

Learning Hebrew: Verbs

HEBREW VERBS

Hebrew roots are usually composed of three consonants (but they may also be composed of two consonants). A root is the simplest form from which Hebrew words are derived. A stem is the simplest form of any word that is derived from a root.

Example: From the root מִלָּךְ (king) comes the noun stems מֶלֶךְ (king), מַלְכָּה (queen), מַלְכוּת (kingdom) and the verb stem מָלַךְ (to reign, be king)

In Hebrew most verbs have gender, person, and number characteristics. These characteristics are expressed in Hebrew verbs by certain patterns of inflection.

Example: כָּתַב (he wrote) and כָּתְבָהּ (she wrote)

Even though most Hebrew verbs can indicate these characteristics they may also be written with an independent personal pronoun which usually indicates emphasis upon one of the characteristics.

VERBAL STEMS

Qal (קָל) is the basic verbal stem which indicates active voice (though some passive forms do exist) and the unnuanced type of action. Example: שָׁמַע (he heard)

Niphal (נִפְעַל) stems express simple action with either a passive or reflexive voice. Example: נִשְׁמַע (he was heard-passive *or* he heard himself-reflexive)

Piel (פִּעֵל) stems are used to express an intensive type of action with an inactive voice.

Example: שָׁבַר (he smashed into pieces)

Pual (פֻּעַל) stems indicate the passive form of the Piel – expressing an intensive type of action with a passive voice. Example: שֻׁבַר (he [it] was smashed into pieces)

Hiphil (הִפְעִיל) stems are used to indicate causative action with an active voice. Example:

הִמְלִיךְ (he caused to reign *or* he made [someone] king)

Hophal (הִפְעֵל) stems express the passive form of the Hiphil – indicating a causative action with a passive voice. Example: הִמְלִךְ (he was made king)

Hitpael (הִתְפַּעֵל) stems indicate an intensive type of action with a reflexive (and sometimes passive) voice. Example: הִתְחַבֵּא (he hid himself)

Stem	Meaning	Example
Qal (קָל)	Simple action, Active voice	שָׁמַע (he heard)
Niphal (נִפְעַל)	Simple action, Passive or Reflexive voice	נִשְׁמַע (he was heard-passive <i>or</i> he heard himself-reflexive)
Piel (פְּעַל)	Intensive action, Active voice	שָׁבַר (he smashed into pieces)
Pual (פּוּעַל)	Intensive action, Passive voice	שֻׁבַר (he [it] was smashed into pieces)
Hiphil (הִפְעִיל)	Causative action, Active voice	הִמְלִיךְ (he caused to reign <i>or</i> he made [someone] king)
Hophal (הִפְעֵל)	Causative action, Passive voice	הִמְלִךְ (he was made king)
Hitpael (הִתְפַּעֵל)	Intensive action, Reflexive voice	הִתְחַבֵּא (he hid himself)

VERBAL CONJUGATIONS

The perfect conjugation indicates completed action.

Example: She worked (past tense), She has worked (present perfect tense), She had worked (past perfect tense), and/or She will have worked (future perfect tense).

The imperfect conjugation expresses incomplete action.

Example: I walk (present tense) and/or I will walk (future tense).

The imperative conjugation is used primarily to express direct commands and occurs only in the second person.

Example: (You) defend the wall from being destroyed!

The cohortative conjugation is used primarily to express purpose or result and occurs in the first person.

Example: Let me honor the priest (first person singular) and/or Let us honor the priest (first person plural).

The jussive conjugation is used to express either a mild command or strong wish and occurs in the third person.

Example: May the King (third person) give to me a reward.

The infinitive construct is a verbal noun which functions like the English Infinitive which is usually translated with the preposition “to” plus a verb (as in “to build”). It can be used as a subject or object of a verb.

The infinitive absolute is used in conjunction with other verbs to emphasize or intensity the action of the verb. It can also be substituted in the place of an imperative conjugation to express a command.

The participle is a verbal adjective. As a verb it expresses a type of verbal action (walking, running) and as an adjective it is used like a Hebrew adjective.

STRONG AND WEAK VERBS

Strong verbs have no weak consonants.

Weak verbs have at least one weak root consonant (gutturals and ך). The consonant ך and ך are also considered weak but only when they appear as the first consonant of the verbal root and only in certain conjugations. Roots with two root consonants and roots in which the second and third root consonants are identical are also weak root consonants.

WORD ORDER

In general (with few exceptions) the word order in Hebrew for a verbal sentence is verb-subject-object.



Sources:

The First Hebrew Primer, Third Edition by Simon, Resnikoff, and Motzkin

Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar by Pratico and Van Pelt