

⌘ Biblical Hebrew Grammar for Beginners

Word Order

The principles that govern the position of words in a Biblical Hebrew sentence are part of an intricate system of norms that are intertwined with personal choices made by a narrator. The narrator may have wished to create a nuanced text by giving a certain prominence to a word or a phrase, comparing and contrasting segments of the discourse, and the like, and thus, aware of the norms, chose to use a non-standard word order.

Three of the principles involved in the normative positioning of words within a sentence are discussed below.

Negation: Placement of the Negative Particle

The [negative particle](#) is usually placed before the element which is negated.

וּמַעַץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרַע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכַלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת.
(Genesis 2:18)

*But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you **should not eat** from it. For on the day that you eat from it, you will surely die.*

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא-טוֹב הֵיטֵב הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ; אֶעֱשֶׂה-לוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ.
(Genesis 2:18)

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

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 responded: "I **know not**. Am I my brother's keeper?"*

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-תְּשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ אֶל-הַנֶּעֱר וְאֶל-תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי עֵתָה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-יִרְאֶה
אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה וְלֹא חֲשַׁכְתָּ אֶת-בְּנֶךָ אֶת-יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי. (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.

כִּי-זֶה שְׁנַתִּים הָרָעַב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ ; וְעוֹד חֲמֵשׁ 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*.

Noun Phrases: Nouns and their Modifiers

In noun phrases, the modifier of a noun will routinely appear following that noun. This applies to both noun+adjective and noun+noun (composite nouns or construct chains) combinations.

The modified noun is highlighted below in red, and the modifier in blue.

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-שְׁנֵי הַמְּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים אֶת-הַמְּאֹר הַגְּדֹל לְמַמְשֶׁלֶת הַיּוֹם
וְאֶת-הַמְּאֹר הַקָּטָן לְמַמְשֶׁלֶת הַלַּיְלָה וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים. (Genesis 1:16)

So God made the two *great lights*: The *greater light* for *governing the day*, the *lesser light* for *governing the night*, and the stars.

וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם רְבִיעִי. (Genesis 1:19)

There was evening and there was morning, a *fourth day*.

וַיְהִי בְּנִסְעָם מִקְדָּם; וַיִּמְצְאוּ בְּקֶעֶה בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם. (Genesis 11:2)

So it was that when they traveled from the east they found a valley in the *land* of *Shinear*, and settled there.

Question Words

Question words are placed at the beginning of the sentence.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִי אֵלֶּךָ אֶל-פַּרְעֹה; וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת-
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם? (Exodus 3:11)

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

מַה-דּוֹדֶךָ מְדוּד הַיָּפָה בְּנָשִׁים? (Song of Songs 5:9)

How is your beloved different from all other lovers, oh most beautiful woman?

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

The Lord said to Cain: *Why* are you angry, and *why* are you crestfallen?

איפה היית ביסודי-אָרֶץ? (Job 38:4)

Where were you when I laid the foundations for the earth?

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל-הַנְּעָר הַמְּגִיד לוֹ אֵיךְ יָדַעְתָּ כִּי-מֵת שָׂאוּל וַיְהוֹנָתָן בָּנָו?

(II Samuel 1:5)

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