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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perfective aspect</th>
<th>Imperfective aspect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moses ate a mutton-burger.</td>
<td>Moses was eating a mutton-burger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-contained</td>
<td>open-ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bounded</td>
<td>unbounded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perfect Conjugation</th>
<th>Imperfect Conjugation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>פָּקַד מֹשֶׁה בַ֫יִת׃</td>
<td>יִפְקֹד מֹשֶׁה בַ֫יִת׃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses visited a house.</td>
<td>Moses will visit a house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frequently past time events</td>
<td>frequently non-past time events</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.
   - נפל משה: Moses fell.

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?
   - ב: נפל משה: Moses has fallen….
     - (present perfect)
   - A: Why wasn’t Moses there?
   - ב: נפל משה: Moses had fallen….
     - (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.
   - זכרת: = ‘you remembered’ (in past context)
   - זכירת = ‘you remember’ (in present context)
   - A: Why don’t you war?
   - ב: ישבענו בשלום: We dwell in peace.
   - b. Contextually, for verbs where the assertion is habitually or proverbially true, present tense can be used.

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 אֵת/אֶת־ (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 אֵת.

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

- שפט האיש עלם: The man judged a people.
- שפט האיש אֵת הָעָם (אֶת־הָעָם): The man judged the people.
The king remembered a horse.

The king remembered the horse.

The king remembered YHWH.

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 (the defective spelling is most frequent) directly before the verb.

The man judged the people.

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.

The woman went down to the river.

She went down to the river.