

# **Biblical Hebrew Grammar for Beginners**

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## The Root

In Hebrew and other Semitic languages, the basic meaning of a word is carried by the consonants. Vowels and a variety of affixes add nuances to that basic meaning. What we find, then, are sets of word families comprised of words that are related to one another yet are distinctly different.

Consider the following sets:

- מֶלֶךְ *king*
- מַלְכָּה *queen*
- מַלְכוּת *reign* (noun)
  
- שֶׁבַע *seven*
- שָׁבוּעַ *week*

In the first set, one can distinctly identify the consonants *mem*, *lamed*, and *khaf*, in that order, in all the words. In the second set, one can identify the consonants *shin*, *bet*, and *ayin*, in that order, in all the words. These consonant groups are traditionally referred to as the “root” of the word.

Roots, which are hypothetical forms as opposed to real words, are usually composed of three consonants, as in the two examples above. In some words, however, only two consonants are obvious, and in others, four. Examples are the words אֹר *light* (*alef*, *resh*) and קֶשֶׁטִים *scales* (*qof*, *sin*, *qof*, *sin*), respectively. Root consonants, sometimes called “radicals”, are often referred to schematically as C1, C2, C3 (first consonant, second consonant, third consonant). In most situations a root can be assumed, but in some there may be more than one possible root or the word is unique enough so that a root cannot be identified with certainty.

Roots are used as the organizational principle in dictionaries and concordances, and as a means of reference to groups of words. Common ways of listing roots are the consonants separated by periods, or the consonants with a root symbol, as in ש.ב.ע or √ שבע.

### [The Root: Exercise](#)