

Verbal Stems

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While the conjugation of a verb applies to “the contour of a situation in time,”* the stem of a verb reflects the type of action that is happening.

There are some complex linguistic reasons for this description, which we will completely ignore.

*Arnold and Choi, *Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 36-37.

Verbal Stems

We have already seen one verbal stem of Biblical Hebrew – the Qal – which simply denotes a simple action. Usually it is active in voice, though it can be stative.

There are six other verbal stems which are worthwhile to know, because they are the most common.

Niphal

נִקְפַּל

יִקְפַּל

Niphal

The Niphal is a simple, passive action. If a verb is in the Niphal, the subject is the recipient, rather than the doer, of the action.

If קָטַל (Qal Perf 3ms) means “He killed,” then the Niphal נִקְטַל (Perf 3ms) would mean “He *was* killed.”

Likewise, if the imperfect יִקְטֹל is translated “He will kill,” then the Niphal יִקְטַל would be translated “He will *be* killed.”

Niphal

The Niphal might also denote a reflexive action – that is, an action which the subject performs on itself.

For instance, the Niphal נִשְׁמַר is translated as “He guarded himself.” Lexicons are often very good at making this distinction for you.

Piel

The Piel has traditionally been described as the “intensive” stem. So, while the Qal שָׁבַר is translated as “He broke,” the Piel שִׁבַּר is translated as “He shattered.”

קִפַּל

Piel

This description has, however, come under extensive criticism, and thus is largely rejected. It simply does not accurately explain enough of the Piel verbs that appear in BH.

The Piel includes at least the following types of action:

Piel: Factitive

Turns a intransitive verb (usually Qal) into transitive.

וַאֲגַדְלָהּ שְׁמֶךָ

Piel waw+Imperf 1cs

“And I **will make** your name **great...**” (Gen 12:2)

A Qal verb (3fs) would be translated, “Your name *will be great...*”

Piel: Denominative

In many cases, Hebrew nouns are formed from verbal stems. The noun for sojourner (מְגוֹר), for instance is from the verbal root meaning “to sojourn” (גוּר).

The Piel can function in the opposite direction, making nouns into verbs. In these cases, the word is typically translated in a simple active voice.

דַּבַּר > דִּבֵּר

Piel: Frequentative

The Piel may also indicate a repeated or iterative action.

כָּל-הַיּוֹם קָדַר הִלְכֹתִי Piel Perf 1cs

“All day, mourning, I **walk around...**”(Psalm 38:7)

Pual

The Pual is essentially the passive Piel.

וְהַפְּשַׁתָּהּ וְהַשְׁעַרְתָּהּ נִכְתָּה Pual Perf 3fs

“The flax and the barley **were ruined...**” (Ex 9:31)

Hithpael

הִתְקַטַּל

The Hithpael often has a reflexive or reciprocal meaning.

וַיִּתְחַבְּאוּ הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה

“And the man and the woman **hid themselves** from the presence of Yahweh...” (Gen 3:8)

Hiphil

הִקְטִיל

The Hiphil is a causative stem. As such, it often takes two direct objects.

וְהוּא יִנְחִיל אוֹתָם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ

“And he **will cause** them to **inherit** the land...” (Deut 3:28)

Hophal

The Hophal is the passive of the Hiphil.

קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּרַכְתִּי אֲשֶׁר הֵבִיִּאת לְךָ

“Please take the blessing
that **is brought** to you...” (Gen 33:11)

Verbal Stems

This is just a general outline of the verbal stems. You will use a combination of the lexicons and grammars to help you interpret verbs as you come across them.

If a verb only appears in one stem, there may not be any particular interpretive nuance to the fact that it appears in a non-Qal stem.

Frequency of Use by Stem

- Qal : 37903
- Niphal: 3016
- Piel: 4474
- Pual: 263
- Hitpael: 499
- Hiphil: 6423
- Hophal: 322

Hishtaphel

A unique verb that appears 173 times in the OT is תָּוָה, “to worship.” It only appears in the Hishtaphel (Eshstapel) stem.

הִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה