

Hebrew Verb

Biblical Hebrew is primarily a verbal language. An average verse of the Scripture from the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) contains no less than three verbs.

Verbs are derived from roots, and roots are usually tri-consonantal groups.

Properties of Verbs

Hebrew verbs have a number of grammatical properties. They are:

1. **Person** - Expresses the relationship between the verb and the speaker. A verb can be in the first person (“I,” “we”), second person (“you,” sing. or pl.), 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 or plural.
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. For instance, the Hebrew verb in the two sentences “The man kept” and “The woman kept” 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 keep)
 2. Intensive action (e.g., to guard carefully)
 3. Causal action (e.g., to cause to be kept). 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** - English verbs indicate tense by means of spelling changes or through the use of “helping verbs” (e.g., I keep. I kept. I *will* keep), Hebrew verbs are *not* marked for tense.
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.

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 the suffixes or prefixes to the stem.

Hebrew Verb Stems

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

1. Qal Stem - Simple action, active voice (e.g. he kept)
2. Niphal Stem - Simple action, passive voice (e.g. he was kept)
3. Piel Stem - Intensive action, active voice (e.g. he kept indeed)
4. Pual Stem - Intensive action, passive voice (e.g. he was kept indeed)
5. Hiphil Stem - Causal action, active voice (e.g. he caused to keep)
6. Hophal Stem - Causal action, passive voice (e.g. he caused to be kept)
7. Hitpael Stem - Intensive action, reflexive voice (e.g. he kept himself)

Note: The Qal stem is the basic form of the verb. The other stems are derived from the Qal. Nearly 70% of verbs are Qal.

Note: The above examples are to show you how each stem shows the aspect of the verb. It is for illustration purpose only.

Hebrew Conjugations

Each of the above seven stems can be *conjugated* in 8 different ways.

1. **Perfect** - The perfect conjugation is used to denote simple, completed action. For the purpose of the first year Hebrew, we will translate this using the simple past tense in English (e.g. He kept).

2. **Imperfect** - The imperfect conjugation is used to denote incomplete action. Again, we will translate this into simple future tense in English (e.g. He will keep).
3. **Cohortative** - Command (1st person) “Let us keep the law!”
4. **Imperative** - Command (2nd person) “Keep the law.”
5. **Jussive** - Command (3rd person) “He will keep the law.”
6. **Infinitive Construct** - Verbal noun. “To keep is good.”
7. **Infinitive Absolute** - A grammatical intensifier.
8. **Participle** - Verbal adjective or substantive. “The keeping man ...”

Perfect and Imperfect

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

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

ש מ ר

Imperfect

אֲשַׁמֵּר

Perfect

שָׁמַרְתִּי

The perfect describes completed action whereas the imperfect expresses incompleting action. This is called the “aspect” of the verb.

The Qal Imperfect

The Imperfect state is an *incomplete* action or state of being. As stated above, for the purpose of the first year Hebrew, we will use the simple future tense in English.

Imperfect uses preformatives (prefixes) before the root and in some cases affirmatives (suffixes).

The Prefix Conjugation ("Imperfect")			
נִשְׁמַר	we	אֲשַׁמֵּר	I
תִּשְׁמָרוּ	you (mp)	תִּשְׁמַר	you (ms)
תִּשְׁמְרִי	you (fp)	תִּשְׁמְרִי	you (fs)
יִשְׁמְרוּ	they (mp)	יִשְׁמַר (יִשְׁמֹר)	he
תִּשְׁמְרֶנָּה	they (fp)	תִּשְׁמַר	she

Note: The forms of *2ms* and *3fs* are the same, so are *2fp* and *3fp* (highlighted in the table); context must dictate translation.

Uses of the Imperfect

Simple Future: One of the most common uses of the imperfect is to describe a simple action in the future.

Frequentative use: Sometimes, the imperfect is used to express repeated or customary actions.

Jussive and the Cohortative: Expresses a desire or a wish in the imperfect (e.g. Please, let us, may I, etc.)

Jussive: third person plural or singular (determined by context)

Cohortative: first person plural or singular (note cohortative הָ suffix)