⌘ Biblical Hebrew Grammar for Beginners

Nouns

Nouns are a major building block of the language. The range of topics associated with nouns in very broad, and below we are developing four, essential for access to the language at the beginner level.

Nouns: Pausal and Non-pausal Forms

A noun may take a different form depending on whether it appears at a pause-- the end of a sentence or at a major break within a sentence (pausal form), as opposed to any other position in the sentence(non-pausal form). The difference between the two forms is expressed in the quality of certain vowels—the meaning is not affected by the variations. Some examples are given below.

Non-pausal form	Pausal form	Meaning
לֶחֶם	לָחֶם	bread, food
מַיִם	מָיִם	water
לַיְלָה	לָיְלָה	night
גַּן	גָּן	garden

Note the difference between the two forms of the noun מַיִם in Genesis 1:6. The two pausal forms, one in the middle of the verse and one at the end, are marked in blue, and the non-pausal form in red. The pausal forms are marked by with major disjunctive accents.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמָּיִם וִיהִי מַבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לָמָיִם׃

And God said: "Let there be an expanse between the waters, and let it separate waters from waters."

The difference between pausal and non-pausal forms is observed in other word classes as well, as in the preposition לְךָ/לָךְ *to you (m sg)* or in the verb יָצַר/יְצָר *he fashioned*.

וַיֹּאמֶר מִי הִגִּיד לְךָ כִּי עֵירֹם אָתָּה ; הֲמִן-הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לְבִלְתִּי אֲכָל-מִמֶּנּוּ אָכָלְתָּ? (Genesis 3:12)

So he said, who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree I had ordered you not to eat from?

וְקוֹץ וְדַרְדַּר תַּצְמִיחַ לָךְ ; וְאָכַלְתָּ אֶת-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה. (Genesis 3:18)

Thorns and thistles it will grow for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field.

מִי-יָצַר אֵל וּפֶסֶל נָסָךְ לְבִלְתִּי הוֹעִיל. (Isaiah 44:10)

Who has fashioned a god and casted an idol? For no benefit.

וַיִּטַּע יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים גַּן-בְּעֵדֶן מִקֶּדֶם ; וַיָּשֶׂם שָׁם אֶת-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצָר . (Genesis 2:8)

Now the Lord God planted a garden in the East; and he placed there the Man whom he had fashioned.

Extended Nouns

Hebrew nouns can be "extended", that is, augmented by a variety of segments. Such segments can be plural suffixes, the definite article, prepositions, and the like. For example, the noun יִשְׂרָאֵל *Israel* can be augmented by the preposition בְּ *in* to render בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל *in Israel*. The noun נַעַר *young man* can be augmented by the definite article to render הַנַּעַר *the young man*, which in turn can be augmented by the masculine plural ending ים. to render הַנְּעָרִים *the young men*. The addition of suffixes, which often results in a shift of primary stress, may result in vowel changes in the original word, while the addition of a prefix may affect the nature of the first consonant of the word. Vowel changes can be observed in the singular and plural forms of *young man*, where in the singular form, נַעַר, the stress falls on the first syllable, and in the plural form, נְעָרִים, it falls on the last. The effect on the first consonant can be observed in the non-definite and definite forms of נַעַר: נַעַר vs. הַנַּעַר. The addition of the definite article precipitates

a lengthening, that is, a longer pronunciation of the first consonant, signaled by a *dagesh*, the dot in the *nun*.

Nouns with Possessive Suffixes

Hebrew has a set of pronominal suffixes that assign possession to the noun. The noun סוּס *horse*, may be augmented by the suffix יִ to render סוּסִי *my horse*, by וֹ to render סוּסוֹ *his horse*, and so on. The full set of suffixes is provided below with the noun אוֹר *light*. Most of these forms are theoretical, that is, they are not found in the Biblical text. Based, however, on what we know about the language, we can safely assume that they were part of the lexicon.

my light	אוֹרִי	יִ
your (m sg) light	אוֹרְךָ	ךָ
your (f sg) light	אוֹרֵךְ	ךְ
his light	אוֹרוֹ	וֹ
her light	אוֹרָהּ	הָ
our light	אוֹרֵנוּ	נוּ
your (m pl) light	אוֹרְכֶם	כֶם
your (f pl) light	אוֹרְכֶן	כֶן
their (m) light	אוֹרָם	ם
their (f) light	אוֹרָן	ן

A different set of suffixes is used with plural nouns, exemplified by אוֹרוֹת *lights* below.

my lights	אוֹרוֹתַי	יַ
your (m sg) lights	אוֹרוֹתֶיךָ	ֶיךָ
your (f sg) lights	אוֹרוֹתַיִךְ	ַיִךְ
his lights	אוֹרוֹתָיו	ָיו
her lights	אוֹרוֹתֶיהָ	ֶיהָ
our lights	אוֹרוֹתֵינוּ	ֵינוּ
your (m pl) lights	אוֹרוֹתֵיכֶם	ֵיכֶם
your (f pl) lights	אוֹרוֹתֵיכֶן	ֵיכֶן
their (m) lights	אוֹרוֹתֵיהֶם	ֵיהֶם
their (f) lights	אוֹרוֹתֵיהֶן	ֵיהֶן

The pronominal suffixes are very common in Biblical Hebrew and their roles vary—while with nouns they indicate possession, with [prepositions](#), for example, they indicate prepositional objects (e.g., to **me**, to **you**, to **him**, etc.) and with verbs they indicate direct objects (as in he took **me**, he took **her**, etc.).

Construct Chains

Nouns are often modified in Hebrew by other nouns that define them in a particular way, much like compound noun in English, where "cornbread" or "pumpkin bread" tell us what kind of bread we are talking about. As with other modifying elements, the modifying noun follows the noun that is modified. Together, the two nouns make a single stress unit, with the stress falling on the modifier. As a result, the modified noun, in a noun+noun structure referred to as a "construct chain", often exhibits vowel changes and word-end changes. Some examples are given below:

Modified Noun	Modifying Noun	Construct Chain	Meaning
בַּיִת	שְׁלֹמֹה	בֵּית שְׁלֹמֹה	Solomon's house

דָּבָר	אֱלֹהִים	דְּבַר אֱלֹהִים	God's word
נָשִׁים	לֶמֶךְ	נְשֵׁי לֶמֶךְ	Lemech's wives
יָמִים	חַיֶּיךָ	יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ	The days of your life
נְשָׁמָה	חַיִּים	נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים	The breath of life

The definite article in construct chains is prefixed to the modifier, as in בְּנֵי הָאָדָם *the sons of man* or בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ *the house of the king*.

Some of the common changes observed in modified nouns:

The vowel *qamatz* is neutralized to a *schwa*, as in דְּבַר אֱלֹהִים, יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ, נְשֵׁי לֶמֶךְ, and.

A noun ending in הָ in a "stand alone" form ends in תַ when it is modified in a construct chain, as in נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים.

A noun ending in ים ends in יֵ when it is modified in a construct chain, as in יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ and נְשֵׁי לֶמֶךְ.

Want to Know More?

1. Segholate Nouns: Many noun patterns can be observed in Biblical Hebrew. Prominent among them is the segholate nouns, named after the vowel *seghol* that is observed in many of the singular forms.

2. Participles: Participles are forms that share the qualities of both nouns and verbs.