

Introducing the Verb

Preliminaries

Common grammar abbreviations or shorthand include two " to join two things together, and one ' to signal abbreviation by “chopping off” of the rest of a word. Thus, פ"ן refers to a Peh-Nun verb (see below). And, ה' is shorthand for הַשֵּׁם “the name” (which many use to refer to the Tetragrammaton) or הַיְיָ which the standard dictionary BDB uses to refer to the divine name.

Throughout the BDB entry for מַלְאָךְ “messenger” מ' is short for מַלְאָךְ and ' for יהוה.

Grammatical aspects of the Hebrew verb are spoken of in relation to two paradigm verbs. Modern grammars use קטל *to kill* to illustrate the morphology and conjugations of the so-called strong verb. Not only do verb charts in the back of learning grammars typically use קטל but qatal, yiqtol, etc., can be used to refer to verb forms which follow the paradigmatic words קטל, יקטל, etc. The traditional word used paradigmatically to speak about verb morphology and syntax is פָּעַל *to do, make*. The verb stems/themes/binyamin are referred to using פָּעַל (see below) and the three letters ל ע פ are used to the I, II, and III root letters of verbs.

ל	ע	פ
III	II	I

Thus נָפַל *he fell* is a פ"ן verb because its פ letter (first letter) is נ, and צִוָּה *he commanded* is a ה"ל verb because its ל letter is ה.

Roots

The “root” is the group of three letters used to make a word, whether verb, noun, and so on. The strong root is one which has three letters that accept a dagesh and do not drop out or assimilate, like קטל. The spelling patterns associated with the various weak roots are among the most challenging problems for students which is why learning grammars often treat them separately. Weak roots refer to verbs which have gutturals (which will not accept dageshim) or יוֹנָה Jonah letters, the consonants used to spell the prophet’s name יוֹנָה (which might disappear like a prophet swallowed by a great fish). For example, עָשָׂה is doubly weak containing a guttural as the first letter (ע-guttural/I-guttural) and a Jonah letter in the third position (ה"ל /III-ה).

Binyanim/Stems/Themes

Hebrew verbs are modified to express different senses. These inflections or conjugations are traditionally called **בְּנֵינִים** *buildings*, singular **בְּנֵן**. The basic form is called **קָל** Qal, which means *light*, because it had no additions. The other stems are named for the kinds of modifications that are made on a model word, namely **פָּעַל**. This is an unfortunate choice for a model because of its weak middle letter which does not accept dageshim. The modifications are formed either by internal intensification of the root or by the addition of preformatives. The seven main stems are: Qal **קָל** (simple), Nifal **נִפְעַל** (passive, reflexive), Piel **פִּעֵל** (more complex nuance: intensive, effecting/causing state), Pual **פּוּעַל** (passive), Hitpael **הִתְפַּעֵל** (reflexive, passive), Hifil **הִפְעִיל** (causing action), and **הִפְעֵל** (passive). For more on binyanim see below.

Forms

Forms refer to the ways verbs denote verbal actions or states. Forms are traditionally referred to as tenses, inflections, principal parts, or conjugations, though none of these quite gets at how forms function. There are five forms: perfect, imperfect, imperative, infinitive, and participle (jussive and cohortative are considered subgroups of imperfect). Verbal aspect explains part of how verb forms function in narrative. Aspect refers to unity and plurality (...), and duration of (—) and complete action (complete as in whole, not necessarily completed). Sometimes aspect is inherent in words themselves (for example, **מָצָא** *to find* is instantaneous and **בִּקֵּשׁ** *to seek/look for* is durative), and at other times aspect is expressed by form (see Joüon, 111.c-d, 122.a-c).

Imperfect signifies ongoing, incomplete action.

Consecutive Imperfect signifies complete action or temporal sequence.

Perfect signifies complete action or description of state or condition.

Consecutive Perfect is not a separate form, but is analogous to the consecutive imperfect, and can indicate future ongoing, incomplete.

Neither “tense” nor “aspect” fully explain how verbs function in narrative. But, these are useful ways to work with the verb while learning the various forms in a first-year grammar course, focused primarily on individual sentences. The student simply needs to realize that working through verb function according to the larger units of narrative discourse is a next step, and, is debated (for one of the better, and user-friendly approaches, see Harmelink, chap 6).

Other Terminology

While the basic terms listed above are majority terms, many different terms used by popular biblical Hebrew grammars. Part of the reason for the lack of standard grammatical terms is the peculiarities of the language, and lack of consensus of the functions of stems and forms. In any event, here is a summary of other grammatical terms, which students are likely to come

across when working with Hebrew language tools (see Waltke and O'Connor, 29.1b; Seow, Excursus C; Joüon, 111.b).

Forms (majority)	3ms Qal (model term קטל)	other common terms
perfect	<i>qatal</i> קטל	affix, suffix conjugation, past
imperfect	<i>yiqtol</i> יקטל	prefix, non-perfective, future
vav consecutive perfect	<i>veqatal</i> וקטל	vav reversive affix, converted perfect, vav conversive, vav relative, vav inersive
vav consecutive imperfect	<i>vayyiqtol</i> ויקטל	converted imperfect, vav relative, vav inersive, vav conversive prefix, preterite

Binyanim (majority)	3ms Qal (model term קטל)	sigla	
Qal	<i>qatal</i> (<i>qatel</i> , <i>qatol</i>)	G	[German <i>Grundstamm</i> meaning basic stem]
Nifal	<i>niqtal</i>	N	[nun prefix]
Piel	<i>qittel</i>	D	[d oubling second root letter]
Pual	<i>quttal</i>	Dp	[d oubling second root letter, p assive]
Hitpael	<i>hitqattel</i>	HtD	[h eh prefix, t av infix, d oubling second root letter]
Hifil	<i>hiqtil</i>	H	[h eh prefix]
Hofal	<i>hoqtal</i>	Hp	[h eh prefix, infix, p assive]

Ten Weak Root Types	Other terminology
פ-guttural	I-guttural
פ"א	I-aleph
פ"י	I-yod
פ"ן	I-nun
ע-guttural	II-guttural; Middle Guttural
Hollow	II-vav/yod; ו"ע; Biconsonantal
Geminate	II=III; ע"ע; twin consonant
ל-guttural	III-guttural
ל"א	III-aleph
ל"ה	III-heh

Models

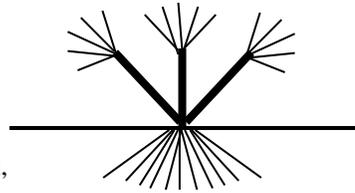
The purpose of the following models and statistics is pedagogical. Students often find confusing at first the relationship between root, binyan/stem, and form. The models lay out, in different ways, an overview of the dimensions or categories of the verb so the student has a very general idea of what needs to be learned.

(1) The Hebrew verb can be thought of according to an *organic metaphor*, each verb root, whether strong or weak, is conjugated in one of the stems and in a particular form (though see GKC § 30 *cd*). Most verbs are not used in all conjugations, thus the potential conjugations of any given verb are theoretical.

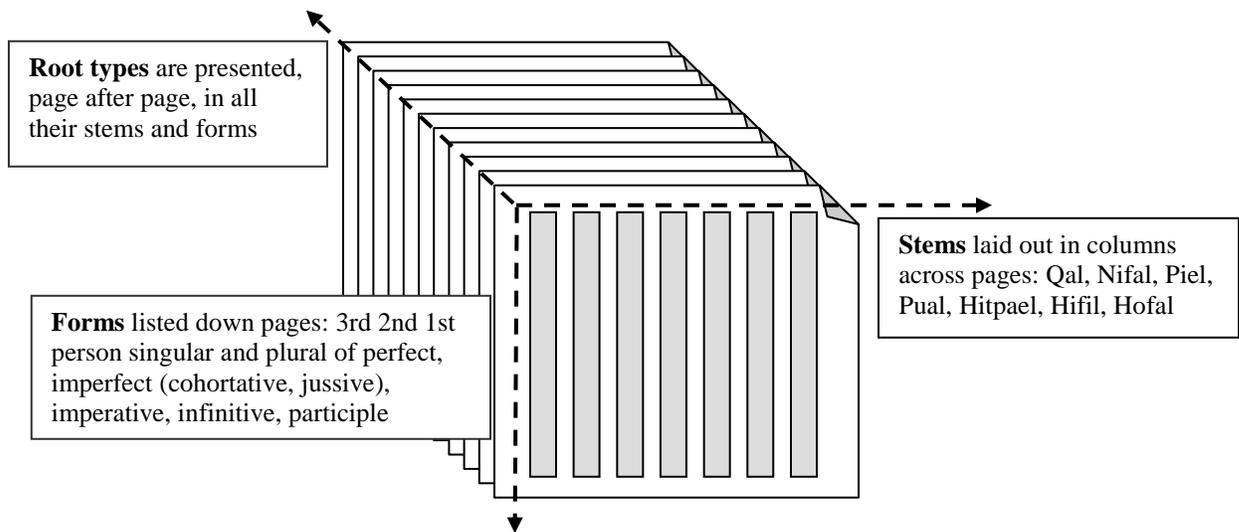
FORMS: **perfect, imperfect** (cohortative, jussive), imperative, infinitive, participle

STEMS/BINYANIM (**Qal**, Nifal, **Piel**, Pual, Hitpael, **Hifil**, Hofal)

ROOTS: strong, פ-guttural, א"פ, י"פ, ז"פ, ט-guttural, Hollow, Geminate, ל-guttural, א"ל, ה"ל



(2) The Hebrew verb can be thought of according to a *three dimensional metaphor*, as though the verb chart pages in the back of a beginning Hebrew grammar were a cube like stack of pages. The **vertical** axis on each page represents the forms with perfect at the top, then imperfect, and so on. The **horizontal** axis represents the stems beginning with Qal on the left, then Nifal, and so on. The first page is the strong root with **successive pages** representing the ten weak root types, each with the same vertical and horizontal axes as the first page.



(3) The Hebrew verb can be thought of as a *system of three groups or families*. The three groups are named for the most common stems—Qal, Piel, Hifil—which represent the “active voice” of the respective groups (adapted from Greenberg, 8.3 [p. 43]).¹

	Qal Group	Piel Group	Hifil Group
<i>active</i>	קָל	פָּעַל	הִפְעִיל
<i>passive</i>	נִפְעַל	פֻּעַל	הִפְעַל
<i>reflexive, reciprocal</i>	נִפְעַל	הִתְפַּעֵל	

The vertical axis of the chart represents the voice of the (primary) subject. Thus, working vertically, Nifal represents the passive and reflexive voices of the verb relative to the subject (so too for Pual, Hithpael, and Hofal, with respect to Piel and Hifil).

The horizontal axis relates to causation. Piel verbs often have a more complex sense than the Qal counterpart of the same verb.

Piel represents the notion of effecting or causing a state corresponding to the basic meaning of the root (when the root is used in Qal and Piel). Hifil represents causing an action (see Waltke and O’Connor, 21.2; 24.1; 27.1; Greenberg, 8.1-15; Arnold and Choi, 42-43).² *The preceding is oversimplified for illustration. In truth, each word has its own “rules” and characteristics.*

(4) The following is a statistical analysis of the proportional frequency of verbs used in the Hebrew Bible (see Waltke and O’Connor, 21.2.3e; 21.1c).

BINYANIM/STEMS			MAIN FORMS—PERFECT AND IMPERFECT		
	occurrences	percentage			relative proportion of these forms
Qal	49,180	68.8%	pf	13,874	27%
Nifal	4,140	5.8%	vav-consec pf	6,378	13%
Piel	6,450	9.0%	impf	14,299	28%
Pual	460	0.6%	vav-consec impf	14,972	29%
Hithpael	830	1.2%	vav conj + impf	1,335	3%
Hifil	9,370	13.1%			
Hofal	400	0.6%			
Other	680	0.9%			

By comparison the imperative is used 4,270 times in the Hebrew Bible, infinitive absolute 796 times, infinitive construct 6,985 times, and participle 9,787 times.

¹ For a morphological comparative Semitic “grid chart,” see Goshen-Gottstein 1969 (vs. functional chart used here).

² Piel is the challenge. It has traditionally been thought of as “intensive” because of the doubling of the second root letter. While defining Piel against Hifil (as I have above, following Waltke and O’Connor) may be a good start, it does not (fully) work (see Goshen-Gottstein 1985, 282, n. 16). If Piel as “something like modification of the basic sense of the root” (283, n. 19) is more accurate, which says little of help.