

BBH Workbook p. 70 #6
(Gen 15:18)

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כָּרַת יְהוָה אֶת־אֲבְרָם בְּרִית לֵאמֹר
לְזֶרַעְךָ נָתַתִּי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת
מִנְהַר מִצְרַיִם עַד־הַנְּהַר הַגָּדֹל נְהַר־פָּרָת

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא

בַּיּוֹם, "in (the) day," consists of

- the preposition בַּ, "in"
- the definite article
- the masculine noun יוֹם, "day"

הַהוּא, "that," consists of

- the definite article
- the ms demonstrative adjective הוּא, "that"

GRAMMAR

We know that הוּא is functioning as an attributive adjective modifying יוֹם because הַהוּא

- follows יוֹם, and
- agrees with יוֹם in gender (masc.), number (sing.), and definiteness (both have the article).

כָּרַת

כָּרַת is the Qal Perfect 3ms of כָּרַת. Because the basic meaning of the root כָּרַת is “to cut,” we may provisionally translate כָּרַת “(he) cut.”

TRANSLATION

The “he” of “(he) cut” is in parentheses because we will need to include it in our translation only if the Hebrew sentence we are dealing with does not explicitly state the subject of כָּרַת.

GRAMMAR

In English, an indicative verb is usually accompanied by an explicit subject, whether a noun, noun phrase, or pronoun. For example,

NOUN SUBJECT

Moses returned (Exod 5:22)

water encompassed me (Jon 2:6 [5])

NOUN PHRASE SUBJECT

his sleep left him (Dan 2:1)

the mountain of the house of the Lord

will be established

(Mic 4:1)

PRONOUN SUBJECT

she let them down by a rope

(Josh 2:15)

we set out from Horeb

(Deut 1:19)

In Hebrew, an indicative verb, if it is not accompanied by a subject that is a noun or noun phrase, usually lacks an explicit pronoun subject. Because Hebrew verbs are more highly inflected than English verbs, the subject of any given Hebrew verb is usually clear from the verb's form. Consider the following partial paradigm:

שָׁמַעַ	he	heard
שָׁמְעָהּ	she	heard
שָׁמַעְתָּ	you (ms)	heard
שָׁמַעְתְּ	you (fs)	heard
שָׁמַעְתִּי	I	heard

Each of the English verbal forms in the above paradigm is the same (i.e., heard), and thus an explicit pronoun (e.g., he, she, you, I) is required in each case in order to indicate the subject of the verb.

On the other hand, each of the Hebrew forms in the above paradigm is unique, and thus no explicit pronoun is required in Hebrew in order to indicate the subject of the verb.

יְהוָה

יְהוָה is the subject of כָּרַת, and thus we may provisionally translate כָּרַת יְהוָה “Yahweh cut,” or “The Lord cut.”

GRAMMAR

Recall that in Hebrew the subject of a verb, if it is explicitly stated, often follows the verb; e.g.,

יְהוָה	כָּרַת
SUBJ.	VERB

אֶת־אַבְרָם בְּרִית

אֶת־אַבְרָם בְּרִית, “a covenant with Abram,” consists of

- אֶת, the preposition “with”
- the proper noun אַבְרָם, “Abram”
- the feminine noun בְּרִית, “covenant”

MORPHOLOGY

The form אֶת־ (pointed אֶת when not attached to another word by means of a Maqqef) may be either

- (a) the definite direct object marker, or
- (b) the preposition "with."

For example,

(A) DEFINITE DIRECT OBJECT MARKER

אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ (God created) the heavens
and the earth (Gen 1:1)

אֶת־נִיְנוּהַ (he built) Nineveh
(Gen 10:11)

(B) PREPOSITION "WITH"

אֶת־הָאֶבֶן וְאֶת־הָעֵץ with stone and with wood
(Jer 3:9)

אֶת־יַעֲקֹב with Jacob (Exod 1:1)

Context indicates when אֶת־/אֶת is the definite direct object marker and when it is the preposition "with."

When the definite direct object marker and the preposition "with" appear with pronominal suffixes, their forms are distinct. For example,

(A) DEFINITE DIRECT OBJECT MARKER

אֹתוֹ (you shall serve) him (Deut 10:20)

(B) PREPOSITION "WITH"

אֶתּוֹ (the guests who were) with him

(1 Kgs 1:41)

- If the אֶתּ in בְּרִית אֶת־אַבְרָם were the **definite direct object marker**, בְּרִית אֶת־אַבְרָם יְהוָה would translate "Yahweh cut Abram a covenant." This translation is not very sensical.
- If on the other hand the אֶתּ in בְּרִית אֶת־אַבְרָם is the **preposition "with,"** בְּרִית אֶת־אַבְרָם יְהוָה translates "Yahweh cut a covenant with Abram." This translation makes sense.

TRANSLATION

בְּרִית כָּרַת, lit. "to cut a covenant," is a Hebrew idiom meaning "to make a covenant." The verb כָּרַת was used because a covenant's ratificatory procedure sometimes involved the cutting up of animals in order to symbolize the self-maledictory oaths that one or both parties to the covenant took on himself or themselves.

Summary: בְּרִית אֶת־אַבְרָם יְהוָה כָּרַת הוּא

On that day Yahweh made (lit. cut) a covenant with Abram.

לֵאמֹר

A footnote indicates that the verb form לֵאמֹר may be translated “saying.”

MORPHOLOGY

Although we have not yet learned how to parse לֵאמֹר, we may note that its root is אָמַר, “to say.”

TRANSLATION

לֵאמֹר occurs very frequently in the Bible. It usually introduces direct discourse (i.e., a quotation of someone’s speech).

Because English quotation marks can often perform the same function as Hebrew לֵאמֹר, providing a translation of לֵאמֹר (i.e., “saying”) is not always necessary. In some cases, however (and our present sentence is one), it is helpful to translate לֵאמֹר “saying”; i.e.,

*On that day Yahweh made a covenant with Abram,
saying . . .*

Students of Greek will notice that (the infinitive) לֵאמֹר is functionally equivalent to the pleonastic (or, redundant) participle λέγων.

לְזַרְעֶךָ

לְזַרְעֶךָ consists of three elements:

- the preposition לְ, here meaning “to”
- the masculine noun זָרַע, “seed, descendant(s)”
- the 2ms pronominal suffix ךָּ, “your”

GRAMMAR

זָרַע is grammatically singular and may refer (among other things) to an individual person (“descendant”) or a plurality of people (“descendants”). In the latter usage, זָרַע is classified as a collective noun.

נָתַתִּי

נָתַתִּי is the Qal Perfect 1cs of נָתַן, “to give.” Its translation in Gen 15:18 will be discussed below.

אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת

אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת, "this land," consists of

- the definite direct object marker אֶת
- the articular noun אָרֶץ, "land"
- the articular demonstrative זֹאת, "this"

MORPHOLOGY

The form אֶת (pointed אֵת when not attached to another word by means of a Maqqef) may be either

- (c) the definite direct object marker, or
- (d) the preposition "with."

For example,

(A) DEFINITE DIRECT OBJECT MARKER

אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ (God created) the heavens
and the earth (Gen 1:1)

אֶת־נִיְנוּהַ (he built) Nineveh
(Gen 10:11)

(B) PREPOSITION "WITH"

אֶת־הָאֶבֶן וְאֶת־הָעֵץ with stone and with wood
(Jer 3:9)

אֵת יַעֲקֹב with Jacob (Exod 1:1)

Context indicates when אַתָּ/את is the definite direct object marker and when it is the preposition “with.”

When the definite direct object marker and the preposition “with” appear with pronominal suffixes, their forms are distinct. For example,

(A) DEFINITE DIRECT OBJECT MARKER

אַתּוֹ (you shall serve) him (Deut 10:20)

(B) PREPOSITION “WITH”

אַתּוֹ (the guests who were) with him
(1 Kgs 1:41)

Summary: לְזַרְעֶךָ נָתַתִּי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת

I gave (or, have given) this land to your descendants.

or

To your descendants I gave (or, have given) this land.

or

It is to your descendants that I gave (or, have given) this land.

The author of our text may have placed לְזַרְעֶךָ at the beginning of the clause לְזַרְעֶךָ נָתַתִּי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת in order to emphasize it. The third translation above reflects such an emphasis.

Excursus: Translation

What is the best way to translate נָתַתִּי in Gen 15:18? To answer this question, it will be necessary to speak for a few moments about the Hebrew verbal system.

Hebrew verbs have both **time** (or **tense**) and **aspect**.

- The **time** or **tense** of a verb refers to when the action or state of being the verb describes occurred (e.g., in the past, present, or future).
- The **aspect** of a verb refers to the kind of action the verb describes (e.g., completed, incompleting, ongoing, or habitual action).

The relative importance of time and aspect differs among verbs and contexts. Many scholars today consider that, generally speaking, aspect is more prominent or essential than time in the Hebrew verbal system.

Hebrew Perfect verbs describe completed (or, perfective) action, whether in the past, present, or future. Thus, the Perfect נָתַתִּי could theoretically be translated "I gave" (past), "I am giving" (present), or "I will give" (future). Context indicates which

translation is appropriate. (Possibly more than one translation might fit the context.)

In our present verse (Gen 15:18), God says the following to Abram: לְזַרְעֲךָ נָתַתִּי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת. Keeping in mind that the Perfect נָתַתִּי can describe completed action in the past, present, or future, we might translate this clause:

I gave this land to your descendants.

I am giving this land to your descendants.

I will give this land to your descendants.

The temporal ambiguity inherent in the verbal form נָתַתִּי is in fact well-suited to the Lord's promise to Abram:

- **Future.** At the time that God spoke the promise, Abram's descendants had not yet been born or taken possession of the land (thus the nuance "I will give" fits the context). A future tense translation would also reflect the fact that God's promise was to have several levels of fulfillment (i.e., typical and antitypical).
- **Present.** Because the Lord's promise was immutable, his very act of uttering it contributed to its accomplishment (thus the nuance "I am giving" also fits the context).

- **Past.** Because it was so certain that God would fulfill his promise, he could speak of it as already having been accomplished (thus the nuance “I gave” fits the context).

Summary: אֶת־אַבְרָם בְּרִית לֵאמֹר לְזֶרַעְךָ נָתַתִּי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת בְּיוֹם הַהוּא כָּרַת יְהוָה

On that day Yahweh made (lit. cut) a covenant with Abram, saying, “I have given (or, am giving, will give) this land to your descendants.”

מִנְהַר מִצְרַיִם

מִנְהַר מִצְרַיִם means “from the river of Egypt.”

מִנְהַר, “from the river of,” consists of

- the preposition מִן
- נְהַר, the construct form of the masculine noun נָהָר, “river”

MORPHOLOGY

The construct chain מִנְהַר מִצְרַיִם, like all construct chains, is an accentual unit with only one primary accent:

[נְהַר מְצַרִּים]. When נְהַר enters the construct state, it loses its primary accent and the following changes occur:

The (long vowel) Qamets in its second syllable (originally closed and accented, but now closed and unaccented) shortens to Pathach.

נְהַר → נְהַר

The (full vowel) Qamets in its first syllable (originally an open near syllable, but now an open distant syllable) reduces to (Vocal) Shewa.

נְהַר → נְהַר

MORPHOLOGY

Some nouns in Hebrew are formed by the prefixing of Mem to a verbal root. For example,

מְקַרָּא	convocation	(Isa 1:13)
מְשַׁכֵּב	bed	(2 Sam 17:28)
מְדַרְשׁ	treatise	(2 Chr 24:27)
מְשַׁכֵּן	tabernacle	(Ps 74:7)
מְבַטֵּחַ	confidence	(Prov 25:19)
מְבַנֵּה	structure	(Ezek 40:2)

Attention to the surrounding context of our present verse (Gen 15:18), knowledge of vocabulary (there is no such

noun as **מְנַהֵר**), and a recognition of the presence of the Daghesth Forte in the Nun of **נְהַר** (which represents the assimilated Nun of **מִן**) inform us that **מְנַהֵר** consists of the preposition **מִן** and the noun **נְהַר** and does not belong to the aforementioned category of nouns.

עַד-תְּנַהֵר הַגָּדוֹל

The prepositional phrase **עַד-תְּנַהֵר הַגָּדוֹל**, “as far as the great river,” consists of

- the preposition **עַד**, “as far as, unto”
- the articular noun **נְהַר**, “river”
- the articular adjective **גָּדוֹל**, “great”

MORPHOLOGY

The Holem Waw of **גָּדוֹל** is spelled defectively here as Holem: **גָּדֹל**.

נְהַר-פְּרָת

In apposition to **הַגָּדוֹל הַנְּהַר** stands the phrase **נְהַר-פְּרָת**, “the river Euphrates (or, the Euphrates River).”

TRANSLATION

נְהַר־פְּרַת is a construct chain but is best translated “the river Euphrates,” not “the river of Euphrates.”

TRANSLATION

פְּרַת was transliterated into Greek as Εὐφράτης and then into English as “Euphrates.”

GRAMMAR

That נְהַר־פְּרַת stands in apposition to הַנְּהַר הַגָּדֹל indicates that the two expressions refer to the same thing. עַד־הַנְּהַר הַגָּדֹל נְהַר־פְּרַת thus means:

as far as the great river, the river Euphrates

i.e.,

as far as the great river, namely, the river Euphrates

Apposition is common in Hebrew, as it is in English. Here are a few biblical examples:

אָבִיו יִצְחָק	his father Isaac	(Gen 31:53)
עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל	my people Israel	(1 Sam 9:16)
שִׁמְשׁוֹן אוֹיְבֵינוּ	Samson our enemy	(Judg 16:23)

Final Translation

On that day Yahweh made a covenant with Abram, saying, "I have given (or, am giving, will give) this land to your descendants, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates."