

# Semantic properties of prepositions: The distinction between causal מִן and כִּי

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Camil Staps (@SemiCamil)

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# Outline

1. We have a fairly good grasp of prepositions individually, but the distinctions between them sometimes remain elusive
2. These distinctions can often be predicted based on the original spatial meaning, using cross-linguistically verified methodology
3. Causal uses of אָ and אַ partially overlap, but differ in terms of “dominance”

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# Prepositions tend to be described individually

- With few exceptions, the literature is focused on “What is the semantic range of this preposition?”, not “Why is preposition X used, and not Y?”
- This means that we often cannot describe a use much more precisely than vague labels like “Instrument”
- Such labels are not helpful if both  $\text{אֶת}$  and  $\text{בְּ}$  are said to mark “Instruments”
- I will use these labels as well, but only as shorthands for properties like volitionality, affectedness, etc., and only with the goal to get to the precise properties expressed by the prepositions

# Prepositions tend to be described individually

For example, while בְּ is the default “Instrument” preposition, we find מִן as well:

Josh 10:11: רַבִּים אֲשֶׁר־מָתוּ בְּאֲבָנֵי הַבַּיִד מֵאֲשֶׁר הִרְגּוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּחֶרֶב:

“There were more who died because of the hailstones than the sons of Israel killed *with the sword*.”

Gen 9:11: וְלֹא־יִכָּרֵת כָּל־בֶּשֶׂר עוֹד מִמֵּי הַמַּבּוּל

“... that never again all flesh will be cut of *by the waters of the flood*.”

2 Sam 7:29: וּמְבָרְכֶתְךָ יְבָרְךָ בֵּית־עַבְדְּךָ לְעוֹלָם:

“... and *with your blessing* shall the house of your servant be blessed forever.”

Why is מִן used in Gen 9:11 and 2 Sam 7:29, and not בְּ?

(All translations are ESV.)

# Prepositions tend to be described individually

Conversely, while מן is the default “Reason” preposition, we find כּ as well:

1 Sam 28:20: וַיִּמְהַר שָׂאוּל וַיִּפֹּל מִלְא־קוֹמָתוֹ אֶרְצָה וַיֵּרָא מְאֹד מִדְּבַרֵי שְׁמוּאֵל

“Then Saul fell at once full length on the ground, filled with fear **because of the words of Samuel.**”

Gen 41:36: וְלֹא־תִכָּרֵת הָאָרֶץ בְּרָעָב:

“(That food shall be a reserve ...), so that the land may not perish **through the famine.**”

Jer 51:46: וּפְנֵי־יִרְךָ לִבְבְּכֶם וְתִירְאוּ בַשְּׂמוּעָה הַנִּשְׁמָעַת בְּאֶרֶץ

“Let not your heart faint, and be not fearful // **at the report heard in the land**”

Why is כּ used in Gen 41:36 and Jer 51:46, and not מן?

## Thesis: מן marks DOMINANCE / FULL CONTROL

Josh 10:11: רַבִּים אֲשֶׁר־מָתוּ בְּאֲבָנֵי הַבַּיִד מֵאֲשֶׁר הָרְגוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהָרֹב:

“There were more who died because of the hailstones than the sons of Israel killed **with the sword.**”

- ✓ The sword is manipulated by another entity; not in full control

Gen 9:11: וְלֹא־יִכָּרֵת כָּל־בֶּשֶׂר עוֹד מִמֵּי הַמַּבּוּל:

“... that never again all flesh will be cut of **by the waters of the flood.**”

- ✓ The waters were especially devastating, they cut off **all** flesh → full control

2 Sam 7:29: וּמְבֹרָכֶתְךָ יְבָרְךָ בֵּית־עַבְדְּךָ לְעוֹלָם:

“Now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, ..., and **with your blessing** shall the house of your servant be blessed forever.”

- ✓ The blessing is powerful enough to endure **forever** → full control

## Thesis: מן marks DOMINANCE / FULL CONTROL

1 Sam 28:20: וַיִּמְהַר שָׂאוּל וַיִּפֹּל מִלֵּא-קוֹמָתוֹ אֶרְצָה וַיִּירָא מְאֹד מִדְּבַרֵי שְׁמוּאֵל

“Then Saul fell at once full length on the ground, filled with fear **because of the words of Samuel.**”

- ✓ “at once” (piel מהר), “full length” (מלא-קומתו), “filled with fear” (וירא מאד):  
Saul is dominated by fear

Gen 41:36: וְלֹא-תִכָּרֵת הָאָרֶץ בְּרָעָב:

“(That food shall be a reserve ...), so that the land may not perish **through the famine.**”

Jer 51:46: וְפִן-יִירָךְ לְבַבְכֶם וְתִירָאוּ בַשְּׁמוּעָה הַנִּשְׁמָעַת בְּאָרֶץ

“Let not your heart faint, and be not fearful // **at the report heard in the land**”

- ✓ The famine / report are *not* causes for perishing / fear, so they are not dominant

# The causal chain in Biblical Hebrew

- The preferences of  $\text{כִּי}$  and  $\text{בְּ}$  can be explained with the “causal chain” (Croft 2012)
- Example: *the coconut was broken by Sue with a hammer*



- A preposition’s causal meaning depends on its spatial meaning
- A  $\text{בְּ}$ -causer is DOMINANT / in CONTROL because it is at the origin, influencing the whole chain
- A  $\text{כִּי}$ -causer has less control because it stands in the middle of the chain; can be controlled itself



# Method

- Corpus: Gen Exod Josh Sam Ru Eccl Est
- Prioritized productive uses of  $\text{בָּ} / \text{מִן}$  over fossilized ones (מִפְּנֵי, בְּיַד)
- Looked for minimal pairs to test the hypothesis

# Minimal pairs: alcohol

Isa 51:21: לִכֵּן שָׁמְעֵינָא זֹאת עֲנִיָּה וְשִׁכְרָת וְלֹא מִזֵּין:

“Therefore hear this, you who are afflicted, who are drunk, but not **with wine**”

Ps 78:65: וַיִּקְעַז כִּישׁוֹן אֲדֹנָי כְּגִבּוֹר מִתְרוֹנֵן מִזֵּין:

“Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, like a strong man shouting **because of wine.**”

2 Sam 13:28: רָאוּ נָא כָּטוֹב לְבַאֲמֹנֹן בִּיַּיִן וְאָמַרְתִּי אֵלֵיכֶם הֲכֹ אֶת־אֲמֹנֹן וְהִמָּתָם אִתּוֹ

“Mark when Amnon’s heart is merry **with wine**, and when I say to you, ‘Strike Amnon,’ then kill him.”

Est 1:10–11: בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי כָּטוֹב לְבַהֲמֶלֶךְ בִּיַּיִן אָמַר ... לְהָבִיא אֶת־וּשְׁתִּי הַמְּלָכָה לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּכֹתֵר מַלְכוּת

“On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry **with wine**, he commanded ... to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown”

- ✓ Only in the *מִן*-cases is the subject completely out of control

## Minimal pairs: alcohol

Isa 28:7: וְגַם־אֱלֹהֵי בַיִן שָׁגוּ וּבַשְּׂכָר תָּעוּ כֹהֲנֵי וְנָבִיא שָׁגוּ בַשְּׂכָר נִבְלְעוּ מִן־הַיַּיִן תָּעוּ מִן־הַשְּׂכָר  
“These also reel **with wine** and stagger **with strong drink**; the priest and the prophet reel **with strong drink**, they are swallowed/confused **by wine**, they stagger **with strong drink**”

שגה ביין	‘go astray’,	‘in’,	‘wine’
תעה בשכר	‘stagger’,	‘in’,	‘strong drink’
שגה בשכר	‘go astray’,	‘in’,	‘strong drink’
נבלע מן־היין	‘be numbed’,	‘from’,	‘the wine’
תעה מן־השכר	‘stagger’,	‘from’,	‘the strong drink’

## Minimal pairs: causes for fear or joy

Exod 3:6: וַיִּסְתֵּר מִשָּׁה פָּנָיו כִּי יָרָא מִהַבַּיִת אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים:

“And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid **to look at God.**”

✓ Fear often overcomes someone completely; hence מן

Jer 51:46: וּפֶן־יִרָךְ לְבַבְכֶם וְתִירְאוּ בַשְּׂמוּעָה הַנִּשְׁמָעַת בְּאֶרֶץ

“Let not your heart faint, and be not fearful // **at the report heard in the land**”

✓ Only once בָּ, and the negation is important: the report is *not* a reason for fear

# Minimal pairs: causes for fear or joy

Jdg 9:19: שְׂמַחוּ בְּאַבְיִמֶלֶךְ וְיִשְׂמַח גַּם־הוּא בְכֶם:

“rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you.”

Ecc 5:19: וְלִשְׂמֹחַ בְּעִמְלּוֹ זֶה מַתַּת אֱלֹהִים הִיא:

“(...) and [to] rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God.”

✓ Joy—as opposed to fear—does not overcome someone completely; hence בָּ

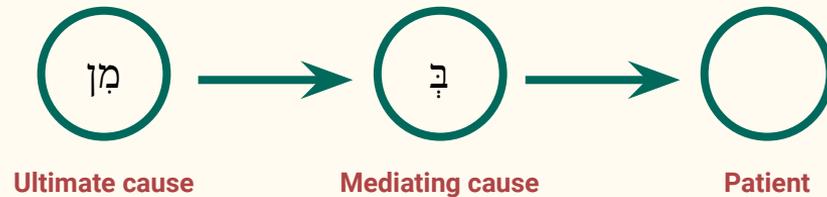
Prov 5:18: יְהִי־מְקוֹרְךָ בְרוּךְ וְיִשְׂמַח מֵאִשְׁתְּ נְעוּרֶיךָ:

“Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth”

✓ Except here, besides other warnings against adultery, where it should be understood as “rejoice in this wife ... *to the exclusion of others*”

# Defining dominance and control

- How to define these terms properly?
- Using the causal chain: further to the left is more dominant



- “Control” is just a more intuitive term for dominance with animate arguments

# Impact on exegesis

Gen 24:50: מִיְהוָה יֵצֵא הַדְּבָר לֹא נוֹכַל דְּבַר אֲלֶיךָ רַע אוֹ-טוֹב:

“The thing has come **from the Lord**; we cannot speak to you bad or good.”

- God’s decisions are final

Prov 16:33: בַּחֵיק יוֹטֵל אֶת-הַגּוֹרֵל וּמִיְהוָה כָּל-מִשְׁפָּטוֹ:

“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is **from the Lord**.”

Ps 37:23: מִיְהוָה מְצַעְדֵי-גִבּוֹר כּוֹנְנֵנוּ וְדַרְכּוֹ יִחְפָּץ:

“The steps of a man are established **by the Lord**, when he delights in his way”

(Also: Jdg 14:4; 1 Kgs 2:15; Ps 37:39; Prov 16:1; 19:14; 20:24; 29:26; Lam 3:18; 2 Chr 26:18)

# Impact on exegesis

Exod 15:23: וַיָּבֹאוּ מִרְתָּה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְשָׁתֶת מַיִם מִמֶּרְה כִּי מָרִים הֵם עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ מְרָה:  
“When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water **of Marah** because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah.”

Or: “..., they could not drink the water **because of bitterness**—it was so bitter! ...”

- To be sure, ESV’s rendering is perfectly fine, too
- But a causal translation highlights the wordplay and resonates with asseverative כִּי

# Conclusions

- When both  $\text{כִּי}$  and  $\text{מִן}$  can be used in a causal sense, the difference is one of dominance
- Dominance can be defined in terms of position on the causal chain
- Contrasting prepositions with each other yields a more precise description, which improves our understanding of biblical texts as well

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