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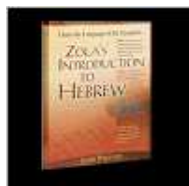
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9.1 Overview of the Hebrew Verbal System

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":

פִּעַל = 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 :

מ.ל.ך

the מ of the root is מ

the ע of the root is ל

the ל of the root is ך

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 incompleted 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



The shorash is the root form of all of the verb stems

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:

III II I
 ק.ט.ל Stem vowel = pos. II

Stem	Type Action	Form	Identifiers	
Qal	Simple active	קָטַל	unaugmented	He killed
Nifal	Simple passive	נִקְטַל	נִ prefix; patach stem vowel	He was killed
Piel	Intensive active	קִטַּל	Chireq-Tsere vowel pattern	He destroyed
Pual	Intensive passive	קִטַּל	Qibbuts-Patach vowel pattern	He was destroyed
Hiphil	Causative active	הִקְטִיל	הִ prefix; Chiriq-Yod stem vowel	He caused death
Hophal	Causative passive	הִקְטַל	הִ prefix; patach stem vowel	He was caused to kill

Hitpa'el	Intensive reflexive	הִתְקַטַּל	הִתְ prefix; Tsere stem vowel	He killed himself
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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 called "Weak Verbs."

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

III II I
X X X

קטל - Strong verb

עמד - Type I Guttural

נאל - Type II Guttural

ברח - Type III Guttural

עלה - Doubly Weak

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.

III II I
ל ע פ

Note: Some grammars refer to positions I, II, and III with the letters Pey, Ayin, and Lamed, respectively (*Pa'al* means to "fall"). For example, a Pey Guttural would mean I-Guttural, an Ayin Guttural would mean a II-Guttural, and so on.

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.

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