

# Ross Ch.10 Perfect Conjugation Handout

## 10.5 Translating the Perfect conjugation

In Biblical Hebrew (BH) there are two main conjugations: the Perfect (Ross 10) and the Imperfect (Ross 17). The use of a conjugation pattern determines the speaker’s (or writer’s) *portrayal/conceptualization* of the verbal action (its aspect). To put it in very simple terms:

- the Perfect conjugation portrays an event as a bounded, self-contained whole (perfective aspect);
- the Imperfect conjugation portrays an event as unbounded & open-ended, or in progress (imperfective aspect).

The following chart might be helpful:

Perfective aspect	Imperfective aspect
Moses <i>ate</i> a mutton-burger.	Moses <i>was eating</i> a mutton-burger.
self-contained	open-ended
bounded	unbounded

The choice to use perfective aspect is a choice to portray the action (*Moses ate*) as a bounded whole, or in summary fashion without reference to the way it unfolds in time, and without reference to anything that happened between the beginning and the end of the action/event. On the other hand, the choice to use imperfective aspect (*Moses was eating*) is a choice to portray an action that has begun but without reference to its conclusion (thus it is “open-ended” rather than self-contained).

NOTE: BH’s conjugations patterns (the Perfect conj. and the Imperfect conj.) do not signify tense (most languages we know are tense-prominent languages, like English or Spanish). BH’s verbal system is aspect-prominent, not tense-prominent! At the same time, BH frequently employs the Perfect conj. to describe past time events, but the Imperfect conjugation to describe non-past time events (present or future). We’ll see this more in Ross 17.

Perfect Conjugation	Imperfect Conjugation
פָּקַד מֹשֶׁה בַּיִת:	יִפְקֹד מֹשֶׁה בַּיִת:
Moses visited a house.	Moses will visit a house.
frequently past time events	frequently non-past time events

How should we translate BH sentences with Perfect verbs? There are a number of ways, based on context and the verb's semantics.

1. Simple past tense in English.	Most common option.	נָפַל מֹשֶׁה: Moses <i>fell</i> .
2. Perfect tenses in English.	Contextually dependent, if the verbal action has ongoing relevance to the time of speaking or some other reference time.	A: Why isn't Moses here? B. : נָפַל מֹשֶׁה: Moses <i>has fallen</i> ... (present perfect)  A: Why wasn't Moses there? B. : נָפַל מֹשֶׁה: Moses <i>had fallen</i> ... (past perfect)
3. Present tense in English.	a. If lexically the verb is stative (indicates the Subject's state, disposition, experience, or mental activity), the Perfect can be translated as present tense.  b. Contextually, for verbs where the assertion is habitually or proverbially true, present tense can be used.	זָכַרְתָּ: = 'you remembered' (in past context) = 'you remember' (in present context)  A. Why don't you war? B. : יִשְׁבְּנוּ בְּשָׁלוֹם: <i>We dwell</i> in peace.

### 10.6 Sign of the Accusative (DO-marker)

If a BH verb is transitive, then it takes a direct object (DO). Many grammars describe the DO function of a noun as "accusative." When the DO in BH is *definite*, then it will commonly be prefixed with the particle אֶת/אֵת (some call this particle the *sign of the accusative*). A noun is considered definite if it is a proper noun (Moses), is articular (the horse), or has a pronoun (his horse). If the DO is not definite, it will not be preceded by a form of אֶת.

NOTE: this particle is a *function word* and serves to signal a definite DO; do not translate it.

שָׁפַט הָאִישׁ עַם    The man judged a people.  
שָׁפַט הָאִישׁ אֶת הָעָם (אֶת־הָעָם)    The man judged the people.

זָכַר הַמֶּלֶךְ סוּס	The king remembered a horse.
זָכַר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת הַסּוּס (אֶת-הַסּוּס)	The king remembered the horse.
זָכַר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת יְהוָה (אֶת- יְהוָה)	The king remembered YHWH.
בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:	God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen 1:1)

### 10.7 Syntax of Verbal Sentences

There is some debate about what the standard word order is for BH sentences. Many believe that the normal word order is V-S-O (that is, Verb first, then Subject, then Object, if the constituents are present). If the S or O is fronted (placed before the verb), it is to give it marked focus (for ex., contrastive focus: “I love pizza; *lima beans* I hate.”).

Let’s review the prior clauses and see the V-S-O word order.

How does BH negate verbs? By placing the negative particle **לא/לוֹא** (the defective spelling is most frequent) directly before the verb.

שָׁפַט הָאִישׁ אֶת הָעָם (אֶת-הָעָם)	The man judged the people.
לֹא שָׁפַט הָאִישׁ אֶת הָעָם (אֶת-הָעָם)	The man did not judge the people.

Finally, keep in mind that Hebrew verbs agree with their S in person, gender, and #. The personal ending/inflectional markings are agreement features of the verb that must reflect the Subject-noun. If the S is overt/explicit, then it is translated as the S. If there is no overt S (if there’s a null-Subject), then the inflectional marking provides the implied S and you should use the appropriate pronoun as your English Subject.

יָרְדָה הָאִשָּׁה לְנָהָר:	<u>The woman</u> went down to the river.
יָרְדָה לְנָהָר:	<u>She</u> went down to the river.