Particles

Biblical Hebrew has a large number of particles, or function words. Some of the most common particles are discussed below.

The Definite-Direct-Object Marker אֵת

The definite-direct-object Marker precedes a direct object that is definite. It has no lexical meaning, and therefore does not appear in translations.

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים; אֵת הַמַּיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ. (Genesis 1:1)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth

יְהִי אָם-מַדְבַּר אֱלֹהִים. לֵאמֶר-קָח נָא אֵת בִּנְךָ אֲשֶׁר אָהֵבְתָּ אֶת יִשְׁחָק; וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּרָהָם; וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי. וַיֹּאמֶר קַח נָא אֶת בִּנְךָ אֲשֶׁר אָהֵבְתָּ אֶת יִשְׁחָק, וְלֶךְ לְךָ אֶל אֶרֶץ הַמּוֹרִיָּה; וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָם לְעֹלָה עַל חַד הֶהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ. (Genesis 22:1-2)

It was after these events that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" To which he replied: "Here I am." God said: "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."

The marker has two variants: אֵת when it stands independently, as in the first example, and את when it is closely connected to the object word, usually by a maqef (hyphen, as in the second example).

Negative Particles

The most common negative particle, used primarily with verbs and adjectives, is לא.
Then the LORD said to Cain:  "Where is Abel, your brother?" And he said:  "I know not.  Am I my brother's keeper?"

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

The same particle, לֹא, is used with emphatic commands, as in the Ten Commandments:

I am the Lord your God who took you out from the land of Egypt, from a place of slavery.  You should not have other gods before me.

Otherwise, the particle used to negate commands (don’t) is אל:  

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.

Nouns are usually negated with אֵין, meaning roughly “non-existent”:

For two years now there has been famine in the land, and five more years are coming with no plowing or reaping.
The Subordinate Particle אֲשֶׁר

The particle אֲשֶׁר precedes a clause that is subordinate to, or dependent on, another clause within a complex sentence. The segment below from Genesis 22 (2) has three sentences, two of them complex with subordinate clauses:

킬-נא אֶת-בִּנְךָ אֶת-יִּצְָחִיק אֲשֶׁר-אַהֲבָּה אֶת
ולֶךְ-לָךְ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמּוֹרִּיָּה
והערלוּ שָם לְעֹלָה עַל חַד הֶהָרִּים אֲשֶׁר אֶמְרָה

Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moria; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.

The meaning of the particle varies with the relationship expressed in the verse. It is, thus, translated alternately as which, whom, that, whose, who, etc.

Conditional Particles

The conditional particle “if” is אִם:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ בָרָק אִם-לְכִי עִמִּי וְּהָלָכְּי; וְאִם-לֹא תֵּלָכְּי לֹא אֵלְךָ
(Judges 4:8)

Then Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I will not go.”

Very often, the particle כי is used to indicate a contingency or a condition:

וַיַּרְא וְּהִׁנֵּה בֵאֵר בַּשָּדֶה וְּהִׁנֵּה שָם שְׁלֹשָּׁה-עֶדְּרֵי צֹאן רֹבְּצִיָּה עָלֶיה יֵׁי מִּן-הַבְּאֵר יַשְּקוּ הָעֲדָרִיָּה; וְּהָאֶבֶן גְּדֹלָה עַל-עִי-הַבְּאֵר.
(Exodus 23:4)

If you chance upon the ox of your enemy or his donkey, wandering off, make sure to return it to him.

The same particle, כי, is used for “because” and also as a subordinate particle “that”:

וַיַּרְא הָאֶבֶן גְּדֹלָה עַל-עִי-הַבְּאֵר-שָׁם שְּלֵשָּׁה-עֶדְּרֵי צֹאן רֹבְּצִיָּה עָלֶיה יֵׁי מִּן-הַבְּאֵר.
(Genesis 29:2)

He saw a well in the field, and three flocks of sheep were lying near it, because the flocks were watered from that well. The stone over the mouth of the well was large.
Jacob told Rachel that he was a brother to her father and that he was Rebecca's son. So she hurried and told her father.

David proceeded to take an oath and said: "Your father surely knows that I have found favor in your eyes, and he may say to himself, 'Jonathan should not know this lest he will be grieved.' But it is clear, as the Lord lives and as you live, that I am only a step away from death."

A hypothetical condition is usually introduced by the particle לָל “if”.

Bilaam answered the donkey and said: "[I am beating you] because you have tormented me. If there was a sword in my hand, I would have killed you now."