# Hebrew Verbs for Dummies

Note: in my exegesis, the meanings have been modified to match the verb stem used. Sometimes the meanings have been modified to reflect the participle or the imperative mood; sometimes not. Sometimes the meanings of nouns are modified to match whether they are singular or plural; and sometimes not.

Extended and much more detailed explanations can be found under Hebrew Grammar for Dummies (or, the PDF version). This will include more extensive footnotes as well.

Some of the stems below are equivalent, but used by different authors. Some of the stems have equivalent uses, but indicate a different formation made upon the original verb.

Hebrew Stems              The Participle              Verb States (or Verb Forms)
                          Hebrew Tenses

| Hebrew Stems | |
|---|---|
| **Stem** | **Usage/Additional Information** |
| **Hiphil** | Causative of the Qal stem of a verb. The subject *causes* the action of the verb, but does not directly perform the act. In many instances, we can simply take the Qal form of a verb and precede it with *to cause to; to make to*. For instance, David *reigned* over Israel (Qal stem with David as the subject of the verb); God *caused* David *to reign* over Israel (Hiphil stem of the same verb with God as the subject). The Hiphil is not necessarily always cumbersome to translate; she *caused* him *to eat* could also be translated, she *fed* him. Although we may understand this, in the English, to be the result of compulsion; in the Hebrew, the concept could be more subtle, such as making something possible to do or the granting of permission to do a thing.[1] The Hiphil form is found approximately 13.3% of the time in Scripture.[2] |
| **Hithpael** | (1) Reflexive of the Piel (intensive) stem. According to BDB: a) This form primarily expresses a "reflexive" action of Qal or Piel, e.g., he wore versus he dressed himself; *he washed* versus *he washed himself; he fell* versus *he flung himself; he sold* versus *he sold himself; I hide, I conceal [something];* versus *I hide myself*. (2) This can be used in a reciprocal sense: *they spoke [with one another]* as opposed to simply *they spoke*. Other examples: *they saw they looked upon one another they whispered they whispered one to another*. (3) Iterative sense: *he walks about; he walks to and fro*. Zodhiates adds that this stem can also have a passive meaning, in which the verb acts upon the subject (not mentioned by Seow). (4) Some verbs in Hithpael are translated as a simple action. The reflexive action os understood. *he prayed, he mourned, he became angry*. This form accounts for 1.4% of the verbs parsed.[3] |

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[1] *The Complete Word Study Old Testament;* Dr. S. Zodhiates; ©1994 AMG Publishers; p. 2274.

[2] According to http://www.verselink.org/bibletext3/dict/bdb/h88.htm accessed September 19, 2009.

[3] Choon-Leong Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew (Revised Edition);* Abingdon Press, Nashville; ©1995, p. 298. Also taken from http://www.verselink.org/bibletext3/dict/bdb/h88.htm#h8804 accessed September 19, 2009.

| Stem | Usage/Additional Information |
|---|---|
| **Hithpalal, Hithpalel, Hithpalpel, Hithpoel, Hithpolel** | Reflexive of the Piel (intensive) stem. These differ from the Hithpael only in form, but they affect the verb in the same way. Some authors do not treat these as separate forms, but simply lump them together with the **Hithpael**. Some authors simply use slightly different names (e.g., Gesenius uses the term *Hithpalel* and BDB uses the term *Hithpolel*). |
| **Hophal** | Passive of the Hiphil (causative) stem. *This form is accounts for 0.6% of the verbs parsed.*[4] |
| **Niphal** | Passive of the Qal stem. |
| **Piel** | Intensive stem of a verb |
| **Pilpel, Polel, Pilel** | Intensive stem of the verb, as above, but a different pattern. Some authors simply us slightly different names (e.g., Gesenius uses the term *Pilel* and BDB uses the term *Polel*). |
| **Poalal, Polal, Pulal** | Passive intensive. |
| **Poel** | Intensive stem. |
| **Pual** | Passive intensive stem. |
| **Qal** | Common or basic stem of a verb, usually in the active voice; the fundamental meanings of a verb are found in the Qal |
| **Participle** | The participle is often used as a noun, describing a person by what he does or has done. When preceded by a definite article, it refers to a particular person involved in the activity of the verb. Without the definite article, this can be any person involved in the activity of the verb or a reference to simply the activity of the verb alone. The Qal active participle is used in several different ways in the Hebrew: When preceded by a definite article, it acts as a noun whose function is described by the verb, e.g., the occupation of a person; It acts as a relative pronoun and verbal description, describing actions which can be attributed to the preceding noun (e.g., *in the presence of the witnesses <u>who were subscribing</u> the book of the purchase* in Jer. 32:12); It behaves as an adjective describing a noun in context (e.g., <u>*sinful*</u> *nation* in Isa. 1:4); and, it acts as a descriptive verbal phrase. |

## Verb States (or Verb Forms)

| State | Usage and Information |
|---|---|
| **Absolute** | The **absolute** is the normal, unqualified state of a noun or of the nominative form. This tells us that we are dealing with our subject. The absolute often distinguishes the noun from its construct. A verb can be in the absolute state. |

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[4] According to http://www.verselink.org/bibletext3/dict/bdb/h88.htm#h8825 accessed September 19, 2009

## Verb States (or Verb Forms)

| State | Usage and Information |
|---|---|
| **Apocopated** | **Apocopated** means that the verb has been shortened. Generally, this means that the final hê (ה) and the vowel which precedes it are dropped. Apocopation is used when the verb functions as a jussive or when the verb is affixed to a wâw consecutive (here, it is affixed to a wâw conjunction). |
| **Cohortative** | The **cohortative** expresses volition. In the English, we often render this with *let* or *may;* in the plural, this can be *let us*. The cohortative is designed for the 1st person, it can express a wish or a desire or purpose or an intent. It is found in conditional statements. |
| **Infinitive absolute** | The **infinitive absolute** has four uses: ❶ when found alone, it sometimes acts as an English gerund, so that we may add *ing* to the end of the verb; ❷ When found directly before its verbal cognate, it serves to intensify or strengthen the action or the meaning of the verb which follows; ❸ When it follows its cognate verb, it emphasizes the duration or the continuation of the verbal idea; and, ❹ it is sometimes used as a substitute for a finite verb form.[5] |
| **Infinitive construct** | An **infinitive construct** of a verb can function as a verbal noun and as a verb (similar to the English infinitive; but it can also be used like a participle). It can accept a subject and an object. The subject is identified by a pronominal suffix. This is why many translators render *my soul* as the subject of the sentence. Gibson writes that the **infinitive construct** can act just like a verb prior to the object. That is, the substantive which follows is the object of the verb. A **construct** generally acts as a genitive of relation and we often place between it and the following substantive the word *of* to indicate that. However, the infinitive construct *can serve in any nominal capacity: subject, predicate, object of a preposition*.[6] The infinitive construct is one of the two infinitives found in the Hebrew language without reference to person, gender or number. The short explanation is that the lâmed plus the infinitive construct can introduce a purpose clause, a result clause or a temporal clause. It can act as a noun or a gerund in any syntactic position. The subject or agent will generally follow an infinitive construct. The subject can be separated from the infinitive by the object or by other intervening words, breaking the construct relation and the infinitive construct acts primarily as a verb. |
| **Infinitive Construct with the bêyth preposition** | The infinitive construct, when combined with the bêyth preposition, can often take on a temporal meaning and may be rendered *when [such and such happens]*. It can serve as a temporal marker that denotes an event which occurs simultaneously with the action of the main verb. |

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[5] *Biblical Hebrew;* Page Kelley; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., ©1992, pp. 184–185.
[6] *The Complete Word Study Old Testament;* Dr. S. Zodhiates; ©1994; p 2277.

## Verb States (or Verb Forms)

| State | Usage and Information |
|---|---|
| **Infinitive construct with the kaph preposition** | The kaph preposition, or k$^e$ (כְ) [pronounced *k$^e$*], which means *like, as, according to,* when this is combined with an infinitive, it can also take on the meanings *as, often, when, as soon as.* It carries with it a temporal connotation. |
| **Infinitive Construct with the lâmed preposition** | The lâmed with an infinitive construct generally expresses purpose or result, although it can have three other common uses with the infinitive: (1) It can have a gerundial or adverbial sense to explain the circumstances of a previous action; (2) it can act as a periphrastic future in nominal clauses; and, (3) it can behave as a gerund, in the sense of *is to be, must be, ought to be*.[7] (4) Lâmed with the infinitive can connote *shall* or *must*.[8] |
| **Jussive** | A **jussive** expresses the speaker's desire, wish or command. We often add into the translation *may* or *let*.[9] The **jussive** expresses volition in the third person and its ideas are dependent upon the relationship between the parties involved. When it is a superior to an underling, it may represent a command, instruction or the granting of permission. In the other direction, the jussive would be a request, a prayer or a request for permission. With the negative, the jussive expresses prohibition or denial.[10] Unfortunately, there is generally nothing which distinguishes a jussive in the imperfect tense (there are a few verbs which are exceptions. |
| **Voluntative** | The **voluntative** is alluded to in Owen's, but I can't find this terminology in any of my Hebrew grammar books, nor in ZPDB or any other Hebrew source whatsoever. This is probably the jussive. What we have here is the letter hê as a suffix to the verb. The translators who do not acknowledge any sort of difference are *The Amplified Bible*, Keil and Delitzsch, KJV, Noyes—in fact, the only place where we find any sort of difference in translation is with *The Emphasized Bible,* with Owen, and, with, of all places, Today's English Version. I am going to tentatively go with the idea of being compelled by oneself and use the words *let, I must, I could, I would, I should, I may*. |

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[7] the bulk of this was paraphrased from J.C.L. Gibson, *Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar~Syntax;* 4th Edition, © T&T Clark Ltd., 1994, pp. 127–132 and from *Biblical Hebrew;* by Page Kelley; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., ©1992, p. 434.

[8] Keil & Delitzsch's *Commentary on the Old Testament;* ©1966 Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.; Vol. 2, p. 438.

[9] This is all taken from *Biblical Hebrew;* by Page Kelley; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., ©1992, pp. 131, 292.

[10] This is all taken from *The Complete Word Study Old Testament;* Dr. S. Zodhiates; pp 2277–2278.

| Hebrew Tenses | |
|---|---|
| **Tense** | **Usage and Information** |
| **Imperfect** | The traditional view of the **imperfect** tense is that it is a reference to an incomplete or to a future action.  This is true, to some extent.  Sometimes the imperfect tense views a portion of an event—i.e., it focuses in on a specific portion of an event and does not concern itself with the event having already occurred or not.  This is often used for on-going action, contingent action, and it can be *used to convey capability, possibility and obligation,* making it similar to the *subjunctive and optative moods in the Greek.*[11]  There are events in the past and in the future which the Hebrews would describes as though they were in the middle of the events—therefore, they would use the *imperfect* (or, *future*) tense.  The imperfect tense can refer to a part of an event or situation.  Therefore, we are not necessarily looking forward to this event occurring, nor is what occurred the entire event. |
| **Perfect** | The traditional view of the perfect tense is that it is a completed action.  However, the **perfect** looks at the action of the verb as a whole, without an thought to the duration of the events or to their completeness.  Zodhiates says that the perfect tense can stand for some action which has begun in the past (or the present) and continues into the present (or the future).  It is a tense which examines the action of the verb as a whole, whether the action is still ongoing or not.  Context tells us whether we are viewing the action of the verb from its inception, progression or completion.  A perfect tense can be action which has not even been begun yet and will occur in the future (the verb *give* in Judges 15:13).  The perfect tense can look back on a completed event; it can view an ongoing event from the standpoint of its entire action; and it can even be used of a future event (many prophecies are in the perfect tense—a use often referred to as the prophetic perfect).  The *past tense* (the perfect) indicated an event which was certain.  So, an event which was in the future, but certain, would call for the use of the perfect tense. |

There are several major misunderstandings when it comes to the wâw consecutive followed by a verb in the imperfect tense.

## The Wâw Consecutive and the Imperfect Tense

The misunderstandings: the imperfect tense often refers to a continuous action, an action which takes place over a period of time, a set of independent acts that occur over a period of time, or a future action.

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[11] This was taken primarily from *The Complete Word Study Old Testament;* Dr. S. Zodhiates; p 2277.

## The Wâw Consecutive and the Imperfect Tense

There are times when the punctiliar nature of the imperfect verb is clear, as it is here. Tamar grabs the pan of bread and then dumps out the bread. There is no indication here that these are prolonged actions. Therefore, for many centuries, it was taught that a wâw conversative then made the continuous action punctiliar; that is, an imperfect tense is then made (converted) into a perfect tense.

Both of these explanations are wrong. What is really happening is, the action is just being moved along successively. The wâw consecutive followed by an imperfect in the midst of several similar constructions simply indicate that we are looking at a series of successive actions. Anytime you see several wâw consecutive stringing together several imperfect verbs, we are simply observing the action as it occurs, as sequential events. The action of the verbs may be punctiliar or continuous; but the Hebrew construction is focusing upon the consecutive nature of the actions.

This may help to explain a great many passages in the Old Testament. Let me warn you that, this did not come out of another Hebrew grammar book, but as a result of exegeting thousands of Bible passages. This explanation makes the most sense to me.