Quirks

Quirks and Idiosyncrasies
in the Classical Hebrew Language

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PREFACE

Every language has its idiosyncrasies. If those in the language that you are studying are the same as those in your own language then you may not notice them; often they are similar but often quite different. This booklet lists some of the commonest in Classical Hebrew in relation to English, but does not claim to be exhaustive. It assumes that the reader is somewhat familiar with the language and it is not for absolute beginners. Advanced students will recognise most of the quirks but may still find something to learn about them and even some new ones. Many of these are carried on into Modern Hebrew, but many are not, while many new ones there result from a mixture of colloquial (Talmudic) Aramaic and mediaeval European (Rabbinic) Hebrew in the language.

A few characteristics of the language that are not found in English, such as the construct state of nouns, and the participle phrase, are also mentioned. These have to be learned and do not confuse, which idiosyncrasies often do.

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A.S.

Eli, Mount Ephraim, Israel
Av 5778
LETTERS

DOUBLING

In Italian, a letter that is written twice in succession is doubled in pronunciation. In *bella* the ‘l’ is given double length. In English this does not apply within a word, e.g. accord, but does when the last letter of a word is the same as the first of the next word, e.g. bus stop is not like bust-up, and when pronounced properly ‘hat trick’ (double t) does not rhyme with Patrick.

In Hebrew a doubled letter within a word (with no vowel or sounded sheva between the two) is not written twice but only once with a dot in the middle, called a ‘strong dagesh’. Its presence or absence affects the meaning. יָדָא means ‘where to?’ (‘whither?’) while יָדָא (a variant of יָדָא) is a strong form of ‘please!’ A case in point is יָדוְתָא וּמְנָא and יָדוְתָא וּמְנָא in Ex. 32:18.
ASPIRATION

A characteristic of Hebrew, which it is assumed the reader has already met, is the three-letter root. This is modified in various ways (change of vowels, doubling a letter, adding a prefix, adding a suffix) to produce variations of the concept of the root. An English analogy is the root ‘act’ which gives us the nouns act, action, activity, the verbs act, acts, acting, acted, enact (etc.), react, actuate, activate, the adjectives active, actionable, hyperactive, radioactive, inactive, the adverb actively, and more. The quirk in Hebrew, especially noticeable when producing variants from the root, is that in certain cases, certain consonants when following a vowel are aspirated, as will be explained. (There is something similar in Welsh.)

The consonants to which this applies are six:

± b,  פ p, ר d, ת t, ג g, כ k.

[Note that there is another t (ט) and another k (כ) to which this does not apply, they never aspirate.]

The rule is simply this:

When one of these letters is not doubled, and it immediately and closely follows a vowel or a sounded sheva, it is aspirated.

‘Immediately and closely’ means within the same word, or at the beginning of a word where the previous one ends in a vowel and is connected to it without any pause – this latter requires understanding the punctuation system which cannot be explained here, but the rule is simple.

What is meant by aspiration? b becomes v, p becomes f (or ph which is the same), d becomes th as in ‘this’, t becomes th as in ‘thing’, g becomes the sound made in a gargoyle, and k becomes ch as in Scottish ‘loch’. (Note that today we do not bother to aspirate d, t, or g, but that is just laxity in pronunciation.)

This was marked in text by placing a horizontal line, called a rafeh, over the letter, thus ±. Simple, but the scribes made it difficult for us. To make sure, they first put a dot (called the dagesh kal) inside the letter whenever it was not aspirated. Then they left out the rafeh except in special cases of doubt. So the letter with a dot is the original, and without a dot is the aspirated! The rule above is then for when to remove the dot – the dot is
there until removed. There is no rule for inserting the dot, it is there until removed! Nothing precedes the first word of the Bible so it is not aspirated, and has to have a dot. This is the quirk.

Note that the addition or removal of a dot in a variation of the root does not affect the root meaning of the word.

Do not confuse

The letter ק with a left dot ק is not aspirated (s), and the letter with a right dot ק is aspirated (sh), but here the two letters are different. They are not variations, and whichever occurs in the root remains in all variations of that root. A change of one to the other means a complete change of meaning, e.g. שָחַר refers to strong drink, שֶׁכֶר to hiring.
NOUNS etc.

GENDER

In Hebrew, every noun has gender, and, exactly as in French, there are only two genders – masculine and feminine. (The other two genders, neuter and common, do not exist in Hebrew.)

It is very important not to confuse gender with sex. Sex is something biological, applying to people, animals and even plants, and may be male or female, whereas gender applies only to words in a language. In any language where gender exists, when a male sex is intended (e.g. a ram), or when both sexes are included (e.g. a sheep) the masculine gender is normally used, and where a female sex is intended (e.g. a ewe) the feminine gender is normally used, but this is not always the case. For instance, ‘a person’ in Hebrew is שֶׁם which, like the French ‘une personne’, is always feminine, and so is the Hebrew word for a bird רִנְשָׁן, regardless of whether a male or a female is referred to. A dove or pigeon נֶפֶר is always feminine, while a raven בַּרְנָה is always masculine, in each case regardless of sex. Here we are dealing with gender, a term used in language and not in biology. A word may have gender, a person or animal does not.

Adjectives

This means that an adjective (including a participle) has different forms for each gender, and the form chosen must agree with that of the noun it qualifies or refers to, as in French.

Pronouns

A pronoun must agree in gender with the noun it refers to. Here we have something similar in English, where gender and sex tend to be confused, so that we say ‘he’ when referring to a male and ‘she’ to a female. But in Hebrew, if the word for a door is feminine you cannot refer to the door as ‘it’ but only as ‘she’ (just like a ship in sailors’ jargon, unique in English).

A verb (except a participle, infinitive or gerund) normally includes a prefix or suffix (or both) that implies a pronoun subject and therefore must
agree in gender as before. A participle does not have a pronoun included, but is an adjective and so must still agree. A noun may have a possessive suffix and the same applies.

Two idiosyncrasies

1. Some nouns have no fixed gender but can take either, for instance the words for sun and wind (שת, ורוח) are usually masculine but can be feminine, camp (מזבח) is usually feminine but can be masculine. The qualifying words (adjectives and verbs) can be mixed up in one sentence: Gen.32:9

2. Gender can also switch in the middle of a sentence. For ‘a person’ we have שֶׁפֶם feminine, or אָמֶר masculine, and a sentence may switch starting with one (here the latter) implied, then changing: (Lev.5:1)

(first part, all feminine) נֹברָךְ כִּי יָדַעְתָּ אָמֶרְךָ לָיָה (second part, all masculine) וְהָא בֶּל יִדַּע אָם אָמֶרְךָ לָיָה וְגֵדֵהּ לִיָּה.
CASE AND STATE

Latin and German have a ‘nominative case’ for the subject and an 
‘accusative case’ for the object everywhere. In English this is found only in 
pronouns (nominative we, she, they, accusative us, her, them) and the same 
applies in Hebrew.

The quirk is that in Hebrew, these pronouns may sometimes be affixed 
as prefixes and/or suffixes in differing forms to nouns and verbs, 
e.g. סקרת. This is complicated and need not be explained here.

In Hebrew, the ‘object’ is often indicated by a preposition. 
(i) The direct object (equivalent to the accusative case), indicated in English 
by word order alone (it follows the verb), may be represented by the 
preposition מ. 
(ii) The indirect object (German or Latin dative case), indicated in English 
by the preposition ‘to’, is represented by the preposition раб or ל.

But these are often omitted (as in English ‘I gave him a pen’ for ‘I gave 
a pen to him’).

There is also, in English, the genitive or possessive case in pronouns (e.g. 
‘my’, ‘his’) and in nouns (e.g. thief’s, thieves’, Jack’s) but this does not 
exist in Hebrew, which uses ‘state’ instead. How ‘state’ works is best shown 
by an example.

In English, “the book of teacher” becomes “teacher’s book” 
“teacher’s” is the genitive case of teacher, 
“the book” stays unaltered.

In Hebrew, “the book of teacher” becomes “book-of teacher” 
“book-of” is the construct state of “book” (‘the’ omitted) 
“teacher” stays unaltered (the absolute state) 
“my book” becomes “book-of-me” 
where ‘me’ being a pronoun is stuck onto the end of the 
construct state of ‘book’.

Your text-book will explain this more fully.
PERSON AND NUMBER

Person

In English, case (in pronouns) applies only in the first and third person (I/me, we/us, he/him, she/her, they/them), and who/whom. In Hebrew it applies also in the second person (you, see next section).

An English pronoun has gender only in the third person, while Hebrew has it also in the second person: ‘you’ differs when the addressed is masculine or feminine. Only the first person pronouns, ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘we’, ‘us’, have no separate forms for gender even in Hebrew, and are always the same for both masculine and feminine, but the gender is implied and a participle must agree.

Number

As in English there are two ‘numbers’ to a noun: singular and plural. The adjective, pronoun or verb has a different form for each gender in the plural. That means that there are four forms, masculine singular, feminine singular, masculine plural, feminine plural. The main exception is with pronouns and verbs in the first person, which have different forms for singular and plural, as well as for case, but not for gender.

Note how the second person pronoun, ‘you’, has eight forms in Hebrew! Four give number and case like the Old English (still used in Yorkshire): thou, thee, ye, you (plural object). But in Hebrew, each of these can be masculine or feminine, making eight. (Adding ewe and yew gives ten!) In the third person, ‘they’ and ‘them’ are also different for masculine and feminine.

Summary for pronouns

A pronoun, whether alone or a prefix or a suffix, must agree with the noun it refers to in person, number and gender where these apply. There are no relative pronouns (who, which etc.) and this is discussed in a later section.

The idiosyncrasy

The tendency in Hebrew is for the third person feminine plural, in verbs and in pronoun suffixes, to die out, and for the masculine form to be used instead. In some cases it is already dead in the Bible and, with isolated exceptions, is never used, only the masculine form is used for both (e.g.
Perhaps not

Moses, speaking to the people in Deuteronomy, switches often between the singular and plural for ‘you’. However, this may have been done deliberately for a special reason and is not necessarily an idiosyncrasy of the language.

The dual

In between the singular and the plural there is in Hebrew a ‘dual’ form used for referring to a pair. Fortunately (unlike in Greek) it does not occur in verbs, nor in adjectives, only in nouns, and is treated as a plural, verbs and adjectives referring to it taking the plural form.

One is reminded of words in English like scissors, shears and trousers. Nobody talks about a scissors or a shear or a trouser, but this is not the same. ‘Water’ and ‘sky’ (or ‘heaven’) have the dual form in Hebrew and are treated as plural nouns. The translations ‘waters’ and ‘heavens’ are idiotic.

Collectives

These are nouns that are singular in form but imply a plural. Examples in English are ‘people’ (plural of person, but not in the sense of a nation), ‘cattle’, ‘fruit’, ‘staff’, ‘crew’. These are usually treated in English as plurals, but not always. In Hebrew they can be either, or mixed in a sentence. ‘The people is becoming impatient and are about to revolt’ is bad English but not bad in Classical Hebrew.

Sometimes a singular is used as a collective, an idiosyncracy met with in English in certain jargons (not exactly slang). In a wholesale fruit and vegetable market someone may say ‘the apple today is not very good’ meaning ‘the apples are not’. So in Hebrew Jacob told Esau (Gen. 32:6) ‘I have an ox, a donkey, a slave’ meaning cattle, donkeys and slaves. In such a case the same rules apply. This is used quite often in the Bible and it is not always obvious that a collective is meant. Adam and Eve did not hide ‘inside a tree of the garden’ בַּעֲרֵי הָגֵן (Gen. 3:8), but ‘within (i.e. among) the trees of the garden’.
NUMBERS

There are two very odd things about numbers in Hebrew.

The first is the numbers themselves. These are a sort of adjective and therefore have gender which must agree with the noun they qualify. But the form of the word is unusual. Numbers one and two have a masculine form for the masculine and the feminine form for the feminine. But numbers three to ten inclusive have the feminine form for the masculine and the masculine form for the feminine. Nobody knows why.

Higher numbers are either of masculine-plural form (used for both genders) or compound. But note that ‘hundred’, ‘thousand’ and ‘myriad’ (ten thousand) are nouns; ‘hundred’ and ‘myriad’ are feminine in form and usage, e.g. ‘five hundred’ in Hebrew is five (feminine) hundreds (plural), while ‘thousand’ is masculine.

The second idiosyncrasy is this. When a noun is qualified by a number, ‘one’ is of course singular, two to ten are plural, but over ten the singular is always used! ‘Ten horses’ but ‘eleven horse’. Again nobody knows why.
AGE

We start counting age from nought. The age we give refers to the number of complete years, so that ‘age one’ has completed a year and is in the second year. In Classical Hebrew, age starts at one, and the number of years given includes a part year. Age one means within the first year, and age three corresponds to our age two, i.e. within the third year. This applies to both people and animals. However, we will see in a later chapter how, with ‘from’ and ‘to’, certain things cancel out.
PREPOSITIONS

In Hebrew, three of the prepositions are prefixes (ב, ג) and a fourth (מ) is sometimes a prefix. Most of the others are very short words of two or three letters. There is never an exact correspondence of usage of prepositions between any two different languages; for instance in English you talk to someone or meet someone, while in American, you talk or meet with them. So in Hebrew ‘they camped by the sea’ is expressed by a word that usually means ‘on’. But that is not a quirk.

Sometimes a preposition can have different meanings, and the text may be ambiguous. For instance, does ידייתון על棵ב mean ‘on the liver’ or ‘next to the liver’ or ‘together with the liver’? Grammatically it can mean any of these, and the decision is based on the context or on oral tradition, though at times there is no decision and there are simply different opinions. This problem rarely occurs in English.

When a preposition is followed by a pronoun, the latter is stuck onto the end just as it is when stuck onto the end of a noun. The quirk is that the preposition often acts like, and is declined like, a plural noun, for instance lever, אלהים, אתני, דוותני.
HAND AND FOOT

In English there is an arm, and the hand is the extension joined on to it at the end. In Hebrew there is a word רַגֶּשׁ which means arm-and-hand together (as in Greek and possibly Latin). Though usually by mistake translated always as hand, it is in most cases best translated as arm. For instance, tefilin are tied onto the arm, not the hand, and the expression רַגֶּשׁ יָמַח ‘strong arm’ implies power, whereas ‘strong hand’ would imply repression, holding down, not what is meant.

Likewise, the Hebrew רַלָּה means leg-and-foot together, usually mistranslated as foot, but in most cases leg is more accurate.

The extensions of arm and leg, namely hand and foot, are expressed by יָדָה, so that יָדָה נָהְרָא is the hand and נָהְרָא נָהְרָא is the foot. Where the context makes it clear which of the two latter is meant, נָהְרָא or the dual מֹצַי נָהְרָא or the plural מֹצַי נָהְרָא is often used alone. [The translations ‘palm of the hand’ and ‘sole of the foot’ are completely wrong, and these expressions are not used as they are not needed in the Bible.] יָדָה is a fist for holding something, as against גַּרְגָּרֵה, a fist for punching. Priests going on duty were told to wash יָדָהוֹנְדָא רַגְוָלִימָא, not just their hands and feet but their arms and legs as well.

There is no Hebrew word for ‘arm’ without hand, or ‘leg’ without foot. The term יָרָד means the fore-arm, (between elbow and wrist), or the lower part of an animal’s foreleg. יָדָה is the shank or lower part of the leg (between knee and ankle) or of an animal’s hindleg. יָדָה is the thigh or upper part of the leg, and hence יָדָה נָהְרָא is the hip.

The above applies to Modern Hebrew as well, but not to Talmudic Hebrew (influenced by Aramaic), so from the latter we say יָדָה for washing the hands, but normally יָד אָמָא means ‘arm’ (with hand included).
ABSTRACT NOUNS

There are some abstract nouns in Classical Hebrew, but generally they were disliked. Abstract nouns mostly arise from a verb, and Hebrew preferred to use a part of the verb, the ‘verbal noun’ or ‘gerund’ which we will meet.

An abstract noun widely used is נִזְמִית meaning ‘work’ or ‘service’ (but NOT מַיָּמִית which, contrary to popular belief, is concrete). Words dealing with a concept or action based on a verb are generally replaced by a verb, e.g. ‘destroying’ פָּשַׁע instead of ‘destruction’. ‘Love’ and ‘fear’ are really just forms of the gerund meaning ‘loving’ (or ‘to love’), ‘fearing’. There is no word for ‘theft’ or ‘loss’ in Classical Hebrew – the use of יָנֵב to mean ‘theft’ is embedded through Yiddish, is perhaps Talmudic, but is certainly not Biblical – see the later chapter on the gerund.

However words describing the result of an action do exist, e.g. יָדָר a memory or a remembrance or memorial.

Abstract nouns describing a state or condition are found such as עָנוּיָה blindness, עָנָב hunger, עָשָׁב thirst (with alternatives אַשָּׁב and אֶשָּׁב); but, and here is the quirk, sometimes they are expressed as a plural, as עַנְוֵי יָנוֹר old-age, or עַנְוֵי לֹא יָנוֹר youth – perhaps implying ‘days’ or ‘years’, a period? Still, עַנְוֵי עִבְרָה is also found.

The ones noticed as missing and never used are forms corresponding to the Modern Hebrew form יִשְׁנֵה or the English ‘-tion’ (rarely ‘-sion’), where a gerund is used.
THE VAV PREFIX

[This really belongs later under ‘syntax’, but must be inserted here earlier as it affects the understanding of the verb.]

The ancient Greeks liked to start a sentence with a link word or connector (‘conjunction’) – or at least put it as the second word, with another starting the second half of the sentence. Classical Hebrew is even more obsessed with the idea, and the connector is in the form of the letter  וה which may appear as ו, ו, or as וה, depending on what it is attached to. Sadly it is always or nearly always translated as ‘and’, which is ridiculous as it can have any of about twenty different meanings.

It not only links words, e.g. nouns in a list of two or more:
– it is used to link a verse (or clause) to the previous one when we would do likewise;
– it is used to do that when we consider it unnecessary;
– it is used to do it when we consider it undesirable;
– it is used even when there is nothing previous to link it to (e.g. the start of the Books of Ruth, Jonah, Ezekiel, Esther!)

[The additional special effect on a finite verb is discussed in a later chapter.]

Here is a list of examples, probably incomplete, of twenty different meanings. In English one would often prefer to leave it out – apart from cases where one should or even must leave it out.

1. ................................................ (Ex. 35:13) the table and its poles (linking nouns)
2. ................................................ (Num. 9:14) for you, both for the resident and for ...
3. ................................................ (Ex. 25:12) four rings ... namely* two rings ... and two (* I am indebted to Rabbi Yitzhak Frank who pointed this out)
4. ................................................ (Ex. 21:15) his father or his mother (classic example)
5. ................................................ (Num. 22:23) standing ... with his sword drawn
6. (Num. 16:6-7) take firepans ... and put fire ...
   (linking clauses and/or verses)

7. (Deut. 2:12) Likewise in Seir .......
   (comparison)

8. (Lev. 19:3) each is to respect his mother ... but observe my sabbaths.
   (contrast — in a case of conflict, the second clause, introduced by ‘but’, will override the first.
   This is not ‘derash’ but obvious if the verse is translated properly.)

9. (Ex. 2:23) During that long period the king .... died
   (ignore both vavs – ignore vayyehi altogether)

10. (Ex. 1:1) Now these are ....
     (conjunction, not adverb)

11. (Gen. 39:1) Meanwhile Joseph had been taken to Egypt

12. (Num. 5:2) that they should send ... out of the camp

13. (Ex. 28:35) so that its sound will be heard

14. (Ex. 18:22) (?and they will judge?) who will judge

15. (Deut. 9:4) whereas [it is] on account of the wickedness

16. (Gen. 13:12) while Lot lived in the towns of the Basin

17. (Gen. 18:1) ... Mamre, he sitting at the entrance ...
     (Participle construction, we would say ‘when (or while) he was sitting’)

18. (Num. 15:39) when you see it (then) you will remember ...

19. (Lev. 14:8) then the ... is to wash his clothes
     (‘then’ in the sense of subsequently, next in time)

20. (Deut. 11:13-14) then I will provide the rain ... on time
     (‘then’ in the sense of consequently, usually after ‘if’ – the ‘apodosis’ of a conditional sentence)
Conditional sentences. A sub-condition (a condition within a condition) is
normally represented as a second condition using γ ‘and’ (e.g. in Deut. chapters 20,
21, 22). It is sometimes hard to distinguish ‘then’ following a condition from a
simple ‘and’: in Gen. 28:20-22 (Jacob’s vow), every ναν is ‘and’ except one which
is ‘then’ – which one? Opinions differ.

Whenever you meet a ναν be careful!
VERBS

THE CAUSATIVE

A characteristic of the verb which is not really a quirk but something very useful and sensible, is worth mentioning.

In English, in a few cases, a verb has a causative form, created by changing a vowel. The examples will make the idea clear.

To rise ..... causative raise.
To fall ..... causative fell.
To sit ..... causative seat.
To lie (to rest, not ‘tell a falsehood’) ..... causative lay.

Sometimes there is no change:

To return (home) ..... causative to return (a book).
To move (yourself) ... causative to move (something).

Other times a different word is used:

To see ..... causative show.
To eat ..... causative feed.
To wear ..... causative clothe.

An intransitive verb is made transitive.

Hebrew changes the form of the verb in a different way to produce a causative, and is widely used, including all the above examples. It is often lacking in English and we cannot translate the Hebrew. For instance to cause someone to see is to show. But to cause someone to hear? Hebrew has it, English does not. Or to give someone (or an animal) to eat is to feed. But to give or cause them to drink? There Hebrew unusually has a different word, but English does not have it at all!
THE MISSING VERBS

Two basic essential verbs are totally missing in Hebrew and another one is partially missing. These are the verbs ‘have’, ‘become’, and in the present tense ‘be’.

The verb ‘be’ exists in the forms used for the past and future, in the gerund and the imperative. Where a present tense is needed it is just left out. For the impersonal ‘there is/are’ and ‘there is/are not’ the words ש and יי are sometimes used.

To ‘have’ is expressed sometimes by רל and ‘to have not’ by רל (and ‘to have not’ by רל), but is usually omitted. ‘I have a tree’ is רל and ‘David has a tree’ is קלודו צן. The result can be misleading, and sometimes only the punctuation can help. In Isaiah 6:2

means not ‘seraphs standing above him’ but ‘he having seraphs standing above’. Otherwise it would be punctuated מקליע or the two words might even be hyphenated. To indicate past or future the verb ‘be’ can be used – וו ‘and he had a tree’.

To ‘become’ is likewise expressed by the verb ‘be’ (there is no need for a present tense) followed by רל, and can be distinguished from ‘have’ either by the context, or by the use of the niph’al, i.e. instead of רל or נרה רל. Or the רל might just be omitted – Lot’s wife became a pillar of salt. Another possibility is the use of the verb מח, to turn or change, i.e. ‘to turn into’ instead of ‘to become’.

22
TENSE AND ASPECT

The entry on ‘Hebrew’ in the Penguin Encyclopaedia includes the following: ‘Verbs have aspects, not tenses.’

English verbs have tenses. Modern Hebrew verbs have only grammatical time. Classical Hebrew verbs have neither, but time and tense are indicated by a combination of aspect, syntax and word order. The use only of aspect, with no reference to time in the verb itself, existed in primitive Indo-European, and is found even today in Yucatec, language of the Mayas of America. Inserting the idea of time or relative time into a verb came later. What is aspect?

Basically and originally, aspect refers to completion: perfective indicates a completed action, and imperfective an action not completed. In Hebrew this use has not been strictly retained, but each verb has a form (or set of forms) for the perfective (such as מָשַׂלֲךָ, מָשַׂלְךָ) and for the imperfective (such as מָשַׁלְךָ). These are NOT past and future as taught, but aspects. They are used in different ways in conjunction with word order and context to convey the idea of tense, and this is quite complicated. A full explanation is given in my Fundamental Concepts of the Classical Hebrew Verb, but here is a brief summary:

Simple actions in the past use the perfective and in the future use the imperfective.

Repeated actions whether in past, present or future use the imperfective.

Continuous (current) actions in past, present or future use neither, but use the participle in a phrase (not a clause).

Actions relative in time to the context use the perfective if completed and the imperfective if not.

The whole has been made far more complicated by the use of the convervive vav, which converts perfective to imperfective and vice-versa, and NOT future to past or the reverse. This will be ‘explained’ as far as possible in a later chapter.

Failure to understand all about this, and obstinate adhesion to the concepts of past, present and future in a verb when they do not apply, has led to much misunderstanding of the biblical text.
Word Order

The normal word order in a simple English sentence is Subject-Verb-Object. In Classical Hebrew it is Verb-Subject-Object, but for stress or contrast the object may appear before the verb.

However, when the subject is placed before the verb it indicates a relative tense – in narrative usually a pluperfect, e.g. ‘Cain had brought’, וַיְבִא קָנָי ‘And Cain brought’. (See Rashi Gen. 4:1 or 21:1). (There are a few exceptions when this merely indicates a contrast.)

This is hardly a quirk, unlike Latin or German where a sentence may be two pages long with the verb at the end!
THE OPTATIVE

A form of the verb often confused with the imperfective (misnamed future) is the optative. Sometimes it is identical in form, especially if the imperfective has a suffix added to the root. Other times it is either shortened, or (in the first person only) even lengthened. It is extremely important in understanding Biblical Hebrew, yet is is hardly ever, if at all, taught properly. Grammarians have either not recognised it, or unnecessarily split it into different things with fancy names. Here are some examples:


There are two usages:

First, the true optative indicates a desire, intention, wish, hope, instruction, command or similar – something in the future that is not exactly a statement of fact. Here its use is compulsory.

Second, as a consecutive, following an instruction or statement that follows on naturally from another. In ‘go to the shop and buy some bread’ buying is a consequence of going, whereas in ‘eat your dinner and write the letter’ writing is not a consequence of eating. For this usage, the optative is optional, that is to say it is not always used.

The so-called imperative, for a command or request, is not (as usually taught) a different form of the verb, but simply the optative when used in the second person positive (i.e. not in the negative) with the first letter, the ה, dropped off. (In the nif’al, hif’al, or hitpa’el, where an original initial ה has been dropped off in the imperfective and optative, it is retained in the imperative, e.g. הָכָתְב from הָכַתְב which is originally הָכַתְב.)
PLEASE!

For a *simple* command/order/instruction the optative is used, except for a second-person positive order which uses the imperative. A *strong* command uses the imperfective, sometimes reinforced by an infinitive: ‘Open up your hand’ (i.e. to the poor) would be פֹּתֵחַ אַתָּה הַרְכֶּךָ, but we find it expressed very strongly as פֹּתַח הַרְכֶּךָ אַתָּה. Rarely the imperfective is left out and the infinitive is used alone. ‘(Whatever happens, make quite sure that you) remember!’ is just זָכַר, short for זָכַר נַחֲרַר.

At the other end, a polite request is expressed by using the word אֲנַהַן (‘please’) placed immediately after the verb; if a negative it is placed immediately after the word לא (‘not’) *before* the verb: ‘לָל אִלֵּיהָ הַחִירָה’ ‘Let there not be a quarrel’ (Gen. 13:8).

A frequent alternative, similar to the English idiomatic quirk ‘yourself’ (‘get yourself something to eat’) is to add לך (or its variant) immediately after the verb, sometimes hyphenated to it e.g. אֶכְשֶׁה לך מַבּחֵל ‘make yourself an ark of’. [‘Variant’ means that this is second person masculine singular, to be changed according to person, number and gender, e.g. כל מחול לך אַנַי in Ex. 12:21.]

A less frequent alternative (in the second person) with a slightly different connotation is like the English ‘go and’, e.g. ‘go and eat’. Hebrew puts the word ואת (lit. ‘get up’) or its variant *before* the verb, e.g. ואת וֹאֵשִׁה ‘go and do it!’ (1Chron. 22:16). Mostly this is used before a verb involving motion (לֵךַ, לָךְ, לָךְ, etc.).
THE CONVERSIVE VAV

This is the big bugbear of Classical Hebrew, the quirk *par excellence*, for which there is neither logic nor explanation. It is the worst idiosyncracy found there and makes the language difficult to learn. The concept cannot be understood, the quirk must be simply accepted, but its usage is straightforward.

In short, a vav prefix changes the aspect of a verb. It changes a perfective verb to imperfective and an imperfective verb to perfective. It does NOT, as taught, change a past to future or a future to past, as there is no past or future verb to change!

Now to clarify another false teaching. They say that there are two types of vav prefix, the vav ‘conjunctive’ or joining, the one we discussed in a previous chapter, and the vav ‘conversive’ dealt with here. Not so! The vav prefix is ALWAYS conjunctive, but when attached to a verb it may ALSO be conversive. That’s all!

Three points are worth noting:
(1) A vav prefix applied to a perfective is always conversive. [There are a few exceptions only in the later biblical books.]
(2) A vav prefix applied to an imperfective is always conversive, uses a different vowel, and may be followed by a dagesh. It *may* also shorten or lengthen the word or at least a vowel in the word.
(3) The vav prefix does not in any way affect an optative.

(2) and 3 help to identify an optative, e.g. while וְהִכָּבֹת must be an imperfective with converter, וְהָכְבַּת can only be an optative.

In narrative or forecasts (prophecy etc.) the verb is usually the first word in the sentence or clause and requires a connector, so the aspect is changed and converted (וְהָאַבְרָא). Less often it is not the first word, and then the aspect is not changed (וְאֵלְקַר).
INFINITIVE AND GERUND

You may need to read this section a few times before you really understand it, but the teachers have so confused the issue that there is no easy way of sorting it all out. What is generally taught is completely wrong, with a misuse of grammatical terms and an incorrect understanding of Classical Hebrew. Unfortunately the wrong teaching is so deeply ingrained, and certain things in English are also confusing, that it is very difficult to clear the mind of misconceptions and to start afresh and correctly.

English has an infinitive (to eat) and a gerund (eating). The gerund is a verbal noun, as in ‘I like eating’ (cf. ‘I like cake’) not to be confused with the participle ‘I am eating’ which is a verbal adjective and which does not concern us in this section. Infinitive and gerund have the same meaning, but usage demands sometimes one, sometimes the other, sometimes either. For instance ‘I like eating’ or ‘I like to eat’; however ‘I enjoy eating’ but never ‘I enjoy to eat’; yet ‘I want to eat’ but never ‘I want eating’. We see that the two — infinitive and gerund — mean the same thing, only usage demands that we do not always have the choice.

Now bear in mind the meaning of each term. A gerund is a verbal noun. Infinitive means something that is not inflected (unlike eat, eats, eaten) but always retains the same form (‘to eat’). Here in English we have a gerund, and the infinitive is also used as a gerund, and includes the preposition ‘to’.

Not so in Hebrew where the infinitive is invariable and does not have a meaning, it is the name of the verb, and it is used in certain ways as will be explained, but itself has no meaning. It cannot change its form or its vowels, nor take a prefix or suffix. The grammarians call it the ‘infinitive absolute’ but we will see what is wrong with this. It does NOT correspond to the English infinitive in its use, only in giving the verb a name.

The gerund is the verbal noun and it corresponds to the English gerund and to the English infinitive. It can take prefixes and suffixes (including -ב which is equivalent to the English ‘to’) so cannot be called ‘infinitive’, yet because it corresponds in use to the English (and incidentally the Latin and German) infinitive, the grammarians have stupidly called this the ‘infinitive construct’. This is doubly stupid because as a noun it can itself
be in either the absolute or the construct state, giving us an ‘infinitive construct absolute’ and an ‘infinitive construct construct’. How stupid can you get?

As you learn the language you will learn the various usages of the gerund, not only the one mentioned.

The Hebrew infinitive has two uses:
(i) before a finite verb to emphasise, (or rarely before an imperative for emphasis and the imperative is left out, so it looks like an imperative)
(ii) sometimes to replace a participle (not a finite verb as taught).

**Modern Hebrew Grammarians**

If you do not encounter Modern Hebrew grammarians, leave this section out, you will only get more confused. They have managed to make an even worse muddle of the whole thing, in one of two systems, ‘each worse than the other’.

System 1. They call the infinitive *makor* which means ‘source’ or ‘origin’ – no real harm in that. But then they call the gerund *makor natuy* which means ‘inflected source’, whereas the source by definition is infinitive and inherently cannot be inflected! *The two have no connection* and pupils are misled at the start.

System 2. They call the infinitive *makor*, and the gerund they call *shem hapo’al*, meaning the noun of the verb, i.e. the verbal noun, which is correct. Unfortunately, *shem*, the word used for ‘noun’, also means ‘name’ so this could mean ‘the name of the verb’ which is wrong. A better title would be *shem-etsem hapo’al* which can only mean noun, not name. It is the infinitive that is traditionally chosen as the name of the verb, because it is the only form that always shows the root, the entire root, and nothing but the root. That cannot be said of the gerund, but they use the gerund today with the prefix -ִּּ by analogy with English, to name the verb, a most unsuitable choice!

All in all a mess, which it should not be if understood correctly. The rule is that *the Hebrew infinitive does not correspond to the English one but has special meanings. Corresponding to the English infinitive Hebrew uses the gerund.*
The Gender of the Gerund

The gerund generally has two forms, a masculine form and a feminine form, e.g. רבדכז ויען (Koresh). לכת. There is no difference in meaning, and in fact the gerund has no gender at all, but where necessary is treated as a masculine, irrespective of its form, e.g. סוד להתרות ליה (not סוד להתרות ליה even after a feminine form). Which form is used mostly depends on the actual verb. Where the root remains full the masculine form is mostly preferred, where the root does not always appear in full the feminine form is mostly preferred, but there are far too many exceptions to justify any rule.

Replacing Abstract Nouns

A popular use of the gerund and to a lesser extent other parts of the verb is to replace abstract nouns, but with a different syntax, as already mentioned. ‘At the registration of’ is replaced by ‘at the registering of’; both are permitted in English, but the former English alternative is not available in Hebrew. There is no Hebrew word for ‘arson’, ‘theft’, ‘loss’, ‘overthrow’, ‘registration’, ‘creation’. The words בזק אלבג. בזק mean, respectively, ‘burnt remains’, ‘stolen property’, ‘lost property’, ‘that which is overturned’, and similar words likewise.
ARCHAIC FORMS

In English we often find archaic words and forms in poetry (e.g. ‘c’er’, ‘oft’, ‘hath’, ‘O’), but occasionally we might find them in ordinary use or even narrative, especially in quotations, and even (sadly) in modern translations of the Bible. For instance ‘lo and behold’ (in conjuring), ‘fare thee well’, ‘thou shalt not’, ‘O’, ‘methinks’, ‘dwelt’. These are confusing to a foreigner learning the language.

Since Classical Hebrew is an ancient language anyway, we cannot usually tell which words were in regular use at the time of writing (unless they occur often) and which were even then archaic, nor does it matter to us; but we occasionally find archaic forms, differing from the forms normally used in the Bible that we are taught (but often closer to Aramaic or even Arabic), mainly of verbs. Teachers do not recognise them as genuine archaic forms and call them ‘irregulars’, which they are not.

Examples in English: hast, dwelleth.

Examples in Hebrew: יִשָּׁמֵהוּ, לֹא שֶפּוּךְו, נִקְה וּלְצַואְךָו, אָמַר וְקִנֵּךְ, וֹרֵךְ.

Often such forms were not recognisable to later generations, so they were read differently (ketiv ukert) to sound more up-to-date.

The suffix for ‘his’ used to be רָּה (e.g. שְּדֵר ‘his land’), but in most cases the ר dropped out so ‘his name’ became שְּמַ, but sometimes the ש dropped out instead, so we have ‘his tent’ or ‘his home’ as נָּהֲלָ. Other ancient forms exist.
ADVERBS

ADVERBS

Someone once described adverbs as the grammarian’s dustbin. A word that does not fit into any other group is called an adverb. There is some truth in this.

The so-called adverbs may be divided into groups:
Group 1. A true adverb modifies a verb (‘he acted badly’) or an adjective (‘badly acted’, ‘hardly audible’) or even another adverb ‘extremely slowly’). Grammarians call most of these ‘adverbs of manner’. In English they are usually formed by adding ‘-ly’ at the end of an adjective; ‘well’ and ‘very’ are examples of those that are not.
Group 2. Because they have no other name there are so-called ‘adverbs of time and place’. (There is no need to distinguish between time and place, the concept is the same.)
Group 3. Miscellaneous oddments that do not belong anywhere else are called adverbs.

Place and time

In Classical Hebrew there are plenty of words in group 2 – now, why, there, tomorrow, how, then, often – as well as words like outside, above, when used as standalones and not as prepositions. There are also some that English has discarded (hence, thither) and some we never had (the-day-before-yesterday, the-day-after-tomorrow). Often affixes (prefixes and suffixes) are included. So far, no quirk, no problem.

However, to indicate a relative location there is something confusing which you may well call a quirk. The prefix יָוְהַ , יָוְהי is used but does NOT have its usual meaning of ‘from’. It corresponds in English to the word ‘to’ which also does not in such a case always have its usual meaning! And if needed it is followed by יִפְרְבַד , יִפְרְבְּד which coresponds to the English ‘of’.

Examples will explain:

יִפְרְבַד מִנְפָּד would mean to the north (af Dan);
יִפְרְבַד מְנָפְתִּי means ‘inside’ or ‘within’.
יִפְרְבַד מְנָפְתִּי ‘Lot travelled [to a place] to the east’.

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To indicate direction or movement, if the prefix יָ
is used, it has its usual mean of ‘from’: לשון
‘he travelled from there’.

Corresponding to the English ‘to’ in its usual sense (to a place), or the
suffix ‘-wards’, Hebrew can use a preposition, but can as an alternative use
the suffix אנוֹ נָ ‘northwards’, קְבֶ ‘thither’
(absent in modern English). Sometimes it may be omitted, as in
‘he went down to Egypt.’

[Incidentally this is the only affix allowed to a construct noun that is
followed by an absolute one, e.g. יָ ‘to the Land of Canaan’.

So far so good. A bit confusing at first but not too difficult.

The true adverb

Hebrew is very weak in true adverbs. There is no adjustment to an
adjective like the English -ly. There are some special words, like very,
regularly or continually, and so on. For well and badly the adjectives ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are used. Otherwise they
have to find a way round it, a quirk is needed.

One method is to add the prefix יָ to a noun. Hastily is given as ‘with
haste’ נָ, cunningly as ‘with cunning’ כָ

Sometimes there is a verb that includes the adverb: let us act
‘let us act cleverly’, דָ ‘to act treacherously’
(there English has a verb, ‘to betray’).

Yet another way, which is puzzling at first, is to add a verb: מָ קָ
‘acting wondrously’, קְרְ ‘she prayed many-times’.

In such cases a literal translation should not be used. Instead put it into
correct English with an (English) adverb.
SYNTAX and STYLE

VERSES AND SENTENCES

There is a natural tendency to associate verses with sentences. While this is often more or less true, there are times when a sentence is split between two or three verses, while a verse may be split, containing one-and-a-half or two sentences.

Consider the first three verses of the Bible. The first verse consists of a subordinate clause (‘when God began to create ...’), followed by the second verse in parentheses (‘for [what became] the earth had been emptiness ...’), and then the first half of the third verse which contains the main clause (‘God said .....’). The second half of the third verse is really a new sentence (‘Then there was light’).

Once when Moses gave a long list of instructions over several verses (Ex.12:21 ff.) he finished in the middle of a verse (vs.27). ‘Then the people bowed down .... ’ in the second half of the verse is clearly a new sentence.

There are many others as such, and we may say that Classical Hebrew does not divide text into sentences. We may divide the text into sentences, but this does not necessarily coincide with the division into verses.
PUNCTUATION AND PARENTHESES

Punctuation

Originally biblical texts consisted merely of continuous rows of consonant letters with word separation and paragraph breaks. Most people could not read anyway, but the professional reader, helped by tradition, knew how to read them.

The Masoretes, who introduced the vowel signs which enabled the words to be read, at the same time marked the verse divisions clearly and introduced a system of punctuation which enabled the sentences, or rather verses, to be read. The punctuation system, known as te’amim, was by placing a mark on each word giving its relative position in the context, and also indicating the intonation. (In public reading the intonation was built up to a chant.)

In English we punctuate in speech by intonation, which varies between different languages and even different localities using the same language. The intonation among Welshmen is much more pronounced than among Englishmen, where even the North and South differ. This is indicated in writing by occasional marks between words. In many ways, the Hebrew system is superior, it is our lack of something similar that is a quirk.

However, we do have an exclamation mark, a question mark, quotation marks, the dash, brackets and parentheses that Hebrew lacks, and which at times we feel are needed in order to explain or clarify something. (The apostrophe is not a punctuation mark, and not missed in Hebrew.) Sometimes putting one word in italics, suggesting intonation, helps to adjust the relative importance of words in a group and adjust the meaning. (Compare ‘that is what he said’ with ‘that is what he said’. ) English and Hebrew share only the hyphen, though the usage is not always quite the same.

Parentheses

The Hebrew system helps to collect words into groups (as our system does less efficiently) but lacking brackets it does not always show the relative position of importance of respective groups. Phrases that appear in
parentheses are not easily noticed, leading to a misunderstanding of the text.

Here are three examples of parentheses: the first is obvious, the second is obvious only from the general context of the biblical story, and the third is generally overlooked allowing the verse to descend to stupidity!

Deut.3:19  Your wives, children and livestock (I know you have a lot of livestock) will settle ...

Gen.15:13  Your offspring will be a resident in a country that is not theirs (and they will serve them, and they will torment them) for four hundred years.

Num.21:13  They camped beyond Arnon ... (because Arnon is Moabite territory) between the Moabites and the Amorites.

In each case the last part ignores the parentheses and goes back to the first. It refers in the second case not to the servitude, but to their being foreigners, and in the third case not to Arnon but to where they camped.
PAUSAL FORMS

A quirk in of Classical Hebrew is the ‘pausal form’.

With rare exceptions, the punctuation divides each verse primarily into two half-verses. (The relevance of this will appear in the next section.) In our (‘Tiberian’) punctuation, the tendency is for the first half of the verse to be longer than the second half, but the tendency in the ‘Babylonian’ system (found in old manuscripts) was the reverse. [I am indebted for this information to Dr. Ronit Shoshany, an expert in ‘Babylonian’ Hebrew manuscripts.]

Very often when a word appears as the last word in a verse or half-verse, a vowel is lengthened or changed so that the word is ‘dragged out’.

With verbs this sometimes brings back the original form which otherwise is shortened. It indicates a style of speech that is no longer recognised in current languages.
RELATIVE CLAUSES

This is a little difficult to grasp, but once you have grasped it you will see that it is extremely simple. The basic concept and usage are more logical and sensible than English, but the quirks are just like in English, only not always recognised.

Consider a relative pronoun ‘who’ as being a compound of a conjunction ‘that’ and an ordinary pronoun (‘that-he’ or ‘that-she’), ‘which’ is ‘that-it’, ‘whom’ is ‘that-him’ or ‘that-her’. In fact we have it in English, and drop out the pronoun, e.g. instead of ‘the man who said’ we have ‘the man that he said’ then drop out the ‘he’ and say ‘the man that said’. The word ‘that’ has replaced ‘who’ and is thought of as a relative pronoun, but it is not really, it is merely a conjunction.

Hebrew has exactly the same. The conjunction (‘that’) is רֹאֶה and is followed (not necessarily immediately) by a pronoun. The quirks are the same as in English, namely sometimes either the conjunction or the pronoun is left out. Sometimes, not always.

Consider: (i) The house where Jack built (= that Jack built it).
(ii) The house that Jack built. (Pronoun omitted).
(iii) The house Jack built. (Conjunction also omitted).

‘The country which he has given’ – נָאֲרֵי אֶשְׁר נָתַנְּוּ becomes just ‘the country that he has given’ – נָאֲרֵי אֶשְׁר נָתַנְּוּ.

‘The way in which they should go’ – מָשָא אֶשְׁר בְּלִי נָךְ – becomes merely מָשָא ‘the way they should go [along]’.

Putting in the missing pronoun in the wrong place alters the meaning – אֶשְׁר נָתַנְּוּ אָלֶֽהּ לְכָלְּהֹ לַשְׁמַעְיָה NOT בְּכָלְּהֹ. Gen. 2:3
‘to make which God had created’ (NOT ‘which God created to make’), see Nachmanides’s commentary for a full explanation.

The Participle Phrase

However, Hebrew commonly uses an alternative to the relative clause, a relative phrase – a participle phrase. ‘The men who seek your life’ becomes ‘the men the [ones] seeking your life’ (Ex.4:19). This is rarely used in
English – ‘the men seeking your life’ is not quite the same. It implies a present time, while in the case quoted they were dead! Using the participle as an adjective that way sounds clumsy to us, but is not a quirk. It is extremely useful when there is a subordinate clause within the relative clause, so that you do not have a sub-subordinate clause, only a subordinate clause within a phrase, so ‘The man who knocked down the house which Jack built’ would come out as ‘The man the [one] knocking-down the house that Jack built.’ (Not ‘the knocker down of’ which is something different.) This takes getting used to.
TEMPORAL CLAUSES

These can be expressed in Hebrew as in English by being introduced with the word ‘when’ or ‘as’. But far more often, instead of a clause there is a phrase – a gerund phrase, where the gerund is used with a prefix meaning ‘at’ or ‘with’ or ‘on’.

Examples:
‘As I leave the town’ is expressed as ‘on (lit. ‘with’) my leaving the town’ (כבראת את העיר Ex. 9:29);
‘When the night divides’ becomes ‘at the night’s dividing’ (at the division of the night, כ再造ת הלילה Ex. 11:4);
‘When Israel left’ becomes ‘with Israel’s leaving’ (כבראת ישראל Ps. 114:1).

This is not really a quirk but a useful facility.
FROM A TO B

When we say ‘from A to B’ we generally include A, but not necessarily B unless specified, e.g. ‘From Monday to Thursday inclusive’. Without the word ‘inclusive’ Thursday might not be included, but Monday certainly is. [Americans say ‘Monday through Thursday’ which is confusing as it seems to include Friday!]

In Hebrew it is the reverse, ‘from A to B’ will normally not include A but will include B. The fast of Kippur is ‘from the ninth day to the tenth’ which includes the tenth but not the ninth.

So with ages, a text saying ‘from twenty to sixty’ would apparently (on this basis) start with 21 and include 60.

But remember what we said earlier about ages starting with one instead of nought. So we must deduct a year to get the age as we would put it, and this would take us back to starting with 20 and excluding 60, i.e. ages 20 to 59 inclusive. We may translate the Hebrew ‘from twenty to sixty’ as the same in English by making two mistakes that cancel one another out! ‘From ... to’ and age work in opposite directions.

This explains the references to ‘from a month old’ which starts at a month old (our reckoning) and not from birth (Hebrew ‘a month old’ during the first month).

This does not apply to places – ‘from Dan to Beersheba’ includes both. Even גב does not mean just ‘upto’ but includes.
POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE

Hebrew lacks words for the responses ‘yes’ and ‘no’. The word for ‘not’ לא serves for the negative response, ‘no’. If you are called and wish to reply ‘yes’ you have to say הנה ‘here I am’ or ‘I am here’.

Otherwise you have to repeat a word from the question. ‘Do you know Laban?’ Answer ‘We know!’ ‘Are you my son Esau?’ Answer ‘I (am)’. ‘Have you done it?’ Answer ‘I have done’ (you need not add ‘it’).

Double negative

It is instilled into us by grammarians that we should never use a double negative. This is far from true.

There is a double negative which is perfectly legitimate. The two negatives cancel out, but you want them to:

‘Why are you sitting there doing nothing?’ ‘I am not doing nothing, I am busy with ...’

The illegitimate use is when you do not want them to cancel, you want a negative and wish to stress it: ‘What are you doing?’ ‘I’m not doing nothing’ meaning ‘I am not doing anything’ is illogical and wrong, and that is what should be avoided.

However this illogical double negative is used legitimately in French and Modern Hebrew. ‘Je ne sais rien!’ says לא יודע כלום literally ‘I don’t know nothing’ actually means ‘I don’t know anything’. You cannot express in French or Modern Hebrew the genuine ‘I am not doing nothing’ (meaning I am busy)!

Here is a non-quirk. Classical Hebrew does not use the double negative either way. לא קיים קמא ‘he did not do anything’, ‘he did nothing’; לא קמא alone means ‘anything’ (or ‘something’), here negated by לא.

Positive, negative and neutral

In cases where numbers can be positive or negative, you must also have nought in the middle. Likewise when using a verb, you can reverse the idea (often using the prefix -un, to do, to undo) but use of a negation often
leaves you in the neutral (to do, not to do). The verb is negated, and nothing is done.

Consider ‘I demand’, ‘I do not demand’. The second is neutral, the verb is cancelled. The opinion on what might have been demanded is open.

Against this, ‘I want’, ‘I do not want’ – the second is like ‘I want ...not’. The opinion on what might have been wanted is clear, it is contrary to my wish, I do want that it should not be. The ‘not’ leaves the verb alone, fails to cancel it, but negates the idea – a quirk!

Which verbs use which depends on the language. German ‘ich muß’ means ‘I must’ or ‘I have to’, but ‘ich muß nicht’ means ‘I do not have to’, ‘I need not’, it does not mean ‘I must not’. Here ‘nicht’ (= not) in German negates the verb, but ‘not’ in English leaves the verb alone and only negates the idea, what it is that I ‘must’.

We find this quirk in Hebrew: יֶתחֶרֶנֶו sometimes means ‘I did not command’, neutral (Deut. 18:20 and Jeremiah 7:22, 14:14, 23:32). No command was given.

But elsewhere it does not mean ‘I did not command’; it means ‘I commanded not [to do]’ (Deut. 17:3, and Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5 and 32:35) in connection with idol worship; also נַחַל (Lev. 10:1) concerning fire for incense. The idea is negated, the verb is not negated. A command was given, namely not to do something.

Those not appreciating the quirk have been misled or at least puzzled by this for generations.
ROUNDING AND APPROXIMATION

Strictly this is a matter of usage rather than syntax.

Large numbers are often rounded off, and the reader often fails to appreciate the fact, expecting the text to be accurate when it is not intended to be. Most of the various census results in the Book of Numbers are clearly rounded off to the nearest hundred. (They cannot all be exact.)

Gideon had seventy sons; one of them murdered all his brothers – seventy we are told – except one who escaped. The seventy is clearly a round number. So too the number seventy of Jacob’s family who went down to Egypt, explaining why the sub-totals do not add up precisely.

‘Not one remained’ after a plague or battle can at times be literal, as when David wiped out a group of Amalekites and left no-one to report who did it, but in general need not mean that no single one escaped. An epidemic killed all the Egyptian livestock, yet enough remained to suffer from further plagues and to drive hundreds of chariots. Approximations and exaggerations are occasionally used, as in any other language.
ACCURACY

Quotation

We are fussy about quotations, insisting that they must be absolutely accurate. Not so in Bible times. The biblical verse in Deut.24:16 is cited as an actual quotation in 2Kings 14:6 but with a slight difference; and differently again in 2Chron. 25:4. People even quoted themselves according to the intent and not the exact words – compare 2Kings 4:28 with 4:16. Aaron’s quoting to Moses the exact words used by the people (Ex. 32:23, cf. 32:1) was a unique exception!

Direct and Indirect Speech

We have today direct and indirect speech. Direct speech must be quoted verbatim, indirect speech gives the gist of what was said and is usually preceded with the conjunction ‘that’. The Hebrew word for ‘that’ in this context is י in but it is only used when there is just a small extraction from the original.

A sort of apology for giving the gist rather than the exact words is made by introducing the statement with the words ו ksi. This was frequently used by the neviim who received a very clear message from God and were left to express it in their own words.

[Some might argue the reverse, that it is an introduction to direct speech, to a verbatim quotation, but this is less likely.]

Otherwise there is no distinction between direct and indirect speech, and the essential is to get the gist right.

An extreme case is in the Ten Commandments, where Moses (Deut.5) even quotes the original (Ex. 20) with variations.

The Obsession

In Biblical Hebrew, provided that the meaning is clear and unambiguous, there is no obsession with precision as there is in the Talmud and in English today. That, together with an obsession for logic in grammar and especially syntax, came later under Greek and Roman (Latin) influence.
Logic Versus Common Sense

Consider נפשות את כל מצוותי (Lev. 4:2 v. Num. 15:40). ‘A person inadvertently does one of God’s commands that are not to be done’ versus ‘You are to do (obey) all my commands’. Obviously the first means ‘commands concerning things that are not to be done’, and this cannot be misunderstood.

Or perhaps try to sort out the logic in Deut. 11:19, recited daily in the shema:

לפדות ... את בני ה' לבב(shell), לביטח ... ונכתב

Are your children to say them when you go to bed? or are you to teach them when you go to bed? Logic demands one or the other, while common sense rejects both: you are to teach them the words, and you are to recite them when you go to bed.

Common sense was assumed against strict logic, and the language was used that way, which is not allowed in English. This may be regarded as a quirk – or is our obsession a quirk?

An English Analogy

The proverbial expression ‘the writing on the wall’ means a warning that the end is near, there need be no writing and no wall. It is based on a biblical story where there was a wall and writing. Likewise the expression ‘to cry “Wolf!”’ means to give a false warning (and thereby get known as a liar, leading people to later ignore a genuine warning) though there is neither crying nor wolf. It is based on a fable where a boy actually cried ‘Wolf!

Such expressions, meaningless to anyone unfamiliar with them and ignorant of their origin, are found in every language, and one should not be surprised to find them in the Bible. An example is Zipporah’s remark (Ex. 4:25) מִלֹּא צֵאָה, whatever that may mean.
POETRY

In poetry, as in all languages, archaic forms and words are used and rules of grammar are often broken. Other quirks in English poetry are the needs to rhyme and to scan; Biblical Hebrew poetry neither rhymes nor scans. Certain psalms and dirges use an alphabetical acrostic, but otherwise there are two special styles that are occasionally used: parallelism, and start-stop-restart.

Parallelism

A short statement is made, and followed by either:
(i) the same thing repeated in different words, or
(ii) something very similar conveying a similar idea, or
(iii) a contrast, more or less the opposite for a different situation.

For example:

שוד אללה שמטה קולו 1 נשי כל צאצאים אָנָה, (i)

[Repetition] Adah and Zillah, hear my voice.
Wives of Lemech, listen to what I say.

ספגה ה' לכל הנפלים 1 ווֹקַח כל הנמרים (ii)

[Similar] God supports all those who fall
and straightens up all who are bent over.

ם' לי כל יְגוֹרְיוֹ 1 לא יארא בְּשֲנַנָא (iii)

[Contrast] I have God to deal with (lit. ‘against’) my friends
and I will handle my enemies.

The two ‘parts’ may be half-verses (as above), or full verses. In public singing or chanting, a solo or group would recite the first statement, and another group would respond with the second.

[Footnote: the same style of parallelism is found in Yucatec, language of the primitive Mayans in Central America!]
Start-stop-restart

This is found mainly in the older poems – the Song of Moses at the Red Sea, the Song of Deborah, and certain psalms attributed by the Talmud to Moses, that is to say they are very early ones. It occurs in other psalms to a lesser extent.

It occurs when someone is addressed, in the Bible usually (but not always) God. A sentence is started, perhaps with an amount of description, but not completed (such as no object to a verb that needs one), then it is restarted with less description and continued in full. [Rashbam, Rashi’s grandson Samuel, quotes this as a style, opposing the midrashim who dissect it.]

In the following examples I have inserted (O), which is not used in modern English, merely to indicate that what follows it is the person or people addressed.

Note the positions and absences of commas.

Give (to) God, (O) nations — give (to) God honour (etc.)

Until when you arose, (O) Deborah — when you arose a mother in Israel.

How long will the wicked, (O) God — how long will the wicked rejoice?

Praise, (O) God’s servants — praise God’s name!

Your right hand, (O) God [who is] endowed with power — your right hand, (O) God, shatters the enemy.

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