⌘ Biblical Hebrew Grammar for Beginners

Questions

"Yes/no" questions in Biblical Hebrew are primarily introduced with a particle called

"interrogative *heh*," a *heh* prefixed to the first word of the sentence, as in:

וַיִּשְׁאַל שָׁאוּל בֵּאלֹהִים הַאֵרֵד אַחֲרֵי פְלִשְׁתִּים? הֲתִתְּנֵם בְּיַד יִשְׂרָאֵל?

[…] (I Samuel 14:37)

Saul inquired of God: "Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will You give them into the hand of Israel?"
[…]

Question words like "who" or "what" are positioned at the beginning of the sentence.   Common

question words are מִי *who*, מַה *what*, לָמָּה *why*, אֵי or אֵיפֹה *where*, and אֵיךְ *how*.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אָנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֵךְ אֶל-פַּרְעֹה ; וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת-
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם? (Exodus 3:11)

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to the Pharaoh; and bring the Israelites out
of Egypt?"

וַיֹּאמֶר לָבָן לְיַעֲקֹב מֶה עָשִׂיתָ וַתִּגְנֹב אֶת-לְבָבִי ; וַתְּנַהֵג אֶת-בְּנֹתַי כִּשְׁבֻיוֹת
חָרֶב? (Genesis 31:26)

Then Laban said to Jacob: "What have you done, deceiving me, and carrying off my daughters like
captives in a war?

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-קָיִן לָמָּה חָרָה לָךְ וְלָמָּה נָפְלוּ פָנֶיךָ?(Genesis 4:6)

So the Lord said to Cain: "Why are you angry? And why are you crestfallen?

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?"

אֵיפֹה הָיִיתָ בְּיָסְדִי-אָרֶץ? הַגֵּד אִם-יָדַעְתָּ בִינָה. (Job 38:4)

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Say so if you understand.

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל-הַנַּעַר הַמַּגִּיד לוֹ ; אֵיךְ יָדַעְתָּ כִּי-מֵת שָׁאוּל וִיהוֹנָתָן בְּנוֹ?

(II Samuel 1:5)

Then David said to the youth who brought him the report: "How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan have died?"

"How" is often rendered as אֵיכָה or אֵיכָכָה.

אֵיכָה יָשְׁבָה בָדָד הָעִיר רַבָּתִי עָם הָיְתָה כְּאַלְמָנָה! […] (Lamentations 1:1)

How solitary lies the city once so full of people! How like a widow she is! […]

A Note on מַה

The question word מַה, its meaning derived from the context, often serves as a generic question word:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה מַה-תִּצְעַק אֵלָי? דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִסָּעוּ.

(Exodus 14:15)

Then the Lord said to Moses: Why are you crying out to me? Speak to the Israelites and have them move forward.

מַה-דּוֹדֵךְ מִדּוֹד הַיָּפָה בַּנָּשִׁים?[…] (Song of Songs 5:9)

How is your beloved better than others, oh most beautiful of women? […]

Depending on the first consonant of following word, מַה also has the variants מָה and מֶה. The distribution is parallel to that of the [definite article](#).

וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אַנְשֵׁי הָעִיר בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּטֶרֶם יָבֹא הַחַרְסָה מַה-מָּתוֹק מִדְּבַשׁ וּמֶה עַז מֵאֲרִי? (Judges 14:18)

The town's people said to him on the seventh day, before sunset: What is sweeter than honey, and what is stronger than a lion?