idelsohn *HOM*, *vol. 2*, p. 13.



Ex. 12. Motifs for the cantillation of Job. Idelsohn *HOM*, *vol. 2,* p. 15.
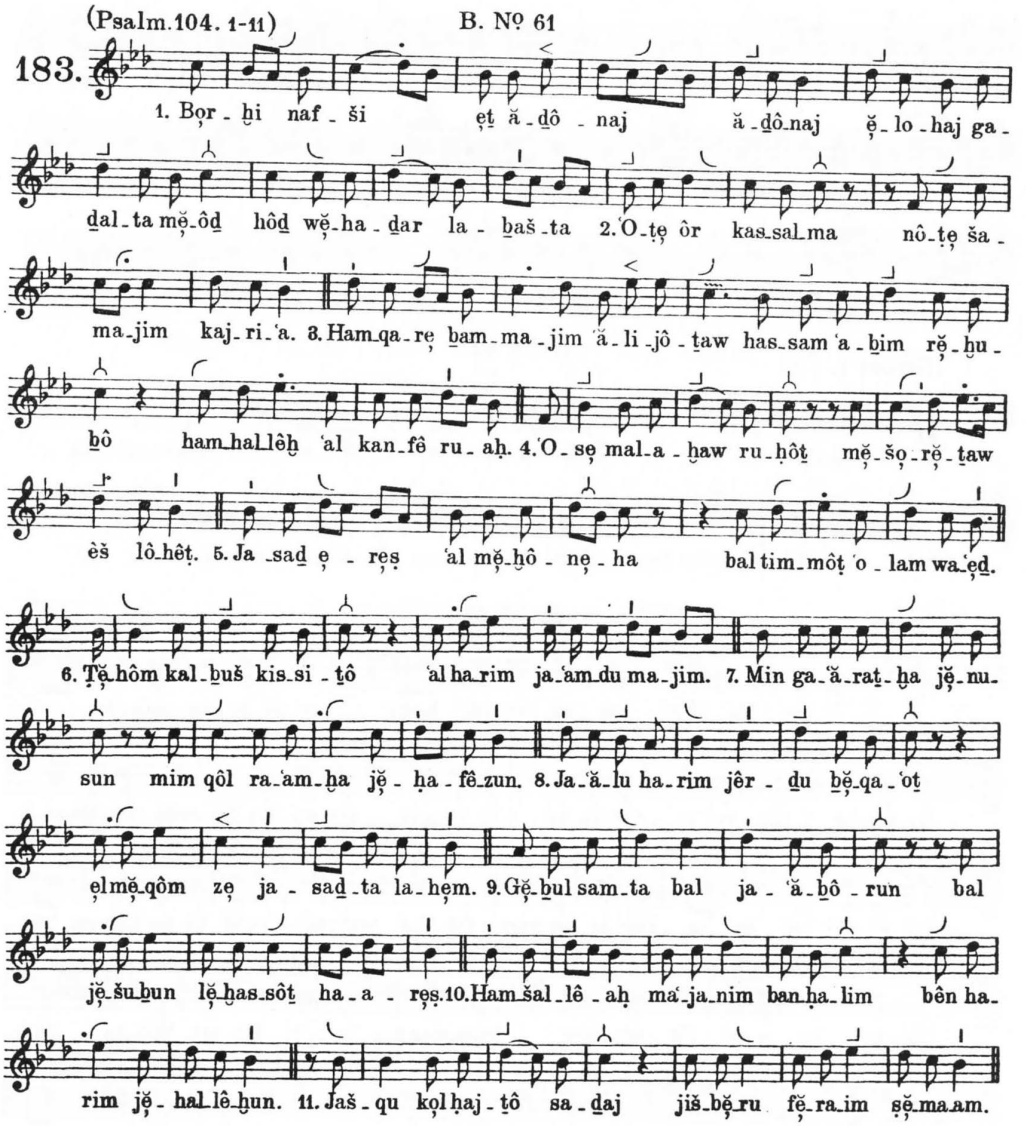
Idelsohn identifies the last measure as representing the motif that is shared by what he terms the "dynamic accents: zarqa, pazer, etc."

Idelsohn included numerous transcriptions of biblical cantillation in his monumental *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*, but there are only two examples of Psalm cantillation. Example 13 shows Babylonian Jewish cantillation from Psalm 104. Notice that Idelsohn supplied the *te'amim* over each word, a practice that the author consistently used for transcriptions of cantillation. The *te'amim* are not supplied for other Psalm transcriptions. Some of the *te'amim* align with Idelsohn's analysis cited above. But the רביע מוגרש in verse 2 is different. The עולה ויורד in verse 3 is different. סילוק sometimes ends with A rather than B-flat.[38] And טרחא appears in four different forms.[39]

37. Idelsohn *HOM*, *vol. 2*, p. 13.

38. Reinhard Flender called this practice "Versüberlappung" (verse overlapping), and it describes the linking of the end of one verse to the beginning of the next through alteration of the cadence pattern. (Flender, "Neue Aspekte zum Strukturellen Zusammenhang zwischen ta'ame emet und hebraisch-orientalischer Psalmodie," in *Yuval: Studies of the Jewish Music Research Centre*, Volume 5, pp. 318-355, edited by Israel Adler, et al. Jerusalem: the Magnes Press. 1986: 344).

39. Idelsohn, Ibid., no. 183.
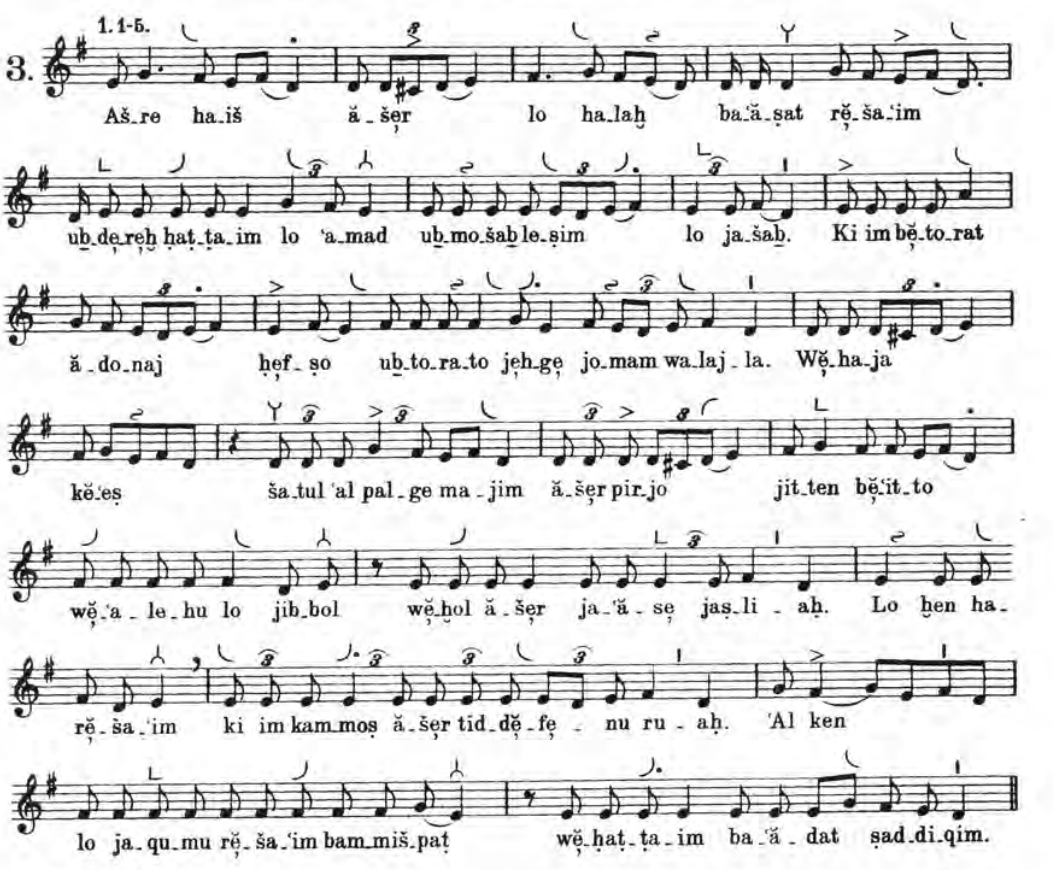


Ex.13. Babylonian Jewish cantillation of Psalm 104:1-11.

In his transcription of a Sephardic Oriental Jewish performance of Psalm 1 in *HOM volume IV* (1923),[40] Idelsohn included the only other notation of Psalm cantillation with the *te'amim* written over the notes (see ex. 14). But does this indeed represent an authentic Psalm cantillation? Here again we seem to find consistency only in the performance of סילוק and אתנחתא. Flender posits that we should not analyze the cantillation of the Psalms using the same criteria by which we observe the cantillation of the Torah, *haftarot* or *megillot*. In the first place, all non-Ashkenazic cantillation tends to be rather free in its musical performance. In some traditions no fixed melodies are assigned to the conjunctive *te'amim*. In some traditions the lesser disjunctives all share a common melody. And all of the contemporary examples of Psalm cantillation that we have encountered derive from non-Ashkenazic sources. Flender writes, "It is therefore a miscon-

40. Abraham Z. Idelsohn, *Hebraïsch-orientalischer Melodienschatz. Volume IV: Gesänge der orientalischen Sefardim*. Berlin: Benjamin Harz, 1923.

ception to try to search for each accent its own musical motif."[41] He adds that the "Oriental Jews" who cantillate the Psalms do not conceive of the *te'amim* as an abstract paradigm; they do not learn to chant the names of the *te'amim* apart from the biblical text. "The realization of the poetic accent system as it is performed by the Oriental Jews, however, does not follow such a method, the sequence of stationary designs. It follows the principle of psalmody, by which the accents are seen as structural indicators."[42]



Ex. 14. Sephardic Oriental Jewish cantillation of Psalm 1:1-5.[43]

Several years ago a young man in my synagogue gave me a non-commercial CD that contained instructions in how to chant the Psalms according to the *te'amim*. The CD had no label or case. I have transcribed the spoken introduction from the recording.[44]

> Unfortunately the Ashkenazic community and most of the Sephardi community no longer have a *mesorah* for the tune of *sifrei emes*. Only the Syrian community retain such a *mesorah*. A certain Ashkenazic *kheder* in Yerusholayim called Aderes Eliyohu decided they were going to teach the children all of Tanakh including *sifrei emes*. One of the children complained that they were learning the *trop* for all of Tanakh but not *sifrei emes*, and that if a *trop* for *sifrei emes* exists somewhere the yeshiva should find it and teach it to them. So a search was conducted. They obtained three recordings of the *trop* of *sifrei*

41. Flender, "Neue Aspekte," 327. The present author's translation.

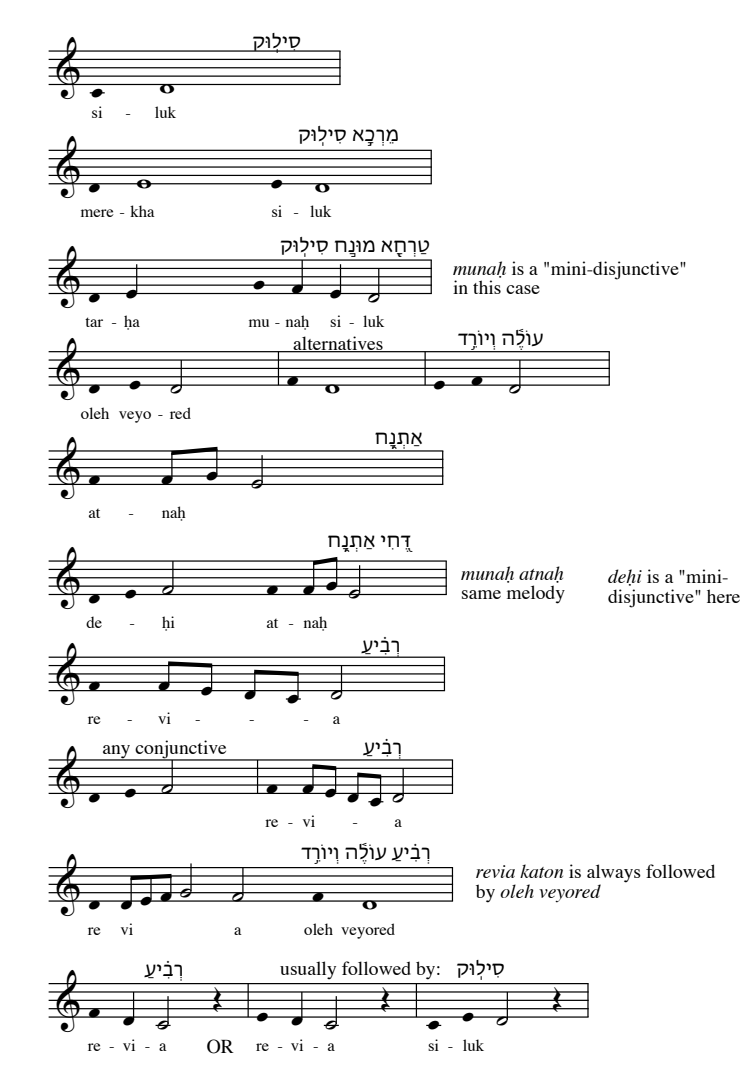
42. Flender, "Neue Aspekte," 344. The present author's translation.
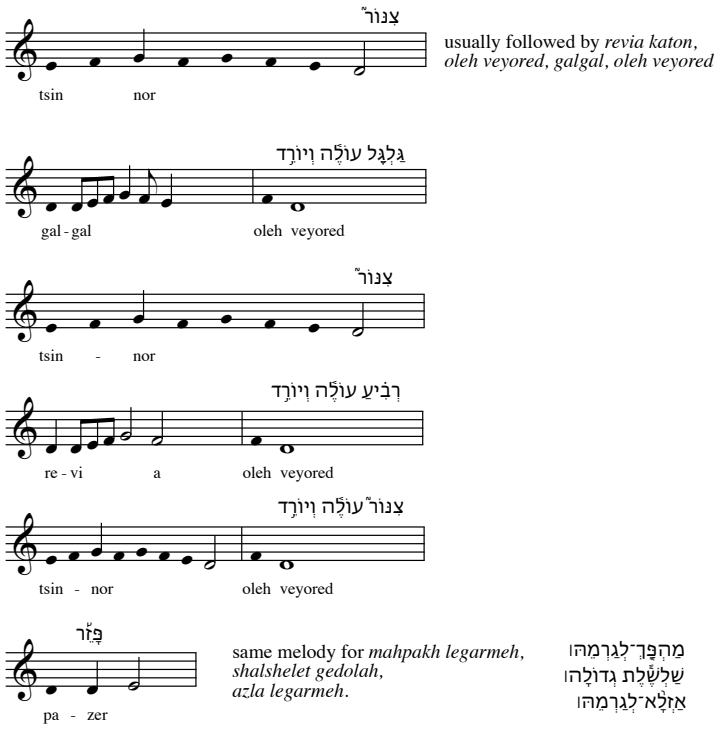
43. Idelsohn, *HOM, vol. 4,* no. 3.

44. In the transcription I have retained the speaker's Ashkenazic Hebrew pronunciation.

emes from three Syrian Jews. The *menahel* of the *kheder* examined the three recordings. The one that he felt was most accurate to the rules of the *trop* (something that was not lost) was chosen to be taught. Another thing that must be mentioned is that the *trop* as was taught to me doesn't sound exactly like the Syrians sing it. That's because it was an Ashkenazi singing a Sephardi tune. It is by nature going to sound a bit different. Therefore before you begin I need to thank Reb Yosef Silbermann *shlita* the *menahel* of the *kheder* for his work in rediscovering a *trop* for *sifrei emes* that we Ashkenazim can use.

Here is my transcription of the *te'amim* from this recording.





Ex. 15. Transcription by the author of Psalm cantillation motifs.[45]

But one nagging question remains. Do these transcriptions of cantillation reflect an unbroken centuries-old tradition, or do they represent a retrojection, an attempt to fill in the gaps in order to create a consistent system? In the words of scholar Avigdor Herzog,

> Although the Psalms are furnished with accents in the Masoretic texts, the question, whether they were ever, or still are, sung according to the accents is still moot. Even the 17th-century Italian notation of accent motives for Psalms and the claims of present-day informants that they sing according to the accents are not conclusive. Most scholars think that the system of the accents is too sophisticated to be followed precisely or that there was a "lost art" of Psalm cantillation. It may even be that some present day practices of following the accents approximately are a back-formation phenomenon: since the accents were there, it was felt that they had to be obeyed somehow and after many generations some characteristic motives became attached to the accent-signs in coexistence with the overall psalmodic line.[46]

It has been said that the Psalms have been set to music more than any other book. From their original improvisatory creation, through splendid performances by the levitic orchestra and choir in the ancient Jerusalem Temple, the psalmody of early churches and synagogues, the tradi-

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45. *Ta'amei Tehillim*, as performed by the Aderes Eliyohu School in Jerusalem (adapted by Rabbi Joseph Silverman from a Syrian tradition).

46. Avigdor Herzog, "Psalms, Book of: Musical Rendition in Jewish tradition." *Encyclopaedia Judaica,* ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., Vol. 16, Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 679-683. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Web. 25 June 2013, 681.

tional *nusah* of the liturgy, impassioned performances by great *hazzanim*, magnificent works of art by European and American composers, and popular contemporary congregational tunes, these lyrics have inspired a tremendous variety of musical expression for thousands of years. The cantillation of the Psalms, though little understood and rarely and imperfectly practiced, is yet another manifestation of this enduring spiritual legacy.

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