

Chapter 2: Nouns, Prepositions, and Simple Sentences

This chapter builds on the fundamentals of the Hebrew letters and vowels that were learned in Chapter One and introduces the student to the basics of the simple Hebrew sentence so that we may begin to read Hebrew. By the end of this chapter, the student will be able to read and construct simple Hebrew sentences.

Like English, all Hebrew sentences contain a subject and a verb. Both Hebrew and English can have an “implied” subject (e.g., in the sentence “get up” the subject you is implied). Unlike English, Hebrew may have an “implied” verb. The situation is somewhat different because Hebrew does not have a present tense form of the verb “to be.” For Hebrew, the equivalent of the present tense for the verb “to be,” the verb is simply implied. Therefore, it is possible to begin to learn and construct Hebrew sentences by learning the general concepts of nouns and verbal adjectives—the “to be” verb is presumed.

The following are the **essential features** that the student will learn in Chapter 2:

1. The concept of a noun.
2. The singular and plural forms of nouns.
3. The definite article.
4. Prepositions.
5. The concept of adverbial predicates.
6. Putting it all together—constructing simple sentences in Hebrew.

One: The noun (part 1 [other parts will be introduced in later chapters]).

The first item that must be understood in order to read a Hebrew sentence is the noun. Hebrew nouns can be divided into masculine and feminine nouns. There are some general guidelines why some nouns are feminine and why others are masculine, but there are also many exceptions. For example, the word for “son” (בֵּן) is obviously masculine, and the word for daughter (בַּת) is logically feminine. Likewise, body parts that are found in pairs are *usually*

feminine. However, there are so many exceptions that the student should memorize the gender of a particular noun along with the meaning of the word rather than attempt to develop hard-and-fast patterns.

Recognition of feminine and masculine nouns.

The situation is somewhat easier in terms of recognition of Hebrew nouns as either masculine or feminine. Nouns that end with one of the following endings are almost always feminine: (*see CD for audio file*)

Table 2.01

| Example | Feminine ending |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| “ground” אֲדָמָה | הַ־ |
| “door” דֶּלֶת | תְּ־ |
| “knowledge” דַּעַת | תְּ־ |

Nouns that do not have these endings are typically masculine (e.g., מֶלֶךְ “king,” אִישׁ “man,” and כֹּהֵן “priest”), but there are exceptions to this general rule (e.g., אֶבֶן “stone,” עִיר “city,” and אֲרֶץ “earth”). In light of these exceptions, the student must memorize the gender of the noun as the vocabulary is learned. In the vocabulary lists that found in the book, the gender is not given for nouns that end in הַ־, תְּ־, or תְּ־ (they will be assumed to be feminine unless otherwise noted. Likewise, unless otherwise noted, all other nouns without these feminine endings will be assumed to be masculine unless otherwise noted.

Two: Singular and Plural nouns.

Hebrew nouns have 3 types of number (singular, dual, and plural). The meaning of the singular is obvious—it is used in instances where there is only one of a particular noun (e.g., “a king” is written מֶלֶךְ, and “a door” is written דֶּלֶת).¹ The dual is used for pairs of nouns (e.g., “a pair of feet” is written רַגְלַיִם). The use of the dual is fairly restricted in Hebrew and usually limited to certain body parts that are found in pairs and certain combinations of numbers. Thus, at this stage, while it is important to know that the dual exists in Hebrew, this textbook will reserve further explanation until a later chapter.

The *plural* is used in instances where there is more than one of a particular noun, and it is not necessary to indicate the concept of a pair of nouns. The typical masculine ending for plural nouns is יִם, while the typical feminine ending is וֹת. (*see CD for audio file*)

Table 2.02

| Plural | Singular | Gender |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| “cities” עָרִים | “a city” עִיר | Masculine |
| “cattle” (pl.) בָּקָרִים | “cattle” בָּקָר | Masculine |
| “kings” מְלָכִים | “a king” מֶלֶךְ | Masculine |
| “laws” תּוֹרֹת | “law” תּוֹרָה | Feminine |
| “commandments” מִצְוֹת | “commandment” מִצְוָה | Feminine |
| “incense” (pl.) קְטָרוֹת | “incense” is קְטֹרֶת | Feminine |

¹ The student will notice that there is no indefinite article in Hebrew. That is, there is not Hebrew particular for the English word “a” or “an.” The indefinite article is simply understood. See below under “definite article” for further explanation.

The bottom line—what needs to be memorized at this stage:

The student will notice that certain vowel changes take place when a singular noun is made into a plural noun. These vowel changes will be introduced in Chapter 3 and 4 below. For now it is sufficient to recognize the following general rules:

1. Masculine nouns are typically formed by adding **ים** — to the end of a noun.²
2. Feminine nouns are typically formed by dropping the ending (**הַ** —, **תַּ** —, or **הָ** —) and replacing the ending with **ים**.³

Three: definite article.

Like English, nouns can be either definite or indefinite. For example, “a king” is indefinite while “the king” is definite—the reader knows which king. In English nouns can be definite because they have possessives (“my king”), because they are proper nouns (“King Edward V”), or because have the possessive article (“the king”). The set of possibilities are true to Hebrew as well. For now the student will only need to learn the definite article. Unlike English, the article is attached to the noun rather than being found as a separate word. The basic form of the article consists in attaching the letter *he* was an /a/ class vowel (**הַ**) to a noun and then doubling the first consonant of the noun. For example, “a king” is written **מֶלֶךְ** and “the king” is written **הַמֶּלֶךְ** (the doubling is signified by the *dagesh* in the *mem* of the noun **מֶלֶךְ**) Unlike

² There are certain vowel changes that occur, but these changes will be learned later. It should also be emphasized that some feminine nouns are irregular and form the plural by adding **ים** — to the end of a noun. The forms will also be learned later.

³ Just like the masculine nouns, there are certain vowel changes that occur, but these changes will be learned later. There are also a small group of masculine nouns that form the plural by adding **ים**. The forms will also be learned later.

English, there is no indefinite article (“a”). Thus, מֶלֶךְ may express “king” or “a king,” and the context must be used to determine meaning is intended. The following examples summarize this concept (*see CD for audio file*):

Table 2.03

| | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| “the house” הַבַּיִת | “a house” בַּיִת |
| “the cow” הַבָּקָר | “a cow” בָּקָר |
| “the elder” הַזָּקֵן | “an elder” זָקֵן |
| “the animal” הַבְּהֵמָה | “an animal” בְּהֵמָה |
| “the seed” הַזֵּרַע | “a seed” זֵרַע |

Four: Prepositions

There are three types of prepositions in Hebrew:

Prepositions attached to the following word: these prepositions consist of a single consonants that are attached to the following word (כְּ “like, as,” לְ “to, towards,” and בְּ “in, on”).

(*see CD for audio file of the examples*)

- a. Attached to an indefinite noun: the preposition is added to the indefinite noun.

(Example 2.04)

| | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| “like a king” כְּמֶלֶךְ | “to a king” לְמֶלֶךְ | “in a king” בְּמֶלֶךְ | “a king” מֶלֶךְ |
|-------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|

- b. Attached to a definite noun: the definite article *he* is dropped, the single-consonant preposition is added, and the vowel of the definite article is retained.

(Example 2.05)

| | |
|----------------------------|-----------------|
| “in the king” בַּמֶּלֶךְ | בְּ + הַמֶּלֶךְ |
| “to the king” לַמֶּלֶךְ | לְ + הַמֶּלֶךְ |
| “like the king” כַּמֶּלֶךְ | כְּ + הַמֶּלֶךְ |

2. Short prepositions that are attached to the following word by a short bar called a *maqqeph*⁴ (“on the house” עַל־הַבַּיִת). Some of the most frequent prepositions of this type are אֶל־ “to, towards,” עַל־ “on, upon,” מִן־ “from,” and עִם־ “with.” (Example

2.06)

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| “to the house” אֶל־הַבַּיִת | אֶל־ + הַבַּיִת |
| “on the house” עַל־הַבַּיִת | עַל־ + הַבַּיִת |
| “from the house” מִן־הַבַּיִת | מִן־ + הַבַּיִת |
| “with the earth” עִם־הָאָרֶץ | עִם־ + הָאָרֶץ |

⁴ The *maqqeph* is used to indicate that the preposition has no stress of its own but should be taken as the first syllable of the following word.

3. Prepositions that are found as separate words (“before the king” **לְפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ**). (**Example 2.07**)

| | |
|------------------------|------------------|
| “before the man” | לְפָנֵי הָאִישׁ |
| “through the window” | בְּעֵד הַחַלּוֹן |
| “after the earthquake” | אַחַר הָרֵעַשׁ |
| “near the stone” | אַצְל הָאֶבֶן |

Five: Putting it all together—Simple Hebrew Sentences

Unlike English, Hebrew does not have a copula (the “to be” verb in present tense).

Thus, simple sentences can be constructed with the “to be” verb understood. There are several ways that such a simple sentence can be formed. Among the more common examples are the following:

1. Juxtaposition of a noun and an adjective: **הָאֲנָשִׁים טָבִים** “the men are good.” Adjectives will be introduced in the next lesson, so for the time being this is presented as information but will not be discussed further.
2. Juxtaposition of a noun and a prepositional phrase can constitute either a prepositional clause or a predicate sentence—only context will distinguish between the two possibilities. (*see CD for audio file of the examples*)

Table 2.08

| | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| “the children of Israel are in the wilderness” | בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּמִּדְבָּר |
| “The man is in the house” | הָאִישׁ בַּבַּיִת |
| “the woman is by the river” | הָאִשָּׁה אֶצְל הַנָּהָר |