⌘ Biblical Hebrew Grammar for Beginners

Sentence Structure

The normative word order in Biblical Hebrew is Verb+Subject+Object (VSO), that is, a sentence normally begins with the verb (the action), followed by the subject (that is, the agent performing the action), and then by the object of the action. Whereas the English rendition of Genesis 1:8 would be "God called the vault 'heavens'", the Hebrew equivalent is "Called God the vault 'heavens'". In the examples below, the first word in the highlighted segments is the verb, and the second is the subject.

(Genesis 1:3)   וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר ; וַיְהִי-אוֹר.

God said: "Let there be light!" And there was light.

וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאוֹר כִּי-טוֹב ; וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ.   (Genesis 1:4)

God saw the light, that it was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לָרָקִיעַ שָׁמָיִם ; וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי.
(Genesis 1:8)

God called the vault "heavens." There was evening and there was morning, a second day.

וַתּוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ דֶּשֶׁא עֵשֶׂב מַזְרִיעַ זֶרַע לְמִינֵהוּ וְעֵץ עֹשֶׂה-פְּרִי אֲשֶׁר זַרְעוֹ-בוֹ לְמִינֵהוּ ; וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב.   (Genesis 1:12)

The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seeds in them after their kind; and God saw that it was good

The VSO word order is not strictly observed. It changes in a variety of ways which reflect shifts in emphasis, complementary or contradictory relationships between text segments, and many other nuances within the discourse.   This strategy is common across languages.   An example can be found in Genesis 1:5, where the contrast between the segments describing the naming of the light and the darkness is emphasized by the positioning of the object *darkness* before the verb *called*: "Called God the light 'day', and the darkness he called 'night'". The parallel segments are highlighted below:

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לָאוֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לָיְלָה ; וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד.

God called the light "day", and the darkness he called "night". There was evening and there was morning, one day.

In deciphering sentences in Biblical Hebrew, it would be wise, then, to look for the verb at the beginning of the sentence, since this is where it is most likely to be founs.