

Hebrew Grammar

Intro:

Morphology- changes to form of word

Syntax- function of word or clause in the sentence

Nouns: GNS

Gender- masc or fem. no neuter in Hebrew.

Number- Singular, Plural, Dual- pairs, used mostly of body parts, 2 eyes, ears, hands, etc.

State-

In Hebrew only one case marking אֶת marker of direct object

וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאוֹר “And God saw the light”

There may be direct object without this marking

This word is spelled the same as אִתְּ a preposition “with”

Construct State

2 nouns side by side in relationship- exact relationship depends on words and context.

head noun and genitive

the main noun, called the ‘head noun,’ is modified by the other noun, called the ‘genitive’

In Heb. the head noun is inflected- said to be in construct state (related to a genitive)

If not inflected, called absolute state (not related)

absolute = man

construct = man of

inflection of masc. sg. nouns the same for absolute and construct, but all others change for construct.

סוּס	horse
סוּס	horse of
סוּסִים	horses
סוּסֵי	horses of
סוּסָה	mare
סוּסַת	mare of
סוּסוֹת	mares of

all nouns with object suffixes are in construct state

construct chains, any number of constructs together

e.g. the horses of the sons of the king of Judah

relatively few adjectives in Heb. adjectival functions

usually taken by construct chain.

can go both directions

Ecc. 4:4 כְּשֵׁרוֹן הַמְּעֵשָׂה lit. skill of labor = skillful labor

Psa. 24:3 בְּמִקְוֹם קִדְשׁוֹ place of His holiness = His holy place

Adjectives

relatively few
agree with noun in gender and number
usually follows noun- the horse the brown speckled
usually last in construct chain- the horses of the sons of the king of Judah
the brown speckled

Adverbs

relatively few
Lexicon is key to understanding function of adverbs

Prepositions

Can be stand alone word or attached to beginning of word
Some prepositions exist in stand alone form and inseparable prefix form
Only a few of them, but they have a wide variety of meaning and function,
Lexicon or Williams grammar is the key to understanding prep function.

Particles

Conjunctions and connecting words
There are few true conjunctions- ו does double and triple duty- depends on
context
Many other connecting words- Lexicon usually gives function

Verbs/ Verbals

Tense

Only 2 tenses in Hebrew
Translation of tense sometimes tricky, must be from context
Focus of Heb. tense is on aspect
2 tenses Perfect and Imperfect- not the same as Gk. pf. and impf.
Perfect tense sees action as a completed whole as from the outside
usually translated by Eng. past tense
Imperfect tense sees action as incomplete/in progress as from the
inside
usually translated by Eng. pres. or fut. tense
This is from the point of view of the author, not reader.

C.L. Seow, A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew, p. 207- “[tenses] indicate how a situation is viewed by the speaker/writer. In the perfect, the speaker/writer is an outsider considering the situation as a whole, with the beginning and the end both in view. In the imperfect, the speaker/writer views the situation from the inside, making explicit reference to the internal temporal structure of the situation, without explicit reference to the beginning or the end.”

There are plenty of examples of Pf. tense referring to future actions- e.g. God will judge the nations
There are plenty of examples of Impf. tense referring to past events from the standpoint of the author, but the focus is on the process of the event unfolding.

Morphology of tenses

The Perfect tense is characterized by inflecting the suffix for person gender and number

שָׁמַר	he kept
שָׁמְרָה	she kept
שָׁמַרְתִּי	I kept
שָׁמַרְנוּ	we kept

The Imperfect tense is characterized by inflecting the prefix and sometimes also the suffix

יִשְׁמַר	he will keep
תִּשְׁמַר	she will keep
אֶשְׁמַר	I will keep
יִשְׁמְרוּ	they(masc.) will keep
תִּשְׁמְרנה	they(fem.) will keep

NOTE: These are the most standard terms for Hebrew tense, however, there are many other terms used.

In Davidson's Analytical Lexicon:

“fut.” (future) = imperfect

“pret” (preterite) = perfect

“Kal” = Qal

Vav-conversive, Vav-consecutive

a ׀ before a verb usually (but it may not) switches the force of the verb so that a perfect is translated like an imperfect and an imperfect like a perfect.

e.g.	יִשְׁמַר	he will keep	impf.
	וַיִּשְׁמַר	and he kept	v.c. impf.
	שָׁמַר	he kept	pf.
	וַיִּשְׁמַר	and he will keep	v.c. pf.

The normal pattern for Hebrew narrative is to start with a perfect tense verb followed by a chain of vav-conversive imperfects.

e.g. He ran (pf.) and he jumped (v.c. impf.) and he laughed (v.c. impf.) and he shouted (v.c. impf.) and..... etc.

How to deal with tense

1. learn Hebrew- not too difficult, but beyond this course
2. start with general guidelines given above, governed by context
3. if any question, see how major translations handled the tense.
4. Hebrew grammars all give detailed explanation of tenses

Other Verb forms

Precatives- express exhortations, commands, and wishes

Jussive expresses command in the 3rd person

יִשְׁמֹר let him keep

Most jussives are identical in form to imperfect and must be distinguished by the context.

Cohortative expresses command in the 1st person

נִשְׁמְרָה let us keep

Imperative expresses command directly in the 2nd person

שְׁמֹר keep!

Participles

Hebrew participles are verbal nouns, similar to Gk. ptcp.

Heb. ptcps are inflected for gender number and state and function the same as Heb. nouns.

Qal participles have an active form and a passive form. All other stems take the characteristic of those stems

Participles have a variety of translation possibilities, some similar to English or Greek, some entirely different.

שׁוֹמֵר keeping, keeper, keeps, kept, etc.

Infinitives

Hebrew infinitives are mostly unlike English or Greek infinitives

Heb. infinitives are fairly common and have a wide range of translation possibilities

Heb. infinitives come in two forms, infinitive absolute and infinitive construct.

Infinitive construct often takes a ל prefix and an object suffix

שְׁמֹר inf. abs. to keep, kept, will keep, etc.

לְשְׁמֹר inf. cs. to keep of, kept of, etc.

One interesting use of infinitive absolute that deserves note:

Inf. abs. of same root with finite verb often has intensifying force.

יִשְׁמֹר שְׁמֹר lit. to keep he will keep = he will certainly keep

How to deal with verb forms

1. learn Hebrew- not too difficult, but beyond this course
2. start with general guidelines given above, governed by context
3. if any question, see how major translations handled the verb form.
4. Hebrew grammars all give detailed explanation of verb forms.

Verb Stem

There are 7 major Hebrew Verb stems each characterized by a regular vowel pattern.

Each stem has a unique translation value.

It is best to treat each stem as a different word, as the lexicons separate the meanings by stem

The stem meanings are **not** interchangeable

See “Hebrew Verb Concepts” for more information

How to deal with verb stems

1. learn Hebrew- not too difficult, but beyond this course
2. treat each stem as different word, governed by context
3. if any question, see how major translations handled the verb stem.
4. Hebrew grammars all give detailed explanation of verb stem.

Hebrew Clauses

Hebrew rarely marks the relationship of clauses.

More often Hebrew puts two clauses next to each other with no connecting marker (asyndeton), or the conjunction ו (and, but, so, etc.).

The connection between the clauses must be inferred from the meaning of the words and the flow of the passage, i.e. context

A few types of clauses are worth mention:

relative clause-

like in Greek, a relative clause is not a completely independent idea, but gives definition or description to an item in the main clause.

a relative clause is marked by the relative particle אשר or the shortened form ש (an inseparable prefix)

These are both translated “which” or “who”

e.g. הַאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַר סוּסִים “the man who kept horses”

clause of existence or negation

clauses that state the existence or nonexistence of something by using the following particles

יש particle of existence “there is...”

אין particle of negation “there is not...”

Ecc. 4:8 יֵשׁ אֶחָד וְאֵין שְׁנַי

lit. “there is one and there is not two” = “there is a man and there is no one else”

interrogative clauses

Hebrew marks questions with a few interrogative particles prefixed particle ה (don't confuse with the definite article)

מי personal interrogative particle “who? whom?”

מה or מזה impersonal interrogative “what? which?”

איך interrogative adverb of manner “how?”

אי interrogative adverb of place “where?”

Word order

The normal word order in Hebrew clauses is as follows:

verb – noun subject – noun object – adverb or prepositional phrase

For Example:

Gen. 37:2

וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת־דְּבַרְתָּם רָעָה אֶל־אָבִיהֶם:
their father to bad report of them Joseph he brought
Prep. phrase Direct Object Subj. verb

Gen. 1:27

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ
in His image the man God And He created
Prep. phrase Direct Object Subj. verb

The order often deviates from normal order, but when it does it should be carefully noted, because it is often for emphasis and has exegetical significance

Variations in word order are most commonly for one of these reasons:

1. The word or phrase that is placed first is placed first for emphasis
 - a. Gen. 3:13- subject

הִנְחַשׁ הַשִּׂיָּאֲנִי
he deceived me *The serpent*
verb Subj.

- b. II Kgs. 22:8- object

סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה מָצָאתִי בְּבַיִת יְהוָה
Yahweh in house of I found *The Law* *book of*
Prep. phrase verb Direct Object

- c. Gen. 3:19- Prep. phrase

בְּזַעַת אַפֶּיךָ תֹאכַל לֶחֶם
food you will eat *your face* *by sweat of*
Direct Object verb Prep. phrase

2. To signal a break in the narrative sequence

a. contrast

I Sam. 1:22

וַחֲנָה	לֹא	עָלְתָה
Subj.	adv.	verb
<i>But</i> Hannah	not	she went up

b. change of subject

Gen. 27:6

וּרְבֵקָה	אָמְרָה	אֶל-יַעֲקֹב	בָּנָהּ
Subj.	verb	Prep. phrase	her son
And <i>Rebekah</i>	she said	unto Jacob	

c. background material or parenthesis

וְהָיָא	מִתְקַדְּשֶׁת	מִטְמֵאָתָהּ
Subj.	verbal (ptcp)	Prep. phrase
and she	She purified herself	from her uncleanness

3. When the clause is a subordinate clause, adverbial

Josh. 10:9

כָּל-הַלַּיְלָה	עָלָה	מִן-הַגִּלְגָּל
night	he went up	Gilgal
all	from	“...by marching all night up from Gilgal.”

Narrative Sequence

There is a common pattern for relating the main events of a narrative.

This pattern is to start with a verb in perfect tense (Perf.) followed by a string of vav-conversive verbs in the imperfect tense. (VCImpf.)

(The normal pattern for a negative statement in this chain is vav + negative + verb in Perfect tense)

וְהָאָדָם יָדַע אֶת-חַוָּה אִשְׁתּוֹ
he knew And Adam
(Perf.)

וַתֵּהָרָה

And she conceived
(VCImpf)

וַתֵּלֵד אֶת-קַיִן
Cain And she bore
(VCImpf)

וַתֹּאמֶר

And she said...
(VC Impf)

This pattern may be broken for a number of reasons

- For emphasis
- To show parenthesis or background material
- For change of scene or speaker
- For contrast
- To show subordinate statements

The break can be made by a number of devices

- Change of word order (as above)
- Change of verb tense
- Unusual construction
- Unusual conjunction
- The word הִנֵּה “look, behold” which usually marks a change of perspective

The original thread of narrative may be picked up by resuming with a VCImpf verb.

This pattern is common, but not always consistent.

In some cases, it is possible to pick out the emphases of a narrative by observing this pattern and the strategic breaks.

An Example of Exegesis from Narrative Sequence

From: Robert B. Chisholm Jr., From Exegesis to Exposition, Baker, 1998. pp. 136-7.

Judges 3:18-26

VCImpf forms are flush left. Subordinate clauses are indented. Nonstandard constructions are in bold print. Quotations are italicized. The function of each phrase follows in parentheses.

- (18) And it so happened (introductory)
 when he had finished presenting the tribute payment (temporal)
 he dismissed the people who had carried it (sequential)
- (19) **But he went back once he reached the carved images** (contrastive)
 which are in Gilgal (relative)
And he said: (sequential)
 I have a secret message for you, O King.
And he replied: (sequential)
 Shh!
And all his attendants left (sequential)
- (20) **When Ehud approached him,** (circumstantial)
 he was sitting in his ventilated upper room (synchronic)
 where he was all alone (relative)
And Ehud said: (sequential)
 I have a divine message for you
And he got up from his throne (sequential)
- (21) And Ehud reached with his left hand (sequential)
 and pulled the sword from his right thigh (sequential)
 and drove it into his belly (sequential)
- (22) And the handle went in after the blade (sequential)
 and the fat closed around the blade (sequential)
 for he did not pull the sword out of his belly (causal)
And it went out (sequential)
- (23) And Ehud went out into the vestibule (sequential)
 and he closed the doors of the upper room behind him (sequential)
 and he locked them (complementary)
- (24) **When he had left** (circumstantial)
 his (Eglon's) servants entered (synchronic)
 and they looked (sequential)
 And look, the doors of the upper room were locked (dramatic)
And they said: (sequential)
 He must be relieving himself in the upper room
- (25) And they waited so long they became embarrassed (sequential)
 And look, he did not open the doors of the upper room (dramatic)
And they took the key (sequential)
 and opened them (sequential)
 And look, their master was lying on the floor dead. (dramatic)
- (26) **Now Ehud escaped while they delayed** (dramatic)
 When he passed by the carved images (circumstantial)
 he escaped to Seirah (sequential)