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.

\[
וּמֵעֵץ הַדַעַת טוֹב וָרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶנּוּ כִּי בְּיוֹם אֲכָלְּךָ מִמֶנּוּ מוֹת תָמוּת.
\]

(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.

\[
וַיֹאמֶר יְּהוָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא-טוֹב הָדָם לְבַדוֹ; אֶעֱשֶה-וֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְּדוֹ.
\]

(Genesis 2:18)

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

\[
וַיֹאמֶר אַל-תִשְּלַח יָדְּךָ אֶל הַנַּעַר וְּאַל-תַעַש לוֹ מְּאוּמָה כִּי עַתָה יָדַעְתִי כִּי יְּרֵא אֱלֹהִים אַתָּה וְלֹא חָשַכְתָּ אֶת בִּנְךָ אֶת יְחִידְךָ מִמֶנִּי.
\]

(Genesis 22:12)

Then the Lord said to Cain: "Where is Abel, your brother?" And he responded: "I know not. Am I my brother's keeper?"
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.

כִי-זֶה שְּנָתַיִם הָרָעָב בְּקֶרֶב הָרֶץ; וְּעֶדְוַּדְוַדְוַד הָשִׁים שְׁנֵים אַשְׁרָא, אַוִּיז-חַרַּישׁ-קֶזֶאשׁ.

(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 אֶת-הַמָּאוֹר הַגָּדֹל לְמֶמְּשֶלֶת הָיֹם וְאֶת-הַמָּאוֹר הַקָּטֹן לְמֶמְּשֶלֶת הַיְּלָה וְאֵת הַכוֹכָּבִים,

(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.

וַיְּהִי עֶרֶב וַיְּהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם רְבִיעִי,

(Genesis 1:19)

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

וַיָּמָּש בְּנָסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם; וַיְּמָצָאוּ בִּקְעָה בְּאֶרֶץ שִנְּעָר וַיְּשָׁבוּ שָם,

(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.

גַּאֲמָר מַעַּשְׂתָּי אל-חֱַאַלֲתִים מִי יָדְּךָ מִי-אֲנִיק כִּי אֶלֹהַ אֶל-פֶּרְעָה; וְכִי אָוֶּרְאַי אַת-אֵל,

(Exodus 3:11)

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

(Song of Songs 5:9)

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

(Exodus 3:11)

The Lord said to Cain: *Why* are you angry, and *why* are you crestfallen?
Where were you when I laid the foundations for the earth?

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