

# **A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax**

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## 1 *Introduction*

At the heart of biblical interpretation is the need to read the Bible's *syntax*, that is, to study the way words, phrases, clauses, and sentences relate to one another in order to create meaning. Biblical Hebrew is a language far removed from us in time and culture. Mastering it is a noble but daunting task. Students often learn to discern the elementary phonology and morphology in order to “read” the biblical text. But we believe exegesis (or the extraction of a text's meaning) requires more than phonology and verb parsing. Achieving a deep-level reading requires a grasp of a text's syntactical relationships, a topic that most beginning grammars do not present in detail. Thus, our task has been to help the reader grasp the building blocks of Biblical Hebrew, that is, the syntactical specifics that constitute meaning. These are the linguistic details through which the most profound of all statements can be made, and have been made – those of Israel's monotheism and the nation's covenant relationship with YHWH.

We have defined and illustrated the fundamental morphosyntactical features of Biblical Hebrew. The volume divides Hebrew syntax, and to a lesser extent morphology (“the way words are patterned or inflected”), into four parts. The first three cover individual words (nouns, verbs, and particles) with the goal of helping the reader move from morphological and syntactical observations to meaning and significance. The fourth section moves beyond phrase-level



phenomena and considers the larger relationships of clauses and sentences. Each syntactical category begins with at least one paragraph, giving definition to that grammatical category. This is followed by a list of the most common exegetical possibilities for that particular grammatical phenomenon. We have provided at least one example (and in most cases more than one) for each syntactical function. Each example is followed by a translation, in which the syntactical feature in question is italicized and underlined where possible. The translations are often related to the NRSV, although we have frequently taken the liberty of altering the translations at points in order to illustrate better the particular syntactical feature under discussion. This is followed by the biblical reference. All examples are taken directly from the Hebrew Bible; on occasion, certain prefixed or conjoined particles, which have no bearing on the syntactical principle being illustrated, have been omitted for the sake of clarity in the English translation.

The categories for classification presented here are by no means exhaustive, which would have required a book many times this size. We have made frequent reference to the leading reference grammars for additional information. We have also omitted discussions of elementary phonology and morphology, including difficult forms or spellings that may be unique or exceptional in some way, all of which are covered sufficiently by numerous beginning grammars. In our footnotes we have frequently included references to the elementary grammars so as to encourage the reader to consult a familiar source in order to review an elementary detail of phonology or morphology, which may have been forgotten. For example, our discussion of “determination” (section 2.6) reminds the reader that one of the ways a noun may be marked as definite is with the prefixed definite article. Since all beginning grammars explain the morphological details of the definite article, with examples of the various forms it takes depending on the noun it marks, we have not repeated that information here. Instead, we direct the reader to review the

beginning grammars where needed.<sup>1</sup> We have also omitted entirely, or in some cases briefly summarized, certain theoretical and complex grammatical issues that regularly make the standard reference grammars unintelligible to the intermediate student. We have, however, included many discussion footnotes dealing with these issues in order to provide additional background information that we believe will be of particular interest to advanced students and scholars. In this way, we have attempted to create a user-friendly volume of modest size.

For the most part, the features defined and illustrated here pertain to the language used in the extended narratives of the Pentateuch and the Historical Books, along with prose sections of the Prophets and Writings. This language is sometimes known as Classical Biblical Hebrew, although we refer to it simply as Biblical Hebrew (BH).<sup>2</sup> At times, we make further observations on Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH), by which we mean the language of most of the biblical books written after the exile (1–2 Chronicles, Ezra–Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, selected Psalms, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and portions of others).<sup>3</sup> Although LBH has features that are often unique, it also shares many features with BH. Thus, in some cases, we have used examples from both BH and LBH to illustrate the continuity of certain grammatical features of the Hebrew language.

<sup>1</sup> For more on morphology, students may now consult the convenient “How Hebrew Words Are Formed” in Landes 2001, 7–39.

<sup>2</sup> “BH” will be used throughout for “Biblical Hebrew.” All other abbreviations may be found in Patrick H. Alexander et al., eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style for Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 121–52.

<sup>3</sup> This list is only partial, since it depends to a large degree on interpretive issues about which scholars are not agreed. For more on the distinction between BH and LBH, see Polzin 1976, 1–2; Rooker 1990; and Sáenz-Badillos 1993, 50–75 and 112–29.