Hebrew Verbs -

An Overview of the Hebrew Verbal System

Biblical Hebrew is primarily a verbal language. In fact, an average verse of Scripture from the Tanakh contains no less than three verbs!

Verbs (as well as nouns) are derived from "roots." Roots are (usually) tri-consonantal groups that comprise the "essence" of the word’s meaning. Note that roots themselves are abstractions that do not exist in Hebrew; instead, from a given cluster of consonants, any number of words can be derived that share the same root. For example:

Notice that the three words shown (melekh, malkhut, and malakh, respectively) all derive from the same three-letter cluster of consonants (Mem, Lamed, Kaf). This tri-consonantal cluster is called the shoresh, and identifying the shoresh of a given word is one of the fundamental tasks you will face as you begin to read Hebrew with comprehension.

Identifying Root Letters

When working with verbs, we will often need to refer to the letters that make up the root. The Hebrew name for verb is po'al, derived from a root meaning "do, perform":

פֹּאל = po'âl, derived from a root meaning "do, perform"

Each of the three letters of any verb root is sometimes assigned one of the three letters, (Pey, Ayin, or Lamed) depending on whether it is the first of the letters (the Pey of the root), the second (the Ayin of the root), or the third (the Lamed of the root).

For example, consider the verb root :

מָלַكְיָה

the Pey of the root is מ
the Ayin of the root is ל
the Lamed of the root is ק
Note that other grammars refer to these as “positions” and refer to them simply as position I, position II, and position III, respectively.

**Properties of Verbs**

Like other parts of speech you have learned, Hebrew verbs have a number of grammatical properties with which you must be familiar:

1. **Person** - Expresses the relationship between the verb and the speaker. A verb can be in the first person (“I,” “we”), second person (“you,” “y’all”), or third person (“he/she/it,” “they”).

2. **Number** - Number is the property that indicates whether one or more than one subject is referenced when using the verb. Verbs can be singular (referring to one subject - I hit) or plural (referring to more than one object - We hit).

3. **Gender** - Gender is a property that indicates the sex of the referent (masculine, feminine, or common). Hebrew verbs agree with their subjects - not only in person and number - but also in gender. Thus the Hebrew verb in the two sentences “The boy ruled” and “The girl ruled” would look different because the genders of the two subjects are different.

4. **Voice** - The voice of a verb denotes the relationship of the action of the verb to the subject of the verb. Hebrew (like Greek) includes three voices:
   
   1. Active voice (the subject is agent of verb (I hit))
   2. Passive voice (the subject is acted upon by verb (I was hit))
   3. Middle voice - reflexive action (the subject both acts and is acted upon by the verb (I hit myself))

5. **Aspect (Mode)** - The kind of action expressed by a verb is called is aspect (or mode). Hebrew uses the following three aspects:
   
   1. Simple action (e.g., to hit)
   2. Intensive action (e.g., to pound to pieces)
   3. Causal action (e.g., to cause to be hit). Hebrew verbs, unlike English verbs, are inflected for "causation." You can look at a Hebrew verb form and tell if the subject of a sentence is “causing” something to happen to something else.

6. **Tense** - Whereas English verbs indicate tense by means of spelling changes or through the use of “helping verbs” (e.g., I talk. I talked. I shall talk), Hebrew verbs are not marked for tense. You cannot tell - just by looking at a verb form without context - when the action occurs.

7. **Strong/Weak Verbs** - Verbs can be either strong or weak. A strong verb has all regular consonants in its stem; a weak verb has one (or more) guttural letters as part of its stem (for more, see below).

These properties of verbs are all expressed by means of patterns of inflection. That is, the person, number, gender, etc. of the verb is indicated by changes in the spelling of the verb.

**Perfect / Imperfect**
Hebrew has two main verb forms: the Perfect and the Imperfect:

- The Perfect is a suffixed form
- The Imperfect is a prefixed form

The Perfect describes completed action (“I ran”) whereas the imperfect expresses incomplete or progressive action (“I was running”). This is called “aspect.” Hebrew often uses a form of the verb “to be” (or an adverb) to indicate a sense of time.

**About Hebrew Verb Stems**

A verb stem is an offshoot of the root that is used to indicate the properties of voice and aspect. In Hebrew there are seven major stems, each with its own characteristic spelling of the root that you will learn:

1. Qal Stem - Simple action, active voice
2. Nifal Stem - Simple action, passive voice
3. Piel Stem - Intensive action, active voice
4. Pual Stem - Intensive action, passive voice
5. Hifil Stem - Causal action, active voice
6. Hofal Stem - Causal action, passive voice
7. Hitpael Stem - Intensive action, reflexive voice

**Note:** The Qal stem is basic, the other stems are derived from it. Nearly 70% of verbs are Qal.

These verb stems can be summarized using the root Qof-Tet-Lamed as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stem</th>
<th>Type Action</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Identifiers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qal</td>
<td>Simple active</td>
<td>פָלַל</td>
<td>unaugmented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niphal</td>
<td>Simple passive</td>
<td>נִפְלָל</td>
<td>קֵּךְ prefix; patach stem vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piel</td>
<td>Intensive active</td>
<td>קִלֵּל</td>
<td>Chiroq-Tessor vowel pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pual</td>
<td>Intensive passive</td>
<td>קִלֵּיל</td>
<td>Gibbuts-Patach vowel pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiphil</td>
<td>Causative active</td>
<td>הִפִּיל</td>
<td>קֵּכִּיל prefix; Chiriq-Yod stem vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hophal</td>
<td>Causative passive</td>
<td>הָפִּיל</td>
<td>קֵּכָּפַל prefix; patach stem vowel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction to Hebrew Verbs

Note: This table is presented only to show you how the three-letter root changes to indicate the aspect of the verb (i.e., stems). More detailed information will be provided later on each of these stems, IY"H.

### Strong and Weak Verb Stems: The Gizrah

Verbal roots are divided into groups (known as a גִּזְרָה (gizrah)) based on whether it is regular or irregular with respect to one or more of its letters. Completely regular verbs have all non-guttural consonants and are called "Strong Verbs." Irregular verbs include one (or more) guttural letters and are are called "Weak Verbs."

Weak verbs are classified according to which of the three letters is "weak":

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>III</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** In addition to these common verb types, verbs can also be made weak when either a Yod or a Nun appears in position I.

This information is provided here to make you aware that not all verbs will be conjugated (inflected) in the same way if there are guttural letters in the stem. We will provide specific examples of weak verbs and their changes as we encounter them in the lessons ahead.

### About Hebrew Conjugations

To make matters more complicated, each of these 7 stems can be conjugated in 8 different ways:

1. **Perfect** - The perfect conjugation is used to denote simple, completed action. Though it is an oversimplification, for now we will translate the perfect conjugation using the simple past tense.

2. **Imperfect** - The imperfect conjugation is used to denote incomplete action. Though it is an oversimplification, for now we will translate the imperfect conjugation using the future tense.

3. **Cohortative** - Command (1st person) "Let us praise the LORD!"

4. **Imperative** - Command (2nd person) "You praise the LORD!"
5. **Jussive** - Command (3rd person) “He shall praise the LORD!”

6. **Infinitive Construct** - Verbal noun. “To praise is good.”

7. **Infinitive Absolute** - A grammatical intensifier.

8. **Participle** - Verbal adjective or substantive. “The praising man...”

**Starting at the Simplest**

We will begin our study of the Hebrew verbal system with the Qal (stem) perfect (conjugation), and progress our way through the other stems and conjugations.