

Jots and Tittles

I heard a Messianic teaching that dealt with “jots and tittles” in the Hebrew text of the Bible. It claimed that these markings were written by Moses, and that Yeshua actually referred to them in Matthew 5:17-19. Is there any validity to this teaching?

In the Hebrew texts of the Scriptures that exist today, there are various notation marks above, to the side of, or underneath various words and letters. There are some Messianic teachers¹ who believe that these marks are what Yeshua was referring to, when He said that “not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18, NASU), and that Moses himself even penned them in the Biblical text. The KJV uses the rendering: “one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law.” Some believe that these markings have significant theological value for us today. Objectively and historically speaking, these claims have likely been a bit overstated.

The original texts of the Torah were not written in the block Hebrew script or alphabet that is used in all texts today. The script used in the original Torah scrolls, which would have been compiled by Moses and/or his scribes, used a Phoenician-derived or palaeo-Hebrew script. The Ten Commandments would have been written in stone in this Phoenician lettering as well. Following the Jews’ return to the Land of Israel after the Babylonian exile in the Sixth-Fifth Centuries B.C.E., the high priest Ezra had all canonical Hebrew texts be re-transcribed into the block Hebrew script that has come down to us today, a written alphabet that is Babylonian in origin (b.*Sanhedrin* 21b). This is because the Samaritans had their own version of the Torah written in the Phoenician or palaeo-Hebrew script, which had substantial theological changes made to it. Ezra wanted a standardized, authorized Hebrew text for the Jewish community to use, and this text was to be written in the block Hebrew script.

The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* has much to say about the Masorah of the Hebrew Bible, including a rather lengthy entry by Aron Dotan, who is also the editor of the *Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), the oldest complete copy of the Hebrew Tanach dating from 1100 C.E. In his rather detailed analysis of the transmission of the Tanach, he does note that there are “irregular items in the script and in the actual writing—dots above the letters, suspended letters, isolated nuns, large letters, small letters, and others” (*EJ*).² It also confirms that “There are dots over 15 words in the Bible and sometimes also under them, one dot over each letter or over some of the letters” (*EJ*).³ While these dots are very old, there is only “evidence concerning some of them going back to the second century C.E.” (*EJ*),⁴ which means that they first appear a minimum of 70 years after Yeshua’s ministry.

No one who encounters the Hebrew Bible can deny that various specialized signs exist, but Dotan goes on to note that “The custom of writing some letters differently—small or larger than usual—never became legally fixed. Thus there are several discrepancies between the various manuscript texts of the Bible.” He goes on to say, “Their number grew as time passed, but in the older manuscripts, such as those of Aleppo and Leningrad, there are still relatively few of these letters” (*EJ*).⁵

One possible example of this appears in the opening line of the Book of Leviticus, which reads with *V’yikra el-Moshe v’daber ADONAI* (וַיִּקְרָא אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה). In the MT the final *alef* (א) in the word *v’yikra*, “and He

¹ Monte Judah, “The Jots and Tittles of Moses.” *Yavoh: He is coming!* Vol. 10 No. 7, July 2004.

² Aron Dotan, “Masorah,” in *EJ*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

called,” is smaller than the other letters.⁶ The commentary *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* by J.H. Hertz explains why this is the case, stating,

“According to an ancient regulation, the last letter of the word ויקרא is in miniature. The Sacred Text was in ancient times written in a continuous row of letters, without any division between the words. When the last letter of a word was the same as the first of the next, as is here the case, one character would often serve for both (Luzzatto). When at a later time both letters were written out, one of them was in smaller size to show that it did not originally occur in the Text—an illustration of the profound reverence with which the Sacred Text was guarded by the Scribes.”⁷

This is an indication that many of what are called or referred to as “jots and tittles” were added much later than the time of Moses, and there is no universal agreement among extant Hebrew texts. They may include enlarged letters that exist, for reasons such as how when words were later broken up from a constant stream of letters, letters that ended one word and started another, needed to be differentiated because they were the same.

Many of the suspended letters and special markings above letters in the Tanach are used to indicate scribal inundations. One particular instance appears in Judges 18:30 with a “hanging nun,” changing the reading from *Moshe* (מֹשֶׁה) or “Moses” to *Menashe* (מְנַשֶּׁה) or “Manasseh.” Rather than having some kind of mystical meaning, Emanuel Tov notes, “This addition was apparently meant to correct an earlier reading which ascribed the erecting of the idol in Dan to one of the descendants of Moses (see. b. *B. Bat* 109b). The addition can therefore be understood as a deliberate change of content.”⁸

Special markings appearing in the Torah occur in much later manuscripts, and were not of Mosaic origin. Also to be taken into consideration, as Dotan remarks, are how “the notes concerning the text of the Bible and the instructions for its proper pronunciation and its exact copying were handed down orally from generation to generation before they were set down in writing” (*EJ*).⁹ Perhaps some of these markings were written down by Ezra the Scribe, but even that can be suspect if there were divergent Hebrew manuscripts as late as the Middle Ages.

A wide number of what might be designated as so-called “jots and tittles” are not only not of Mosaic origin, but are in fact known by the designation of upper accents. Jeffrey H. Tigay explains in the *Etz Hayim* Torah commentary, “These are...superlinear and sublinear ‘accent signs’ (Hebrew *t’amim*, Yiddish *trop*) that accompany the text in manuscripts and printed Bibles...These signs serve simultaneously as a system of punctuation and of musical notation for cantillation of the text.”¹⁰ Tigay’s article does note that “They do not appear in [all] Torah scrolls,” but often do appear in codices and in portions of the Decalogue that are often canted aloud in synagogues. He also states that “The lower and upper sets of accents seem to have originated in Palestine and Babylonia, respectively. Because the lower set corresponds to the normal way of versifying the Torah, it is probably the older of the two.”¹¹

Aside from discovering that these markings were not written by Moses, or any of the original Tanach authors, and may in fact be cantillation marks used for singing the Torah in a synagogue—we can find nothing in the various Jewish commentaries we have in our ministry library relating to any systematized definition of meanings that can be applied as to what these things mean. Dotan notes that the reversed letter *nun* (נ) which appears in Numbers 10:35-36,¹² “is generally accepted...to separate the section ‘when the ark is set forward’ as if it

⁶ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *ArtScroll Tanach* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications., 1996), 244; Harold Fisch, ed., *The Jerusalem Bible* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2000), 115.

⁷ J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino, 1960), 410.

⁸ Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 57.

⁹ Dotan, “Masorah,” in *EJ*.

¹⁰ Jeffrey H. Tigay, “Decalogue With ‘Upper’ Accents,” in David L. Lieber, *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 1343.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Then it came about when the ark set out that Moses said, ‘Rise up, O LORD! And let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You.’ When it came to rest, he said, ‘Return, O LORD, to the myriad thousands of Israel!’” (Numbers 10:35-36, NASU).

were a book itself, there is no similar consensus of opinion concerning the signs in Psalms” (*EJ*).¹³ At the same time, it has been also proposed that the reversed *nun* in Numbers 10:35-36 indicates that some of the verses may be out of place textually.¹⁴

If there is no universally available definition regarding what any of the specialized markings in the Torah scroll mean, then they may be some of the many decorative marks in the scrolls of the Hebrew Bible. There are likely to be speculative remarks made regarding these different appearances in the Mishnah, Talmud,¹⁵ or Midrashim (and most disturbingly, later Medieval Jewish works like the Zohar, which form the foundation of the Kaballah or Jewish mysticism). One has to be careful not to make a theological value judgment until a wide array of data has been consulted, and then proceed with some tact and even a bit of caution.

One presumed “jot and tittle” that has been able to gain traction in some Messianic quarters, has been from what is seen in the Hebrew text of Genesis 33:3-4:

“But he himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. **Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept**” (Genesis 33:3-4, NASU).

The Hebrew clause of interest is *v’yipol ‘al-tzava’rav v’yishaqeihu v’yiv’khu* (וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צְוָאֲרָו וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ), and it is noticeable how there are dots over the verb *v’yishaqeihu* (וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ), “and kissed,” in Genesis 33:4.

Be rather critical of teachings circulating in the Messianic community,¹⁶ which give too much significance to the notational dots over the verb *v’yishaqeihu*. Generally speaking, it is attested in textual studies, how such dots “may have originated in the pre-Masoretic period to indicate letters of words that were considered questionable but left in the text. Similar points are used in this manner in the Dead Sea manuscripts and in early Samaritan manuscripts. It is striking that many of the letters and words thus marked are lacking in the Septuagint and Syriac translations of the Bible, and also from the Samaritan Pentateuch” (*The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*).¹⁷

In the scope of Rabbinic interpretation of Genesis 33:4, it is thought that the “dots over each letter of this word [וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ], [serve as] an exegetical device that calls attention to hidden allusions. The Sages disagree regarding the significance of the dots in this verse. Some hold that Esau’s kisses were sincere; but R’Shimon bar Yochai says that, although it is an immutable rule that Esau hates Jacob, at that moment his mercy was aroused and he kissed Jacob with all his heart (*Rashi*)” (*ArtScroll Chumash*).¹⁸ Esau’s kissing Jacob might have been sincere, or might not have been sincere.

It is quite possible that the dots over *v’yishaqeihu* carry an important meaning for readers of the Masoretic Hebrew text, inscribed by its editors and copyists. These would serve to point out something significant, no different than how today within English we might mark something with an asterisk *, an at sign @, or a pound/number sign #. **There is no evidence, though, that the dots over *v’yishaqeihu* were ever of Mosaic origin**, and they would instead date much closer to the First Century B.C.E.-C.E.

ל ויהי בנסע הארן ויאמר משה
 קומה יהוה ונפצו איביך וינסו
 משנאיך מפניך
 ובנחה יאמר שובה יהוה רבבות
 אלפי ישראל ל

V’yehi binso’a ha’aron v’yomer Moshe, “Qumah ADONAI v’yafutzu o’vekha v’yanusu mesanekha mipanekha,” u’venuchoh yomar, “Shuvah ADONAI riv’vot alfei Yisrael.”

¹³ Dotan, “Masorah,” in *EJ*; cf. Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph, et. al., eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977), 231; Aron Dotan, ed., *Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 213.

¹⁴ In the Greek Septuagint of Numbers 10:33-36, the actual verse order is 33, 35, 36, 34.

¹⁵ For a further evaluation of Numbers 10:35-36, consult Mark Huey’s commentary on *B’ha’alotkha* (Numbers 8:1-12:16), “Arise, O Lord!,” appearing in *TorahScope, Volume I*.

¹⁶ One summary of possible meanings of irregularly sized and placed Hebrew letters in the Tanach is b.*Shabbat* 104a.

¹⁷ Monte Judah, “Kiss of Esau.” *Yavoh: He is coming!* Vol. 8 No. 12, December 2002.

¹⁸ Page H. Kelley, Daniel S. Mynatt, and Timothy G. Crawford, eds., *The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 153; cf. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 53; *Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia*, 50.

¹⁸ Scherman, *Chumash*, 177; cf. Sarna, in *Etz Hayim*, 203 making reference to *Genesis Rabbah* 78:9.

When Yeshua said in Matthew 5:18 that “till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (RSV), or “not so much as a *yud* or a stroke will pass from the *Torah*” (CJB), does He refer to varied specialized markings in our current Hebrew Tanach? He cannot be referring to these markings if they do not appear in First Century Hebrew texts. We have not been able to find any evidence that these are markings that go back to the time of Moses and the Exodus. Yeshua seems to not be referring to irregular markings in the Torah scroll, which appear much later and not in all texts, but rather that the smallest serifs or strokes on the letters will not pass away, which can alter the meaning of a passage if not transmitted properly. As David H. Stern notes in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*,

“*Yud* is the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet and is used in the JNT to render Greek iota, the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet. Only a small stroke distinguishes one Hebrew letter from another—for example *dalet* [ד] from *resh* [ר] or *beit* [ב] from *kaf* [כ].”¹⁹

This speaks of the fact that Yeshua is concerned with the details of the Hebrew Torah, and the reality of how these small markings of letters, or letters themselves, can change the meaning of a word or an entire sentence (i.e., the disputed reading of *lo*, לֹ = “for himself” or *lo*, לוֹ = “not” in Exodus 21:8).

It was not until the Ninth Century C.E. that the vowel markings that are so commonplace to Biblical Hebrew texts were added. It is likely that at this time the scribes who were responsible for adding the vowel markings to the Hebrew text of the Tanach (Old Testament), also standardized the various notations above, to the sides of, and below letters and words, mostly for the purpose of canting or singing it in the Synagogue. These markings could have been made to point out important theological themes in the Scriptures, and if so they could very well have had a significant amount of commentary to go with them.

It would be valid, to a certain extent, to claim that various markings and notations in the Hebrew Torah and Tanach are of ancient Jewish origin from *after* the time of Yeshua, and possibly bore some theological significance to the scribes and the Sages. There might be some interesting points for today’s Messianic Believers to discover there. It would not be too accurate to say, though, that various markings and notations were what Yeshua was speaking of in His Sermon on the Mount of Matthew chs. 5-7.

We would urge you to be most cautious and highly skeptical of teachings relating to “jots and tittles,” where textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible is not emphasized. Look for credible, conservative reference sources and commentaries (not ultra-Orthodox or Chassidic) supporting the theological claims regarding what these various markings actually mean. Do not just hear a teaching and accept it, unless there is some engagement and triangulation with contemporary Biblical Studies.²⁰

¹⁹ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 27.

²⁰ For a further discussion of this issue, consult Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, pp 54-58; Kelley, Mynatt, and Crawford, *The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.