

ותגל ערבה ותפרח כחבצלת:
The Biblical Accentuation and Exegesis of Isaiah 35:1–2

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In the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible every word¹ is marked with accents that indicate both punctuation and intonation. These accents, therefore, can help in the reading and interpretation of a biblical verse, as they provide guidance as to meaning. Some readers defer to the biblical accents as binding exegetical tools for “it is a major principle to observe the way of accents” (R. Abraham Ibn Ezra on Isa 1:9),² while there are those who diverge here and there from the accentual reading and give a different reading because “not all exegeses agree with the punctuation of the text” (R. David Kimchi on Hos 12:12).³ One case where the exegesis seems to diverge from the accentual reading is Isa 35:1b: ותגל ערבה ותפרח כחבצלת “The wilderness shall rejoice and shall blossom like a rose (lit. crocus).”

Biblical Accents as Punctuation Marks

According to the biblical accents, Isa 35:1b should be read as follows:

{ ותגל ערבה ותפרח } *tiḥa* { כחבצלת }

meaning ‘the wilderness shall rejoice like a crocus and shall blossom like a crocus’ (i.e., ‘like a crocus’ is used as a complement of both verbs). Yet it

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¹ According to biblical accentuation, a word is a minimal linguistic form with one main stress. Thus words that are combined by *maqaf* (hyphen) are considered to be one word.

² My translation from the Hebrew: “עיקר גדול הוא לשמור דרך הטעמים”.

³ My translation from the Hebrew: “אין כל טעמי הפרושים הולכים אחרי טעמי הנקוד”.

would appear that the traditional commentators ignore the accents here⁴ (perhaps due to the difficulty in identifying the hierarchical relationship between ‘*ṭiphā*’ and ‘*tevir*’).⁵ Ibn Ezra, an adherent of accentual reading, does not address the issue raised here at all, nor do Ibn Bal’am (in his Isaiah commentary), Ḥayyuj (*Kitab Al-Nutaf*),⁶ Ibn Janah (*Sefer Ha-Riqmah* and *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*)⁷ and others. From those who comment on this verse it seems that the punctuation should be as follows:

{ ותגל ערבה } *tevir* { ותפרה כחבצלת }

meaning ‘the wilderness shall rejoice, and it shall blossom like a crocus’ (i.e., ‘like a crocus’ complements the verb ‘shall-blossom’ only). For example, Rashi comments: ותגל: ערבתה של ירושלים (= *shall rejoice*: the wilderness of Jerusalem) apparently referring to the phrase ותגל ערבה⁸ “and the wilderness shall rejoice,” while D. Kimchi comments on the next two words—*ותתן ריחה* ותתן ריחה ותתן ריחה: כמו הוורד שתפרה ותתן ריחה (= *and shall blossom like a crocus*: like the rose that shall blossom and give its scent). This reading

⁴ S. Kogut, *Correlation between Biblical Accentuation and Traditional Jewish Exegesis Linguistic and Contextual Studies* (Jerusalem, 1994) 111 (Heb.), posits that exegesis which deviates from the accents generally expresses an implicit opposition to them.

⁵ Cf. “...‘Sof Pasuq’ is more of a disjunction than an ‘*atnah*’ and an ‘*atnah*’ more than a ‘*zaqef*’, and a ‘*zaqef*’ more than a ‘*tevir*’ and a ‘*tevir*’ more than a ‘*ṭiphā*’” (*Sefer Tvo ta’am* [a facsimile of the Basel 1532 edition; trans. E.A. Levita; Tel Aviv, 1982] Ch. 4 [Heb.]). On common contemporary mistakes in the reading of the accent sequence ‘*tevir*’-‘*ṭiphā*’ see A. Dotan, “Pronunciation in Prayer and Tora Reading,” in *Shivtiel Book: Studies in the Hebrew Language and in the Linguistic Traditions of the Jewish Communities* (ed. I. Gluska and T. Kessar; Tel-Aviv, 1992) 71 (Heb).

⁶ N. Basal, *Kitab al-nutaf by Judah Ḥayyuj: A Critical Edition* (Tel Aviv, 2001).

⁷ M. Wilensky (ed.), *Sefer HaRiqma (Kitab Alluma) by R. Jona Ibn Ganah, translated to Hebrew by R. Judah Ibn Tibbon*, (2nd. ed.; Jerusalem, 1964); W. Bacher (ed.), *Sepher Haschoraschim: Wurzelwörterbuch der hebräischen Sprachen von Abulwalid Meruan Ibn Ganah (R. Jona)...* (a facsimile of the Berlin 1896 edition; Jerusalem, 1966).

⁸ R. Joseph Kara and others read this verse similarly; see M. Cohen (ed.), *Isaiah (Mikra’ot Gedolot HaKeter* (Ramat Gan, 1996) *ad loc.*

seems to be the one in R. Sa'adia Gaon's Arabic translation (Tafsir, on this verse):⁹ טרב בואדיהם ותפרע ריחנהא כאלנרוגס (= Its wildernesses shall rejoice, and their good scent shall blossom like the crocus). It seems that in this reading 'like a crocus' complements only the verb 'shall-blossom'.

Modern commentators, as well, do not follow the punctuation indicated by the accents. For example, Segal, who renders the words of the prophet in poetic columns, divides the verse into three parts: יששום מדבר וציה/ ותגל/ ערבה/ ותפרה כחבצלה (= The desert and dry country shall be glad/and the wilderness shall rejoice/and shall blossom like a crocus), and it is clear that by this division, Segal reads the verse literally (i.e., 'like a crocus' complements only 'shall-blossom') and not according to the accents.¹⁰ A similar division is also found in modern translations (with punctuation marks), e.g., Beuken:¹¹ "Let the wilderness and dry land be glad,/let the desert rejoice,/and blossom like the crocus."

What is חבצלה?

The word חבצלה is used only twice in the whole Hebrew Bible (here in Isa 35:1 and in Song 2:1), and there is no consensus among commentators, translators and scholars as to its identification. Among the older sources some say that חבצלה means שושנה 'lily',¹² some say it means 'narcissus',¹³

⁹ N.J. and Z.H. Derenbourg (eds.), *R. Sa'adia Ga'on, Tafsir Sefer Yeshaiia* (Paris, 1896).

¹⁰ M.Z. Segal, *A Literary Edition of the Bible* (Tel-Aviv, 1941) *ad loc.*

¹¹ W. Beuken, *Isaiah II* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Leuven, 2000) 305.

¹² Tg. Ps.-J. Isa 35:1: שושניא; LXX: κρίνον; R. Yudan: "When it is small it is called חבצלה, and when it is grown it is called שושנה" (*Song Rab.*, 2:3, on the verse); Rashi on the Song of Songs.

¹³ The Aramaic translation to Song of Songs: ברוקס רטיב מגנתא דערן (= a wet narcissus from the Garden of Eden); R. Sa'adia Ga'on, Tafsir: אלנרוגס; as well as S.D. Luzzatto in his commentary to Isaiah (Samuel David Luzzatto, *Commentary to the Book of Jesaiah* [Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1970; orig. 1876]).

some identify it as **ורד** 'rose',¹⁴ while others simply identify it as 'flower'.¹⁵ Löw says that **הבצלה** is 'Colchicum',¹⁶ while Feliks prefers either 'Colchicum' or 'Sea Daffodil' (*Pancreatum maritimum*),¹⁷ as **הבצלה**, whether Sea Daffodil or Colchicum, characteristically blossoms in the dry season, before the rainy season. Thus, this botanical trait makes it appropriate here as a simile.¹⁸ Regarding contemporary Bible dictionaries and translations, here too differing views can be found,¹⁹ and as Beuken notes:²⁰ "It is not clear whether the term **הבצלה** refers to a sort of lily or to a crocus or narcissus." Beuken (English version) does not attempt to determine the ultimate identity of **הבצלה**, and follows RSV in translating it as "crocus."

Aside from the problem of identifying **הבצלה**, it seems that the literal sense of the verse is not difficult to understand, and there is a consensus among the commentators and early translators as to the syntactic-logical

¹⁴ R. David Kimchi; Geneva Bible; KJV.

¹⁵ LXX to Song of Songs: ἄνθος. This is how the word 'צִיץ' is rendered in the Septuagint (e.g., Isa 40:7, 8). For more on the translation of 'הבצלה' and 'צִיץ' see J. Reider and N. Turner, *An Index to Aquila: Greek-Hebrew, Hebrew-Greek, Latin-Hebrew, with the Syriac and Armenian Evidence* (VTSup 12; Leiden, 1966).

¹⁶ I. Löw, *Die Flora der Juden*, (4 vols.; Hildesheim, 1924–1934) 2:156.

¹⁷ Y. Feliks, *Plant World of the Bible*, (Ramat Gan, 1957) 242–243 (Heb.).

¹⁸ See also other sources that mention **הבצלה** and offer other identifications of it, as well as on the various kinds of Colchicum.

¹⁹ The following are some examples from English Bible dictionaries and translations: 'Meadow Saffron' (e.g., BDB; HALOT), 'Crocus' (e.g., RSV; R.E. Clements, *Isaiah* [NCB; London, 1980]; J.D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66* [WBC 25; Waco, 1987]; J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB; New York, 2000]), 'Asphodel' (A.S. Herbert, *Isaiah* [CBC; Cambridge, 1873]; O. Kaiser, *Isaiah* [trans. R.A. Wilson and D.M.G. Stalker from ATD 18; OTL; London, 1974]), 'Lily' (M.A. Sweeney, *Isaiah with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* [FOTL 16; Cambridge, 1996]), or just 'flower' (NAB).

²⁰ Beuken, *Isaiah*, 306.

structure of the verse.²¹ Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to try to understand the logic of the accents to this verse.

{Rejoice + blossom} like the crocus

Whereas the literal sense of the verse seems to be composed of the metaphor תגל ערבה “The wilderness shall rejoice” and the simile תפרה כחבצלה “It shall blossom like the crocus,” the biblical accentuation applies the simile to both verbs: {shall-rejoice + shall-blossom} like the crocus. However, given the fact that by definition a simile indicates a similarity between the subject of the comparison (the tenor) and the thing or idea to which the subject of the simile is compared (the vehicle) by virtue of a shared characteristic (the ground),²² there is a problem with the simile תגל ערבה... כחבצלה “The wilderness shall rejoice... like a crocus,” since rejoicing is not a characteristic attributed to plants.

Ḥacham, in one of his proposed readings of the verse, indirectly applies the characteristic of rejoicing to plants, by equating them to “garments of joy” worn by the wilderness.²³ Below we will show that it is possible to settle the issue raised when the verse is read according to the accents by clarifying the uses of the prefixed preposition כְּ (‘as’, ‘like’) that are appropriate to the matter at hand.

The prefixed preposition כְּ (‘as’, ‘like’)

Kaddari, entry ‘כ־’, shows that comparative sentences are often elliptical, and it is possible that particles that should follow כ־ are omitted in the

²¹ On contemporary translations that reflect a divergent view of verse division from that of the Masoretic text see below (“Terms of rejoicing”).

²² The vehicle possesses some true characteristic and by the use of the simile this characteristic is applied to the subject.

²³ A. Ḥacham, *Isaiah* (Da’at Miqra; Jerusalem, 1984) 359–360 (Heb.).

Hebrew biblical text.²⁴ For example (Job 29:2): **מי יתנני כירחי-קדם** (= lit. O that I were as months gone by), is elliptical for **מי יתנני כבירחי קדם** "O that I were as in months gone by".²⁵ HALOT (p. 454), entry 'ק', also furnishes examples where various prepositions are elided after כ-, e.g.: **כהר** (Isa 28:21) means: "as on the mountain" (NJPS: *As on the hill*). In a like manner we propose reading the verse as follows: **ותגל ערבה... כנחבצלת**, meaning: "The wilderness shall rejoice as with the crocus,"²⁶ i.e., the wilderness shall rejoice as one rejoices because of the blooming of the crocus (when it blooms or when one sees its flowers).²⁷

It is possible to suggest an additional reading based on the method of "Total Interpretation", according to which "the importance of structure in assigning meaning necessitates first of all... to define the literary limits of the unit to which the verse belongs."²⁸ If we read the verse in question by using this method, and try to understand the meaning dictated by the accents while referring to the verses explicitly or implicitly connected to its content, we will see that the metaphoric description of the "wilderness" as

²⁴ M.Z. Kaddari, *Biblical Hebrew Dictionary (Oṣar Leshon Hamiqra' me-ʾAlef ad Tav)* forthcoming (Heb.).

²⁵ I have also heard from Kaddari on Zech 10:7, that **ושמח לבם כמו-יין** (= lit. And they shall exult as wine) is likewise elliptical for **ושמח לבם כמו ביין** "And they shall exult as with wine".

²⁶ M.Z. Kaddari, *Studies in Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Ramat Gan, 1976) 41 (Heb.), mentions the simile "shall blossom like the crocus" and assigns to it two underlying structures: the verb 'blossom' referring to the wilderness (= was covered with blossoms) and the verb 'blossom' referring to the crocus (= bloom, produce or yield blossoms).

²⁷ According to the reading proposed here, the verse seems to have two underlying sentences: **ותגל ערבה תגל כנחבצלת** (= The wilderness shall rejoice as with the crocus) + **ותגל ערבה תפרח כנחבצלת** (= The wilderness shall blossom like the crocus), and such a reading is somewhat problematic.

²⁸ M. Weiss, *The Bible and Modern Literary Theory* (Jerusalem, 1987) 187 (Heb.).

well as its simile (in the usual sense of the prefixed preposition 'כ'='as'/'like') may be clarified in the larger context, as follows:

The sentence discussed here is part of a discourse unit consisting of two verses (Isa 35:1–2), and it is connected, by way of opposition, to Isa 33:9. In the latter (Isa 33:9) the angels of peace lament:

אבל אמללה ארץ החפיר לבנון קמל היה השרון כערבה ונער בשן וכרמל

The land is wilted and withered; Lebanon disgraced and moldering, Sharon is become like a desert, and Bashan and Carmel are stripped bare

In Isa 35:1–2, on the other hand, which is a prophecy of solace and comfort, it says:

יששום מדבר וציה ותגל ערבה ותפרח כחבצלת... כבוד הלבנון נתן לה הדר הכרמל והשרון

The arid desert shall be glad, the wilderness shall rejoice; and shall blossom like a crocus... It shall receive the glory of Lebanon, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon²⁹

From the opposition between *אבל אמללה ארץ* "The land is wilted and withered" (33:9) and *יששום מדבר וציה ותגל ערבה ותפרח* "The arid desert shall be glad, The wilderness shall rejoice And shall blossom" (35:1), we learn that the roots *אב"ל* and *אמ"ל*, whose meanings are related to 'sorrow' and 'dryness',³⁰ are the opposites of the roots *שי"ש* and *גי"ל* (which deal with 'joy'), as well as opposites of the root *פר"ח* ('sprout').³¹ Likewise, in Isaiah 33:9 *היה השרון כערבה*, Ibn Ezra comments: *היה השרון: כמו חבצלת השרון* (=Sharon is become: like the rose of Sharon).³² Based on the association between 'rose' (or 'crocus') and 'Sharon,' and the contrast between the

²⁹ Y. Feliks, *Trees: Aromatic, Ornamental, and of Forest in the Bible and Rabbinic Literature* (Jerusalem, 1997) 115 (Heb.), says that Isaiah uses terms referring to the height of trees and bushes. He calls the tallest trees 'Lebanon' (meaning the tall trees of Lebanon—cedars and cypresses); shorter than these he calls 'forest', and the bushes are called 'Carmel'.

³⁰ See, for example, Kaddari, *Otsar*, s.v. 'אבל'; Weiss, *Literary Theory*, 200.

³¹ As P.D. Miscall, *Isaiah* (Sheffield, 1993) 86 notes: "After the nightmare comes the dream, and the dream counters the nightmare on many points."

³² Meaning: Sharon—as in Song 2:1.

similes ערבה... "Sharon is become like a desert" (33:9) as against ...ערבה כחבצלה "...wilderness... like a crocus" (35:1), we may possibly deduce that the 'wilderness' shall blossom and rejoice as 'Sharon'. At the background of this simile there is a presupposition that in the good old days of 'Sharon' it was covered with 'crocuses'/'roses', and just as in the past 'Sharon' rejoiced (metaphorically) and blossomed, so 'shall the wilderness rejoice and blossom'.

Terms of rejoicing

Isaiah 35 uses a considerable number of verbs of joy, particularly at the beginning and end of the chapter. In the beginning of the chapter it says:

יששום מדבר וציה ותגל ערבה ותפרח כחבצלת פרח תפרח ותגל אף גילת ורגן...

The arid desert shall be *glad*, the wilderness shall *rejoice*; and shall blossom like a crocus. It shall blossom abundantly; it shall also *exult* and *shout*... (35:1-2)

At the end of the chapter it is written:

ובאו ציון ברנה ושמחת עולם על ראשם ששון ושמחה ישיגו

And come with *shouting* to Zion, crowned with *joy* everlasting. They shall attain *joy* and *gladness* (35:10)

Some claim that the root פר"ח also belongs to this group, e.g., פרה תפרח (35:2) is translated by Targum Jonathan as מדץ ידווצון (= "it shall rejoice indeed"). Perles proposes a similar reading based on comparison to the Arabic فَرِحَ "be joyous," and sees here in Isaiah a pun on פר"ח₂ (=ח₂) "bloom" (35:1), paralleling Arabic فَرِحَ, on the one hand, and פר"ח₁ (=ח₁) "be joyous" (35:2), paralleling Arabic فَرِحَ on the other.³³ Similarly, Eitan,³⁴ distinguishes two homonymous senses of פר"ח, albeit changing the order of senses by assigning the sense "be joyous" to פרה in the first verse. He prefers this reading because of the parallelism in this verse and the

³³ F. Perles, "A Miscellany of Lexical and textual Notes on the Bible," *JQR* 2 (1911-1912) 97-132, esp. 108.

³⁴ I. Eitan, "A Contribution to Isaiah Exegesis 66, 14a," *HUCA* 12-13 (1937-1938) 55-88, esp. 87-88.

synonymy: שׁי״ש | | פר״ח + גי״ל. The difficulty of assigning the characteristic of joy to the crocus is resolved, according to Eitan, by the different division of the verses, as follows:

Verse 1: ישׁוּם מְדַבֵּר וְצִיָּה וְתִגַּל עֲרֵבָה וְתִפְרַח

Verse 2: כַּחֲבַצְלֵת פֶּרַח תִּפְרַח וְתִגַּל אִף גִּילַת וְרִנְנָן...

The arid desert shall be *glad*, the wilderness shall *rejoice* and shall blossom.

Like a crocus it shall blossom abundantly, it shall also *exult* and *shout*...³⁵

This division is also preferred by others, for prosodic reasons,³⁶ and as Watts notes: “The verse division is disrupted. Most would end the verse one word earlier.”³⁷

From the point of view of the biblical accents, there is no difficulty in the parallelism between פר״ח and גי״ל since their division is

הַעֲרֵבָה { תִּגַּל + תִּפְרַח } כַּחֲבַצְלֵת

(= lit. The wilderness {shall rejoice + blossom} like a crocus). Identifying the verb פר״ח as synonymous to גי״ל in both verses puts all the verbs in one semantic field of “verbs of joy,”³⁸ and as we show below, it paves the way for additional readings, based on comparison to cognate languages.

The Akkadian ‘*ḥabašillatu*’

The Akkadian word ‘*ḥabašillatu*’ is rare. It is found only in word lists, and Dévaud assigns it a Northwestern Semitic source.³⁹ Regarding the meaning

³⁵ Shout—in the sense of shouts of joy.

³⁶ e.g., RSV; B. Duhm, *Jesaja* (HKAT; Göttingen, 1922); Herbert, *Isaiah*; Kaiser, *Isaiah*; J.N. Oswald, *The Book of Isaiah* (NICOT; Michigan, 1986); Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah*. One should also note that this differing division is implicit in the line arrangement of BHS.

³⁷ Watts, *Isaiah*, 4.

³⁸ For the connection between שמ״ח and צמ״ח see Sh. Morag, “‘Light is Sown’ Ps. XCVII, 11,” *Tarbiz* 33 (1964) 147–148 (Heb.).

³⁹ E. Dévaud, “Études de lexicographie égyptienne et copte,” *Kēmi* 2 (1929) 3–18, esp. 7 n.4. The word also occurs in Syriac (חַמְצִילִיתָא), and as a loanword in Egyptian,

of the word, *CAD* (H, p. 8, 'ḥabašillatu') as well as *AHw* (p.303, 'ḥabašillatu') suggest that it means: (1) fresh shoot of reed, (2) a musical instrument.⁴⁰ Both dictionaries note that the parallel word in Sumerian is 'gi.še.dù' (in a sense similar to that of 1 above), while *AHw* quotes additional Sumerian parallels, among them 'gi.su.un', which means "dry stalk". According to Waetzoldt, it was customary to add the stalk (especially a dry one) to alcoholic beverages to enhance flavor.⁴¹

According to *CAD*, the meaning of "reed" for **חבצלת** is also appropriate in Hebrew, and it is to be preferred to the accepted interpretation (a kind of flower). Hoch rejects this proposal.⁴² He claims that there is no connection between the meaning of the word in Akkadian and in Hebrew because: (1) the letter **ח** in **חבצלת** is /ḥ/ (and its parallel in Akkadian is not /ḥ/, but a vowel); (2) the parallelism in Song 2:1 **חבצלת השרון || שושנת העמקים** (= lit. ḥabaššet of Sharon || lily of the valley) supports the claim that **חבצלת** is some kind of flower. However, the claim made by Feliks that **פרח** in the Bible means "to sprout," "to put forth flower buds" and not "to bloom," "to produce flowers" would seem to support *CAD*'s proposed meaning of **חבצלת** in the Bible.⁴³

It appears that assigning **חבצלת** the meaning of "blooming bud" is possible in our verse regardless of whether we understand **פרח** to mean either "sprouting and blooming" or take it to be a term of rejoicing. On the

where it is used as a woman's name (see J.E. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period*, [Princeton, NJ], 1994] 225, paragraph 309, and see there his remarks on the orthography of the Egyptian word).

⁴⁰ *AHw*: a kind of drum.

⁴¹ H. Waetzoldt, "'Rohr' und dessen Verwendungsweisen anhand der neu-sumerischen Texte aus Umma," *Trees and Timbers in Mesopotamia* (Bulletin on Sumerian Agriculture 4; Cambridge, 1992), 125–146, esp. 126–128.

⁴² Hoch, *Semitic Words*, 225, paragraph 309.

⁴³ Y. Feliks, *Nature and Land in the Bible* (Jerusalem, 1992) 69–75 (Heb.).

other hand, if we read **הבצלת** as meaning “a dry stalk used as a spice in an alcoholic beverage,” we are forced to read **פר"ה** only in the sense of **שמ"ה** “rejoice,” thus strengthening the connection between **הבצלה** and the verbs of rejoicing (for it is a common assumption that the consumption of alcoholic beverages is a mood enhancer). Taking **הבצלת** with the meaning of ‘a musical instrument’ also establishes an associative connection to ‘rejoicing.’

Although it is possible that our proposals concerning the readings based on Akkadian are somewhat farfetched, they are nevertheless worth mentioning. For even if the Hebrew **הבצלת** did not borrow the Akkadian-Sumerian meanings as such, it is possible that it borrowed from them by association the sense of rejoicing. Such a reading further clarifies the biblical accents that associate **הבצלת** and **גי"ל** by simile.

The limits of interpretation

As Weiss says, it is possible to interpret a biblical text

“...only in so far as its potential possibilities allow, namely, the form and the context of the text put limits on interpretation.”⁴⁴

What we have said does not extend beyond what is “allowed.” The different readings we have proposed here conform to the biblical accents as well as the wording and structure of the verse. They agree with the larger discourse and its logic, and are connected to the vocabulary common to Hebrew and cognate languages.

⁴⁴ Weiss, *Literary Theory*, 65.