

Biblical Hebrew Grammar for Beginners

Particles

Biblical Hebrew has a large number of particles, or function words. Some of the most common particles are discussed below.

The Definite-Direct-Object Marker **את**

The definite-direct-object Marker precedes a direct object that is definite. It has no lexical meaning, and therefore does not appear in translations.

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים ; **את** הַשָּׁמַיִם וְ**את** הָאָרֶץ . (Genesis 1:1)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה **את**-אַבְרָהָם ; וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי . וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא **את**-בְּנֶךָ **את**-יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר-אַהַבְתָּ **את**-
יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ מֹרְיָה ; וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר
אָמַר אֱלֹהִים . (Genesis 22:1-2)

It was after these events that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" To which he replied: "Here I am." God said: "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."

The marker has two variants: **את** when it stands independently, as in the first example, and **את** when it is closely connected to the object word, usually by a *maqef* (hyphen, as in the second example).

Negative Particles

The most common negative particle, used primarily with verbs and adjectives, is **לא**.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-קַיִן אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ ; וַיֹּאמֶר **לֹא** יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי
אָנֹכִי? (Genesis 4:9)

*Then the LORD said to Cain: "Where is Abel, your brother?" And he said: "I know **not**. Am I my brother's keeper?"*

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים **לֹא**-טוֹב הֵיטִיב הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ ; אֶעֱשֶׂה-לוֹ עֶזְרָא כְּנֶגְדּוֹ.
(Genesis 2:18)

*The Lord God said: The man's being alone is **not** good. I will make him a helper opposite him.*

The same particle, **לֹא**, is used with emphatic commands, as in the Ten Commandments:

אָנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים ; **לֹא**-יְהִיָּה
לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פָּנָי. (Exodus 20:2)

*I am the Lord your God who took you out from the land of Egypt, from a place of slavery. You should **not** have other gods before me.*

Otherwise, the particle used to negate commands (don't) is **אַל**:

וַיֹּאמֶר **אַל**-תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל-הַנֶּעֱר וְ**אַל**-תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי עֵתָה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-יִרָא
אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה וְ**לֹא** חָשַׁכְתָּ אֶת-בְּנֶךְ אֶת-יְחִידְךָ מִפָּנָי. (Genesis 22:12)

*And he said: **Do not** extend your hand at the boy and **do not** do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, and you **have not** withheld your son, your only one, from me.*

Nouns are usually negated with **אֵין**, meaning roughly "non-existent":

כִּי-זֶה שְׁנַתִּים הָרַעַב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ ; וְעוֹד חֲמִשׁ שָׁנִים אֲשֶׁר **אֵין**-חֲרִישׁ וְקָצִיר.
(Genesis 45:6)

*For two years now there has been famine in the land, and five more years are coming with **no** plowing or reaping.*

The Subordinate Particle אֲשֶׁר

The particle אֲשֶׁר precedes a clause that is subordinate to, or dependent on, another clause within a complex sentence. The segment below from Genesis 22 (2) has three sentences, two of them complex with subordinate clauses:

קח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךָ אֶת-יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר-אֶהְבֵּת אֶת-יִצְחָק
וְלֶךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה
וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ

Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.

The meaning of the particle varies with the relationship expressed in the verse. It is, thus, translated alternately as *which*, *whom*, *that*, *whose*, *who*, etc.

Conditional Particles

The conditional particle “if” is אם:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ בָּרַק אם-תֵּלְכִי עִמִּי וְהִלַּכְתִּי ; וְאם-לֹא תֵלְכִי עִמִּי לֹא
אֵלֶיךָ . (Judges 4:8)

Then Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I will not go."

Very often, the particle כִּי is used to indicate a contingency or a condition:

כִּי תִפְגַּע שׁוֹר אֲיִבֶךָ אוֹ חֲמֹרוֹ תֵּעָה הַשֶּׁב תִּשְׂיִבְנוּ לוֹ . (Exodus 23:4)
If you chance upon the ox of your enemy or his donkey, wandering off, make sure to return it to him.

The same particle, כִּי, is used for “because” and also as a subordinate particle “that”:

וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה בְּאֵר בַּשָּׂדֶה וְהִנֵּה-שָׁם שְׁלֹשָׁה עֲדָרֵי-צֹאן רֹבְצִים עָלֶיהָ כִּי מֵן-
הַבְּאֵר הַהוּא יִשְׁקוּ הָעֲדָרִים ; וְהָאֶבֶן גְּדֹלָה עַל-פִּי הַבְּאֵר . (Genesis 29:2)

He saw a well in the field, and three flocks of sheep were lying near it, because the flocks were watered from that well. The stone over the mouth of the well was large.

וַיַּגֵּד יַעֲקֹב לְרַחֵל כִּי אָחִי אָבִיהָ הוּא וְכִי בֶן-רֵבְקָה הוּא ; וַתִּרְץ וַתֵּגֵד לְאָבִיהָ.
(Genesis 29:12)

Jacob told Rachel *that* he was a brother to her father and *that* he was Rebecca's son. So she hurried and told her father.

וַיִּשָׁבַע עוֹד דָּוִד וַיֹּאמֶר יָדַע אָבִיךָ כִּי-מִצָּאתַי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל-
יָדַע-זֹאת יְהוֹנָתָן בֶּן-יַעֲצָב ; וְאוּלָם חַי-יְהוָה וְחַי נַפְשְׁךָ כִּי כִפְשָׁע בֵּינִי
וּבֵין הַמּוֹת. (I Samuel 20:3)

David proceeded to take an oath and said: "Your father surely knows *that* I have found favor in your eyes, and he may say to himself, 'Jonathan should not know this lest he will be grieved.' But it is clear, as the Lord lives and as you live, *that* I am only a step away from death."

A hypothetical condition is usually introduced by the particle לו "if".

וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְעָם בְּלִעָם לְאֶתוֹן כִּי הִתְעַלְלִיתָ בִּי ; לֹא יֵשׁ-חֶרֶב בְּיָדִי כִּי עָתָה הִרְגִיתִּיךָ .
(Numbers 22:29)

Bilaam answered the donkey and said: "[I am beating you] because you have tormented me. *If* there was a sword in my hand, I would have killed you now."