

Chapter 7: The Past Tense Narrative

Vocabulary:

his silver: כֶּסֶףּוֹ	or (conj.): אוֹ
he found: מָצָא	tent: אֹהֶל
justice; judgment; custom: מִשְׁפָּט	Aaron: אַהֲרֹן
prophet: נָבִיא	fire (fem.): אֵשׁ
he fell: נָפַל	he built: בָּנָה
still, yet, again (adv.): עוֹד	in the midst (of): בְּתוֹךְ
eternity; ancient time: עוֹלָם, עֲלָם	blood: דָּם, דַּמִּים
tree: עֵץ	life (pl.): חַיִּים
now (adv.): עַתָּה	sword (fem.): חֶרֶבּוֹת
voice, sound: קוֹל	his sword: חֶרֶבוֹ
much, many (adj.): רַב	he brought forth; he bore (gave birth): יָלַד
spirit; wind: רוּחַ	sea: יָם
official; leader; prince: שָׂר	Jacob: יַעֲקֹב
heavens; sky (dual. noun): שָׁמַיִם	he went down: יָרַד
gate: שַׁעַר	vessel; utensil: כֵּלִי
under; beneath; instead of (prep): תַּחַת	silver: כֶּסֶףּ

The Past Tense in Biblical Hebrew Narratives

This chapter introduces the past tense in Biblical Hebrew narratives. Since narrative texts often describe events that took place in the past, the ability to read verbs that convey the past tense is very important. These forms will allow the student to begin reading larger portions of texts that come from the Hebrew Bible.

Introduction to the inflection of Hebrew Verbs:

As alluded to several times so far in this textbook, the various inflections (perfect, imperfect, etc.) of Hebrew verbs convey aspect and not tense. That is, the imperfect inflection conveys the aspect of how the action takes place and not the tense of the action. Thus, the imperfect inflection conveys aspect in the sense of *either* the idea of action in the future *or* the idea of habitual, potential or probable action in the mind of the speaker or writer of a Biblical Hebrew text.¹ In English, action that has not taken place is commonly conveyed by the future tense. For example, if the action “guarding the king” is incomplete, the following sentence in the future tense might be the result: “he will guard the king.” Therefore, the imperfect inflection in Biblical Hebrew is often translated as the future tense, but in other cases where the present tense or the use of a modal verb is more appropriate for the imperfect inflection. Subsequent chapters will treat this topic as it relates to imperfect in greater detail, but for the present it is sufficient for the student to remember that the Hebrew verbal inflections convey aspect and not tense.

With this concept in mind, we can turn to perfect inflection. The perfect conveys the concept of a completed whole in the mind of the speaker or writer. Depending on the context, this will often (but not always) convey the idea of the past tense. It is common for introductory grammars of Hebrew to introduce an inflection (such as the perfect), and then review all of the tenses that can be conveyed by this verbal aspect. For example, it is typical to introduce the perfect aspect and then show how the perfect can convey action in the past, a perception or mood in the present, and even sometimes the future tense. While it is important to remember that Hebrew verb inflections are not static and can

¹ It should be noted that the name for the imperfect inflection is somewhat deceptive. It was previously thought that the imperfect inflection conveyed incomplete or unfinished action, and thus the name “imperfect.” Recent grammatical studies have shown that such an analysis is too simplistic for Biblical Hebrew. There are instances where the imperfect describes incomplete action (i.e., future action), but there are many other instances where it is more accurate to say that the imperfect may be used to describe “action conceived by the speaker as general, non-specific, habitual, potential, or to some degree probable” (Lamdin, p. 100).

convey different tenses, the present textbook takes a different approach—the focus will be on the presentation of the typical forms used in actual Biblical Hebrew texts to convey past narration.

Likewise, the same approach will be used for the present tense, and the common uses of the perfect tense to convey the present tense will be discussed in detail at that time.

The most frequent way to express the past tense in Biblical Hebrew narratives:

Two inflections are commonly used to describe action that took place in the past:

1. **The perfect:** As noted above, Biblical Hebrew verbs do not convey tense but aspect.

Specifically the perfect conveys the idea on the part of the speaker or writer that the action is a complete whole. This is often translated with the English past tense. For example, the perfect would be used to translate the following English sentences written in the past tense and where the action is seen as complete:

I called to the lad קָרָאתִי לַנֶּעָר

I wrote to the lad כָּתַבְתִּי לַנֶּעָר

However, the perfect might also be used to translate following English sentences written in the present tense:

I know the lad יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־הַנֶּעָר

I love the lad אָהַבְתִּי אֶת־הַנֶּעָר

In the second set of examples, the perfect inflection can be used in Hebrew to convey the idea that the love of the lad is complete, but it also conveys a continuing disposition towards an object. In this case, the Hebrew verb inflection allows the writer or speaker to convey more than is possible in the simple English present tense.

While it is important to recognize that the perfect can convey different tenses, the focus of this chapter is on uses where the perfect conveys action that takes place in the past. Other uses of the perfect will be taken up in subsequent chapters.

2. The **so-called converted imperfect**: In a manner similar to the perfect inflection, the imperfect inflection in Biblical Hebrew is used to convey the idea of incomplete aspect. This is often used to convey the future tense. However, there are a large group of verbs that look identical to imperfect forms that clearly convey the past tense. This group of verbs has previously been labeled the “converted imperfect” because they all have the same orthography and yet all convey the past tense. These forms are easy to recognize because they all follow a *waw* conjunction with a short /a/ vowel, and they typically have a doubling of the preformative.

-imperfect form; typically translated “he will guard” **יִשְׁמֹר**

-so-called converted form translated as “and he guarded” **וַיִּשְׁמֹר**

-imperfect form; typically translated “he will call” **יִקְרָא**

so-called converted form translated as “and he called” **וַיִּקְרָא**

The discovery of ancient texts at Ugarit and Tell el-Amarna that were written in Semitic languages that are related to Hebrew have allowed scholars to see that the so-called converted imperfect is actually another Hebrew inflection called the preterite. Unlike the perfect, the preterite does normally convey past action, so it will also always be translated using the past tense. The beginning student does not need to learn the historical grammar involved with the identification of the preterite, but it is sufficient for the moment to know that the so-called converted imperfect forms will almost always be translated using the past

tense. In this chapter, we will only use the 3rd person masculine singular form of the so-called converted imperfect or the preterite.

The orthography of the perfect for Hebrew verbal roots

The last chapter introduced the idea of verbal roots. To this point, the student has only experienced verbs in the vocabulary in their active participle form. From this point forward, all verbs will be introduced in the 3ms (3rd masculine singular) perfect form because this form usually preserves all of the root letters. The 3ms perfect form of strong roots is formed by placing a long /a/ vowel under the initial consonant, and a short /a/ vowel under the second consonant. The following table illustrates how to form the 3ms perfect form for several verbs that have already been encountered:

	Perfect Form		Participle Form
he heard	שָׁמַעַ	he hears	שׁוֹמֵעַ
he went	הָלַךְ	he goes	הֹלֵךְ
he served	עָבַד	he serves	עוֹבֵד
he wrote	כָּתַב	he writes	כּוֹתֵב
he ate	אָכַל	he eats	אֹכֵל

The orthography of the perfect for strong roots

The 3ms form of the perfect is formed as described above—placing a long /a/ vowel under the first root letter and a short /a/ vowel under the second root letter (שָׁמַעַ ← ש-מ-ע). The inflected forms are formed by placing an affirmative ending on the verbal root. The endings must be memorized, but they are similar to the endings found on the Class A suffixes that were learned in the

previous chapter. The following chart illustrates how the endings of the perfect are similar to the Class A suffixes:

Pl. Class A Suffixes	Plural Perfect Forms	Sg. Class A Suffixes	Sing. Perfect Forms
לָנוּ	שָׁמְרוּנוּ	לִי	שָׁמַרְתִּי
לָכֶם	שָׁמַרְתֶּם	לְךָ	שָׁמַרְתָּ
לָנוּ	שָׁמַרְתֶּן	לְךָ	שָׁמַרְתָּ
לָהֶם	שָׁמְרוּ	לוֹ	שָׁמַר
לָהֶן		לָהּ	שָׁמְרָהּ

The student should note that vowel reduction in the propretic syllable only occurs when the affirmative ending is a close syllable. When the affirmative ending is an opening syllable, the accent is found on the second syllable (e.g., שָׁמַרְתָּ) so there is no need to reduce the long /a/ vowel in the first syllable. However, when the ending is a closed syllable, the accent shifts to the end of the word with subsequent vowel reduction in the propretic syllable (e.g., שָׁמַרְתֶּם).

The orthography of verbs with gutturals in the verbal root

As the student has discovered in the previous chapters, gutturals normally do not accept a *sheva*, so there are some slight modifications for verbal roots with gutturals. In I-gutt. and II-gutt. roots, a composite sheva is found. In III-gutt. roots, the *sheva* is accepted except in the case of the 2fs form where the /a/ vowel is assimilated for III-ע or III-ה roots. In III-א roots, the *aleph* is quiescent and does not accept a vowel. III-ה roots follow a special pattern and will be treated in a subsequent chapter. The following chart illustrates these variations:

III-א root	III-gutt. root	II-gutt. root	I-gutt. root	Strong root
מ-צ-א	ש-מ-ע	א-ה-ב	ע-מ-ד	ש-מ-ר
מָצַאתִי	שָׁמַעְתִּי	אָהַבְתִּי	עָמַדְתִּי	שָׁמַרְתִּי
מָצַאתָ	שָׁמַעְתָּ	אָהַבְתָּ	עָמַדְתָּ	שָׁמַרְתָּ
מָצַאתְּ	שָׁמַעְתְּ	אָהַבְתְּ	עָמַדְתְּ	שָׁמַרְתְּ
מָצַא	שָׁמַע	אָהַב	עָמַד	שָׁמַר
מָצַאָה	שָׁמַעָה	אָהַבָה	עָמַדָה	שָׁמַרָה
מָצַאנוּ	שָׁמַעְנוּ	אָהַבְנוּ	עָמַדְנוּ	שָׁמַרְנוּ
מָצַאתֶם	שָׁמַעְתֶּם	אָהַבְתֶּם	עָמַדְתֶּם	שָׁמַרְתֶּם
מָצַאתֶן	שָׁמַעְתֶּן	אָהַבְתֶּן	עָמַדְתֶּן	שָׁמַרְתֶּן
מָצַאֵי	שָׁמַעוּ	אָהַבוּ	עָמַדוּ	שָׁמַרוּ

Orthography of the 3ms preterite in narrative sequence (so-called converted imperfect):

The 3ms preterite in narrative narratives is an extremely frequent form in Biblical Hebrew, so this form will be introduced in this chapter before other inflections of the imperfect are introduced in subsequent chapters. To this point the student has already encountered in the vocabulary two such preterite verbs in narrative sequence:

“and he said” = וַיֹּאמֶר

“and he called” = וַיִּקְרָא

In each case that has been encountered, two features allow the student to recognize this verb:

1. There is a *waw* conjunction with a short /a/ vowel (וַ).
2. There is a doubling of the preformative (in the case of the 3ms form, a *yod*).

At this point in the textbook, the emphasis will be on recognition of the 3ms forms and not on the ability to reproduce the forms. The following table shows how some of the forms that have been learned to this point are found in the preterite in narrative sequence:

Translation	Pret. in narrative seq.	Verbal root
And he guarded	וַיִּשְׁמֹר	ש-מ-ר
And he wrote	וַיִּכְתֹּב	כ-ת-ב
And he said	וַיֹּאמֶר	א-מ-ר
And he called	וַיִּקְרָא	ק-ר-א
And he heard	וַיִּשְׁמַע	ש-מ-ע
And he went out	וַיֵּצֵא	י-צ-א
And he knew	וַיֵּדַע	י-ד-ע
And he went	וַיֵּלֶךְ	ה-ל-ך
And he came	וַיָּבֹא	ב-ו-א

Reading exercise (adapted from Gen 19)

1. וַיָּבֹא מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה לְסֹדֹם¹ וְלוֹט יָשָׁב בְּשַׁעַר־סֹדֹם וַיִּקְרָךְ לוֹט לַמִּלְאָךְ :
2. וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹט אֶל־הַמִּלְאָךְ סוּר נָא² אֶל־בֵּיתִי וְלִין עִמִּי הַלַּיְלָה³ :
3. וַיָּבֹא מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֶל־בֵּית לוֹט וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לוֹט עָשָׂה מִשְׁתֶּה⁴ וַיֹּאכְלוּ :
4. וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אָנְשֵׁי הָעִיר אָנְשֵׁי סֹדֹם הָלְכוּ לְבֵית לוֹט מִנְעַר וְעַד־זָקֵן כָּל־הָעָם
5. וַיִּקְרְאוּ⁵ אֶל־לוֹט וַיֹּאמְרוּ⁶ לוֹ אַיֵּה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־בָּא אֵלֶיךָ⁷ הַלַּיְלָה⁸ הַזֶּה אֶת־הָאִישׁ אֵלֵינוּ⁹ וְנִדְעָה¹⁰ אֹתוֹ :

1. To Sodom
2. please turn = נָא סוּר
- 2א. הַלַּיְלָה = tonight
3. a feast
4. and they called
5. and they said
6. to you
7. tonight
8. bring out (an imperative)
9. to us
10. that we may know (i.e., sexually)