

## Chapter Nine

### Construct Nouns

#### Vocabulary

אֶבֶן	stone (f)	מַלְכָּה	queen (f)
אֱמֶת	truth (f)	מִצְרַיִם	Egypt
אֵשׁ	fire (f)	נֶעֱר	lad
חַיָּה	living thing, animal (f)	עֵת	time (f)
חֵכְמָה	wisdom (f)	פֶּה	mouth (m)
חֶסֶד	goodness, kindness (m)	רֵגֶל	foot (f)
יַיִן	wine (m)	רָע	evil
כּוֹכֵב	star (m)	רָעָה	evil (f)
לֶחֶם	bread (m)	שֶׁמֶן	oil, fat (m)
מִדְבָּר	wilderness, desert (m)	תְּהוֹם	abyss, great deep (f)

#### Construct Relationship

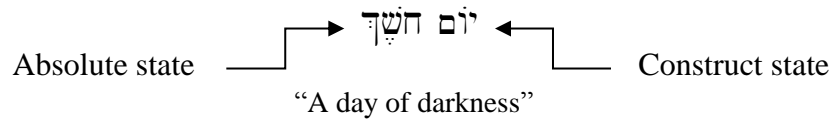
Drs Pratico and Van Pelt say, “There is no word for “of” in biblical Hebrew. Rather, Hebrew expresses the “of” (possessive) relationship between two nouns by what is called the construct chain. For those who have studied Greek, the construct chain is Hebrew’s rough equivalent of the genitive case.”<sup>1</sup>

Hebrew nouns can either be in the absolute or construct state. The singular absolute state is the dictionary form that is listed in the lexicon. When a noun is joined with other nouns it will sometimes experience shortening. The joining may either be by simple juxtaposition or by the use of a *maqfef*. The final noun that is joined must remain in the absolute state, while the noun that proceeds it must take the form of the construct state.

The construct relationship can be described as a chain jointing together two or more nouns in a sentence.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Pratico & Miles Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 97



## I. Rules for construct relationship

### A. Plural Construct Nouns

1. *Shorting of plural construct nouns.* The construct plural noun is shortened when it is in the construct state. The following rules apply.
  - a. *Masculine plural noun.* When a masculine plural noun is placed in the construct state, its ending is reduced from ם to ם, and long vowels are reduced to vocal *shevas*.

Plural absolute			Plural construct	
בָּנִים	sons	→	בְּנֵי	sons of

- b. *Masculine plural noun.* When a masculine plural noun ending with ם is placed in the construct state the ם ending is retained since the *holem-vav* is unchangeable long.

Plural absolute			Plural construct	
אָבוֹת	fathers (m)	→	אָבוֹת	fathers of

- c. *Feminine plural construct nouns.* When a feminine plural noun is placed in the construct state the ם ending is retained since the *holem-vav* is unchangeable long. However, other vowel changes will occur.

Plural absolute			Plural construct	
אֲרָצוֹת	lands (f)	→	אֲרָצוֹת	lands of

### A. Singular Construct Nouns

1. *Vowel reduction*. The rules governing singular construct nouns are complicated and you are referred to a lexicon for identification. However, a few rules are provided in order to help you quickly identify them.<sup>2</sup>

a. *Monosyllabic nouns*. Monosyllabic nouns with unchangeably long and short vowels have the same form in the singular construct as the singular absolute.

Singular absolute		Singular construct		Plural absolute		Plural construct	
אִישׁ	man	אִישׁ	man of	אֲנָשִׁים	men	אֲנָשֵׁי	men of
יּוֹם	day	יּוֹם	day of	יָמִים	days	יָמָיו	days of
קוֹל (f)	voice	קוֹל	voice of	קוֹלוֹת	voices	קוֹלוֹת	voices of
בַּת (f)	daughter	בַּת	daughter of	בָּנוֹת	daughters	בָּנוֹת	daughters of
הָר	mountain	הָר	mountain of	הָרִים	mountains	הָרָיו	mountains of

b. *Monosyllabic nouns with changeably long vowels*. Monosyllabic nouns with changeably long vowels will be shortened.

Singular absolute		Singular construct		Plural absolute		Plural construct	
בֶּן	son	בֶּן	son of	בָּנִים	sons	בָּנָיו	sons of
דָּם	blood	דָּם	blood of	דָּמִים	bloods	דָּמָיו	bloods of
שֵׁם	name	שֵׁם	name of	שֵׁמוֹת	names	שֵׁמוֹת	names of
יָד (f)	hand	יָד	hand of	יָדוֹת	hands	יָדוֹת	hands of
				יָדַיִם	hands (dual)	יָדָיו	hands of (dual)

c. *Monosyllabic nouns אָב “father” and אָח “brother.”* Monosyllabic nouns אָב “father” and אָח “brother” are irregular in the singular construct.

Singular absolute		Singular construct		Plural absolute		Plural construct	
אָב	father	אָבִי	father of	אָבוֹת	fathers	אָבוֹת	fathers of
אָח	brother	אָחִי	brothers	אָחִים	brothers	אָחִי	brothers of

d. *Bisyllabic nouns with both syllables closed*. Bisyllabic nouns with both syllables closed will shorten the long vowel in the second syllable<sup>3</sup>.

Singular absolute		Singular construct		Plural absolute		Plural construct	
מִסְפָּר	number	מִסְפָּר	number of	מִסְפָּרִים	numbers	מִסְפָּרָיו	numbers of
מִשְׁכָּן	tabernacle	מִשְׁכָּן	tabernacle of	מִשְׁכָּנוֹת	tabernacles	מִשְׁכָּנוֹת	tabernacles of
מִשְׁפָּט	judgment	מִשְׁפָּט	judgments	מִשְׁפָּטִים	judgments	מִשְׁפָּטָיו	judgments of

<sup>2</sup> The rules can become complex so it is recommended that you are aware of the various changes but not get overwhelmed with the details. This list is adapted from Page Kelley’s Biblical Hebrew Grammar.

<sup>3</sup> Long vowels cannot stand in closed, unaccented syllables.

- e. *Bisyllabic nouns with the first syllable open and the second closed.* Bisyllabic nouns with the first syllable open and the second closed will reduce the first open syllable's vowel to a sheva and shorten the second syllable's vowel.

Singular absolute		Singular construct		Plural absolute		Plural construct	
דָּבָר	word	דְּבַר	word of	דְּבָרִים	words	דְּבָרָיו	words of
כּוֹכֵב	star	כּוֹכֵב	star of	כּוֹכָבִים	stars	כּוֹכָבָיו	stars of
מְקוֹם	place	מְקוֹם	place of	מְקוֹמוֹת	places	מְקוֹמוֹתָיו	places of
נְבִיא	prophet	נְבִיא	prophet of	נְבִיאִים	prophets	נְבִיאָיו	prophets of

- f. *Feminine nouns.* Feminine nouns ending in הַ in the singular absolute change to הֵ in the singular construct.

Singular absolute		Singular construct		Plural absolute		Plural construct	
מַלְכָּה	queen	מַלְכַּת	queen of	מַלְכוֹת	queens	מַלְכוֹתָיו	queens of
מִצְוָה	command	מִצְוַת	command of	מִצְוֹת	commands	מִצְוֹתָיו	commands of
שָׁנָה	year	שָׁנַת	year of	שָׁנִים	years	שָׁנָיו	years of
תּוֹרָה	law	תּוֹרַת	law of	תּוֹרוֹת	laws	תּוֹרוֹתָיו	laws of

- g. *Segholates.* Segholate singular construct nouns have the same form as the singular absolute.

Singular absolute		Singular construct		Plural absolute		Plural construct	
אֶרֶץ	(f) land	אֶרֶץ	land of	אֶרְצוֹת	lands	אֶרְצוֹתָיו	lands of
דֶּרֶךְ	way	דֶּרֶךְ	way of	דֶּרָכִים	ways	דֶּרָכָיו	ways of
מֶלֶךְ	king	מֶלֶךְ	kings	מֶלְכִים	kings	מֶלְכָיו	kings of
נֶעַר	lad	נֶעַר	lad of	נְעָרִים	lads	נְעָרָיו	lads of
נֶפֶשׁ	(f) soul	נֶפֶשׁ	soul of	נַפְשׁוֹת	souls	נַפְשׁוֹתָיו	souls of
סֵפֶר	book	סֵפֶר	book of	סִפְרִים	books	סִפְרָיו	books of
עֶבֶד	servant	עֶבֶד	servant of	עֲבָדִים	servants	עֲבָדָיו	servants of

- h. *Nouns built with the diphthong וָ.* Nouns built with the diphthong וָ as in בַּיִת "house" are irregular.

Singular absolute		Singular construct		Plural absolute		Plural construct	
בַּיִת	house	בַּיִת	house of	בָּתַיִם	houses	בָּתַיִם	houses of
זַיִת	olive tree	זַיִת	olive tree of	זַיִתִּים	olive trees	זַיִתֵּי	olive trees of
עַיִן	eye	עַיִן	eye of	עַיִנִים	eyes (Du.)	עַיִנָיו	eyes of

1. *Definiteness.* The construct noun will never take the definite article. Definiteness of the construct chain is determined by the definiteness of the absolute noun. When the absolute noun is definite the translation is "the ... of the ..."

מֶלֶךְ אֶרֶץ "A king of a land"

מֶלֶךְ הָאָרֶץ “The king of the land”

- a. When a noun is in construct relationship, definiteness is also determined by the addition of a pronominal suffix added to the absolute noun.

בֵּית מַלְכֵי “The house of his father”

2. *Multiple construct nouns.* Multiple construct nouns can appear in a construct chain, but the chain will have only one absolute noun. In this case, each instance of the construct noun will be translated with “of” and definiteness is derived from the definiteness of the absolute noun.

Absolute state	Construct state
הַמֶּלֶךְ	עֶבֶד בֵּית
“the servant of the house of the king”	

3. *Construct chains with adjectives.* Construct nouns cannot be separated by other words. When an adjective is used to modify either the construct or the absolute noun it must follow the construct chain and the adjective must agree in gender, number and definiteness with the noun it modifies.

מֶלֶךְ הָאָרֶץ הַטוֹב	“the good king of the land”
מֶלֶךְ הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה	“the king of the good land”

Context must be used to determine the proper translation in construct chains where the adjective is the same in gender and number to both the construct and absolute nouns.

4. *Construct chains with demonstrative pronouns.* The demonstrative pronouns “this” and “that” can be used in a construct chain. When a demonstrative pronoun is used to modify either the construct or the absolute noun it must follow the construct chain.

דְּבָרֵי הַנְּבִיא הַזֶּה	“the words of <i>this</i> prophet”
דְּבָרֵי הַנְּבִיא הַטּוֹב הַזֶּה	“the words of <i>this</i> good prophet”
דְּבַר הַנְּבִיא הַזֶּה	“the word of <i>this</i> prophet” or “ <i>this</i> word of the prophet”

5. *Construct nouns with inseparable preposition.* While the definite article cannot attach to a construct noun an inseparable preposition can and hence the definite article with the inseparable preposition. For example בְּבַיִת דָּוִד is “in the house of David.”

## II.

### Usage of construct nouns

Dr. Kelly identifies the following construct relationships that is used to express various meanings:<sup>4</sup>

1. *Possessive*. The construct has the basic meaning of possession or ownership.

דְּבַר אֱלֹהִים “the word of God”  
רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים “the spirit of God”  
שָׂדֵה נָבוֹת “the field of Naboth”

2. *Location or origin*. The construct can express location of origin of a person or thing.

עָרֵי יְהוּדָה “the cities of Judah (location)”  
אֲנָשֵׁי יְרוּשָׁלַם “the men of Jerusalem (origin)”

3. *Identification*. The construct can express further description or identification of a person or thing.

יוֹם חֹשֶׁךְ “a day of darkness (kind of day)”  
סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית “the book of the covenant (which book?)”  
אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם “the land of Egypt (which land?)”

4. *Source*. The construct can express the source of a thing.

דְּבַר יְהוָה “the word of/from the Lord”

### Practice

1. Translate the following:

- a. תּוֹרוֹת הַמִּלְכָּה הַטּוֹבוֹת
- b. הַיְכָלֵי הַמֶּלֶכָה הַגְּדוֹלָה
- c. שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
- d. אִשְׁתְּ הָאִישׁ הָרַע
- e. כּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם

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<sup>4</sup> Page Kelley, *Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 64