

Why are there Chapters and Verses?

Simply stated, we have verses and chapters to help us reference parts and sections of the Bible. We should note that the original Hebrew texts did not have verses and chapters. What did they have? They had parashah/parashot.

A parashah/parashot or “portion, portions” formally means a section of a biblical book in the Masoretic Text of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible). In the Masoretic Text, parashah sections are designated by various types of spacing between them.



An example showing parashah.

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Aleppo_Codex_\(Deut\).jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Aleppo_Codex_(Deut).jpg)

In most modern Torah scrolls and Jewish editions of the Bible, there are two types of parashot: an “open portion” (parashah petuhah) and a “closed portion” (parashah setumah). An “open portion” is roughly similar to a modern paragraph. A “closed portion”, on the other hand, leaves a space in the middle of the line of text.

A parashah break creates a textual pause, roughly analogous to a modern paragraph break. Such a pause usually has one of the following purposes:

In most cases, a new parashah begins where a new topic or a new thought is clearly indicated in the biblical text.

In many places, however, the parashah divisions are used even in places where it is clear that no new topic begins, in order to highlight a special verse by creating a textual pause before it or after it (or both).

The division of the text into parashot for the biblical books is independent of chapter and verse numbers which we see in our English bibles. So, our versification and chapterization is not part of the masoretic tradition. Rather, a system was devised to section the Scriptures. For the purposes of our time we will not need to be concerned with

how the system works. Yet, the sections are really useful to us and give us a glimpse of how a Jew would read their Bible.

When the English bibles were put together with chapters and verses, they would have used the Masoretic texts, but the Vulgate and Ancient copies would also have been taken into consideration. Thus, sometimes, the parashah breaks are different from our chapters.

As you study, for example, the book of Isaiah, use the parashot of Isaiah as one way to guide you. Keep in mind that parashot are not numbered, although some have special titles if you decide to research the whole Old Testament.