

Hebrew verbs are categorized in several ways: by roots, binyanim or stems, and forms. I will explain roots, binyanim, and forms, compare various terms that grammarians use for these, and offer models for conceptualizing the verb.

**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. The spelling patterns associated with the various weak roots are among the most challenging problems for students. Some of the letters, for example, characteristically drop out or assimilate when conjugated. 1<sup>st</sup> י, 1<sup>st</sup> נ, hollow verbs (i.e., 2<sup>nd</sup> ו/י), and 3<sup>rd</sup> ה are often missing in Qal imperfect verbs. *Jonah* יוֹנָה contains the missing letters—ones that are swallowed up. Gutturals account for the other challenges. See below for the ten kinds of weak roots.

**Binyanim/Stems.** Hebrew verbs are modified to express different meanings. These inflections or conjugations are traditionally called *binyanim* (בִּנְיָנִים)—buildings. The basic form is called 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 *to do, make* (this is an unfortunate choice for a model because of its irregular middle letter). The modifications are formed either by internal intensification of the root or by the addition of preformatives.

**Forms.** refer to the way verbs are conjugated with the subject pronoun. Forms are traditionally referred to as tenses, inflections, principal parts, or conjugations. There are five forms: perfect, imperfect, imperative, infinitive, and participle (jussive and cohortative are considered subgroups of impf). These forms are not tenses (even though tenses are part of the way we translate the verb forms) but signify aspect. **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 בָּקַשׁ *to 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.

*Converted Imperfect* signifies complete action or temporal sequence.

*Perfect* signifies complete action or description of state or condition.

*Converted Perfect* is not a separate form, but is analogous to the converted imperfect, and can indicate future ongoing, incomplete.

Neither “tense” nor “aspect” really work in explaining 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 Names.** There are many different terms used by popular grammars. Part of the reason for the lack of standard grammatical terms is the peculiarities of the language. In any event, here is a summary of other grammatical terms, keyed to the textbook’s preferred terms, which you are likely to come across when working with Hebrew language tools (see Waltke and O’Connor, 29.1b; Seow, Excursus C; Joüon, 111.b).

Conventional	3ms Qal (using model term קָטַל)	Other Common Terms
perfect	<i>qatal</i> ( <i>qtl, qatel, qatol</i> [for general Qal, A, I, and U class])	affix, suffix conjugation, past
imperfect	<i>yiqtol</i> ( <i>yqtl</i> )	prefix, prefix conjugation, non-perfective, future

converted perfect	<i>veqatal</i>	vav reversive affix, vav conversive, vav relative, vav inversive
converted imperfect	<i>vayyiqtol</i>	preterite, vav consecutive, vav relative, vav inversive, vav conversive prefix
conjunctive vav + impf	<i>veyiqtol</i>	
participle (passive)	<i>qotel (qatul)</i>	
infinitive absolute (construct)	<i>qatol (qtol)</i>	

**Ten Root Types**      **Other systems based on the three root letters as I, II, and III, or פ, ע, and ל from the model word פָּעַל (the term used for binyanim/stems)**

Peh Guttural	I-Guttural	1 <sup>st</sup> Guttural; פ-Guttural	
Pe Aleph	I-Aleph; I-א	1 <sup>st</sup> א; א''פ	
Pe Yod	I-Yod; I-י	1 <sup>st</sup> י; י''פ	
Pe Nun	I-Nun; I-נ	1 <sup>st</sup> נ; נ''פ	
Ayin Guttural	II-Guttural	Middle Guttural; ע-Guttural	
Ayin Vav/Yod	II-Vav/Yod; II-ו/י	<b>Hollow</b> ; ו''ע/י''ע	(Biconsonantal)
Double Ayin	II=III	<b>Geminate</b> ; ע''ע	(twin consonant)
Lamed Guttural	III-Guttural	3 <sup>rd</sup> Guttural; ל-Guttural	(III-ה/ע)
Lamed Aleph	III-Aleph; III-א	3 <sup>rd</sup> א; א''ל	
Lamed He	III-Heh; III-ה	3 <sup>rd</sup> ה; ה''ל	

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

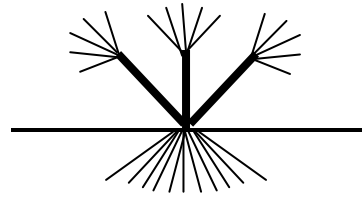
**Models** The purpose of the following models (and statistics) is pedagogical. Students often find confusing the relationship between root, binyan/stem, and form. The models lay out, in different ways, an overview of the dimensions or categories of the verb so the student has an overview what needs to be learned. These models are ways of imagining the Hebrew verb in general to facilitate learning.

(1) The Hebrew verb can be thought of according to an *organic metaphor*, each verb root, whatever its kind, is conjugated in one of the stems and in a particular form (though see Gesenius, 30.1cd). 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

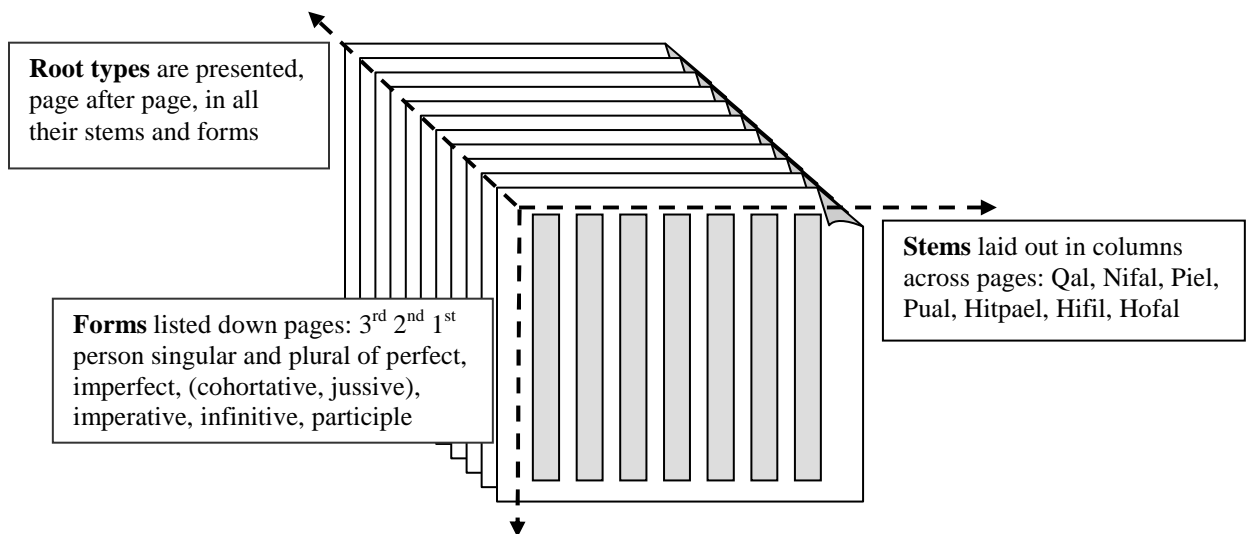
STEMS/BINYANIM (**Qal**, Nifal, **Piel**, Pual, Hitpael, **Hifil**, Hofal)

ROOTS: strong, 1<sup>st</sup> yod, 1<sup>st</sup> nun, 1<sup>st</sup> aleph, hollow, 3<sup>rd</sup> heh, 3<sup>rd</sup> aleph, 1<sup>st</sup> guttural, 2<sup>nd</sup> guttural, 3<sup>rd</sup> guttural, geminate



First, verbs have three letter roots. The root can be “strong” or “sound,” with three letters that will not drop out or assimilate and can each take a dagesh, or it can be one of the ten kinds of weak roots, 1<sup>st</sup> ך, 1<sup>st</sup> ך, 3<sup>rd</sup> ך, and so on. Second, the root can be inflected in one of the stems: Qal, Nifal, and so on. Third, the verb can be inflected in one of the forms: perfect, imperfect, and so on.

(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 stacked into a “cube” or a stack of pages. The vertical axis on each page represents the forms, and the horizontal axis the stems. The successive pages represent the root types. The first page is the strong root, and Qal perfect and imperfect are listed at the top of the left hand column.



(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]).<sup>1</sup>

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

The vertical axes 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 represents the notion of effecting or causing a state corresponding to the basic meaning of the root. 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).<sup>2</sup> *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			percent relative to pf/impf
Qal	49,180	68.8%	pf	13,874	27%
Nifal	4,140	5.8%	conv-pf	6,378	13%
Piel	6,450	9.0%	impf	14,299	28%
Pual	460	0.6%	conv-impf	14,972	29%
Hithpael	830	1.2%	vav+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.

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

<sup>2</sup> Piel is the real problem. 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, defining it against Hifil, as here is only a start. Yet, see discussion and citations in Arnold and Choi, 42-43. They follow Waltke and O’Connor and say what Piel verbs cause is “for all practical purposes an adjectival causation predicate” (43).