THE IMPERFECT VERB

[Sometimes called the "Prefix" or "Non-Perfective" conjugation]
see Waltke, § 31.1.2 - 31.7.2

NOTE: The following syntactical options for the "imperfect verb" also apply to the *perfect with waw-consecutive.*

A. DENOTING THE FUTURE

> For contingency situations ("if", "when") with specific future, see section F of this chapter.

1. **Specific Future** - denotes a real act occurring in the future.

Isa 7:14   *"Therefore the Lord Himself <u>will</u> <u>give</u> you a sign."*

אוֹת לָכֶם הוּא אֲדֹנָי יִתֵּן לָכֵן
sign to-you himself Lord he-will-give therefore

2. **Historical Future** - denotes the future from the viewpoint of a past moment. This appears only in a dependent clause; not common (normally use "would" when translating).

               Perf Vb   Impf Vb

2 Kgs 13:14   *"Now Elisha was sick with the sickness from which he <u>would</u> <u>die</u>."*

בּוֹ יָמוּת אֲשֶׁר חָלְיוֹ . . .
from-him he-would-die which illness-of-him

3. **Anterior Future** - denotes an act in the future which is prior to another future act (use "will have"; not common).

Jud 6:26   *"And you will offer up burnt offerings with the wood of the Asherah which you <u>will</u> <u>have</u> <u>cut</u> <u>down</u>."*

תִּכְרֹת אֲשֶׁר הָאֲשֵׁרָה . . .
you-cut-down that the-Asherah-pole

B. DENOTING A REPEATED ACTION   [Waltke, § 31.2 - 31.3]

1. **Habitual Imperfect** - conceives of a general action (universal?) as occurring over and over again in the past, present and future (involves a timeless truth or principle). [Waltke refers to this as "habitual non-perfective," whereas Chisholm (*From Exegesis to Exposition*) refers to this as "characteristic or habitual present"].

This is similar to "gnomic perfect," but the gnomic perfect conceives the event or state as a single event. In translation, however, the difference is not distinguishable.

Deut 1:44   *"They pursued you as bees <u>do</u>."*

                                                         See next page for another example.

הַדְּבֹרִים תַּעֲשֶׂינָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אֶתְכֶם וַיִּרְדְּפוּ
the-bees they-do just-as you and-they-chased

Prov 10:1   *"A wise son <u>makes</u> a father <u>glad</u>."*

אָב   יְשַׂמַּח־   חָכָם   בֵּן
father he-brings-joy wise   son

2.   **Present Progressive Imperfect** - denotes the progress of an action in present time (viewed as actually going on). Occurs frequently with questions. [Waltke refers to this as "progressive non-perfective," and Chisholm refers to it as "present progressive"].

2 Sam 16:9   *"Why <u>does</u> this dead dog <u>insult</u> my lord the king?"*

הַמֶּלֶךְ   אֲדֹנִי   אֶת־   הַזֶּה   הַמֵּת   הַכֶּלֶב   יְקַלֵּל   לָמָה
the-king lord-of-me *** the-this the-dead the-dog should-he-curse why?

Ps 121:1   *"I <u>lift</u> up my eyes unto the hills."*

הֶהָרִים   אֶל־   עֵינַי   אֶשָּׂא
the-hills   to   eyes-of-me I-will-lift-up

Note: These can also occur with stative verbs (with stress on the present situation):

Ps 61:3   *"Lead me to a rock that <u>is higher</u> than I."*

תַּנְחֵנִי   מִמֶּנִּי   יָרוּם   בְּצוּר־
you-lead-me more-than-me he-is-high to-rock

> The *state* (not the action) progresses on.

3.   **Customary Imperfect** - denotes repeated action in past time — that which one would customarily do (use "used to" or "would").

Gen 29:2   *"And from that well they <u>would</u> water the flocks."*

הָעֲדָרִים   יַשְׁקוּ   הַהוּא   הַבְּאֵר   מִן־
the-flocks they-were-watered the-that the-well from

4.   **Past Progressive Imperfect** - denotes action that is going on in past time (but not customary action).

Ex 8:20   *"the country <u>was</u> <u>being</u> <u>destroyed</u> by the flies.*

הֶעָרֹב   מִפְּנֵי   הָאָרֶץ   תִּשָּׁחֵת
the-fly because-of the-land she-was-ruined

<u>Stative Verbs</u>:   Stative verbs in the imperfect can express continual action in the past.
   1.   Having an <u>active</u> sense
         Stative verbs can represent the situation as existing without interruption. In some cases, a verb which would have been otherwise stative (in the Perfect) can take on an active sense.

Ps 32:4   *"For day and night Your hand <u>would</u> <u>weigh</u> <u>heavily</u> upon me."*

יָדֶךְ   עָלַי   תִּכְבַּד   וָלַיְלָה   יוֹמָם   כִּי
hand-of-you upon-me she-was-heavy and-night by-day for

As a stative verb, כבד would mean "to be heavy."

2.   Incipient Past Imperfect (see Waltke, § 31.2c)
In certain cases, the stative verb may stress the commencement and continuing
phases of a past situation (which lends itself to circumstantial clauses). This is in
contrast to the participle which stresses mere continuance, but not the inception.

Isa 6:4   *"The doorposts shook . . . while the temple <u>filled</u> (began filling) with
smoke."*

עָשָׁן   יִמָּלֵא   וְהַבַּיִת . . . הַסִּפִּים   אַמּוֹת   וַיָּנֻעוּ
smoke   he-was-filled and-the-temple . . . the-thresholds doorposts-of and-they-shook

C.   DENOTING MODAL NUANCES   [Waltke, § 31.4]

1.   **Potential Imperfect (or Imperfect of Capability)** - denotes the nuance of potentiality or that
something is capable of happening (can be translated with "be able," "can," or "could").

1 Kg 12:26   *"the kingdom <u>can</u> <u>return</u> to the house of David."*   [*NIV*: "likely will revert"]

דָּוִד   לְבֵית   הַמַּמְלָכָה   תָּשׁוּב   עַתָּה
David   to-house-of   the-kingdom   she-will-revert   now

1 Sam 13:19   *"a smith <u>could</u> not <u>be found</u> . . ."*   [Note: expressed in the negative]

יִמָּצֵא   לֹא   וְחָרָשׁ
he-was-found   not   and-blacksmith

Note: The "potential imperfect" can also occur with questions (contrast the *deliberative
imperfect*). Example:

Deut 1:12   *"How <u>can</u> I bear your problem all by myself?"*

טָרְחֲכֶם   לְבַדִּי   אֶשָּׂא   אֵיכָה
problem-of-you   by-myself   can-I-bear   how?

2.   **Permissive Imperfect** - denotes permission ("may").

Gen 2:16   *"from any tree of the garden you <u>may</u> <u>eat</u> to your pleasure."*

תֹּאכֵל: אָכֹל   הַגָּן   עֵץ   מִכֹּל
you-may-eat   to-eat   the-garden   tree-of   from-any-of

3.   **Deliberative Imperfect** - denotes deliberation — as to whether or not a situation should take
place. Occurs in questions (use "should" or "ought"). This will usually be in the first person, but
does not have to be (cf. 2 Sam 3:33).

Gen 27:45   *"Why <u>should</u> I <u>be bereaved</u> of both of you?"*

שְׁנֵיכֶם   גַּם־   אֶשְׁכַּל   לָמָה
both-of-you   also   should-I-lose   why?

4. **Obligatory Imperfect** - denotes obligation or necessity (in positive statements rather than questions; use "ought to," "should," or "would have to"). For use of the negative, see Gen 20:9.

   Ruth 3:4   *"He will tell you what you should do."*

   תַּעֲשִׂין: אֲשֶׁר אֶת לָךְ יַגִּיד וְהוּא
   you-must-do   what   ***   to-you   he-will-tell   then-he

5. **Imperfect of Desire (or Desiderative Imperfect)** - denotes a desire, wish, intention, or want ("wish to," "be willing to").

   Ruth 3:13   *"If he is willing to redeem you, good"*

   טוֹב יִגְאָלֵךְ אִם־
   good   he-redeems-you   if

   1 Sam 26:6   *"Who is willing to go down with me to the camp of Saul?"*

   הַמַּחֲנֶה אֶל־ שָׁאוּל אֶל־ אִתִּי יֵרֵד מִי־
   the-camp   into   Saul   to   with-me   will-he-go-down   who?

6. **Imperfect of Possibility** - denotes possibility (not just whether one can, but whether one will; use "may").

   Jud 7:5   *"Whoever may lap with his tongue from the water . . ."*

   הַמַּיִם מִן־ בִּלְשׁוֹנוֹ יָלֹק אֲשֶׁר־
   the-waters   from   with-tongue-of-him   he-laps   who

D. DENOTING THE VOLITIONAL MOOD   [Waltke, § 31.5]
    Expresses a situation wherein the speaker imposes an obligation on the subject addressed.

   1. **Imperfect of Injunction** - denotes a positive command (but this can also be a request or appeal). Translate as an imperative.

      Ps 51:9   *"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean."*

      וְאֶטְהָר בְּאֵזוֹב תְּחַטְּאֵנִי
      and-I-will-be-clean   with-hyssop   you-cleanse-me

   2. **Imperfect of Instruction** - denotes legislation or "legal" instruction.

      Ex 21:28   *"That ox shall certainly be stoned."*

      הַשּׁוֹר יִסָּקֵל סָקוֹל
      the-bull   he-must-be-stoned   to-be-stoned

   3. **Imperfect of Prohibition** - denotes negative instruction or legislation.

      Ex 20:13   *"Thou shalt not murder."*   [usually occurs with לֹא plus the imperfect]

      תִּרְצָח לֹא
      you-shall-murder   not

E.   TO EXPRESS "PAST TIME" WITH CERTAIN PARTICLES

When used in combination with certain particles, the imperfect *can* denote a <u>past</u> situation. This includes the use of particles such as אָז, טֶרֶם, and בְּטֶרֶם.

Ex 15:1   *"Then Moses <u>sang</u>."*

אָז	יָשִׁיר־	מֹשֶׁה
then	he-sang	Moses

Ex 12:34   *"The people took their dough before it <u>was</u> <u>leavened</u>."*

וַיִּשָּׂא	הָעָם	אֶת־	בְּצֵקוֹ	טֶרֶם	יֶחְמָץ
so-he-took	the-people	***	dough-of-him	before	he-was-leavened

> But this is not always the case. An Imperfect vb with בְּטֶרֶם, for example, can be <u>past</u>, but it can also be *present* or *future* (which is quite common).
>
> For example - Gen 27:4
>
> | בְּטֶרֶם | אָמוּת |
> |---|---|
> | before | I die |

F.   WITH PARTICLES OF CONTINGENCY   [Waltke, § 31.6]

The imperfect verb can be used in conjunction with certain particles to express uncertainty or contingency, or for expressing purpose.

1. **Conditional** (with particles such as אִם or לוּ)

   Gen 18:26   *"If I <u>find</u> in Sodom fifty righteous people . . ."*

אִם־	אֶמְצָא	בִסְדֹם	חֲמִשִּׁים	צַדִּיקִם
if	I-find	in-Sodom	fifty	righteous-ones

2. **Expectancy**

   Gen 32:18   *"When my brother Esau <u>meets</u> you . . ."*

כִּי	יִפְגָּשְׁךָ	עֵשָׂו	אָחִי	. . .
when	he-meets-you	Esau	brother-of-me	. . .

> We can also have cases of contingency involving future time, but without particles. See Waltke, page 511. For an example with a temporal nuance, see Gen 2:17 — "when you eat from it, you shall surely die!" [There is no specific particle for "when"].

3. **Final Imperfect** - denotes purpose (see *GKC* § 107q for various situations).

   This can occur in dependent clauses, usually having some sort of conjunction before it like אֲשֶׁר "that" (Gen 11:7), לְמַעַן "in order that" (Ex 4:5), פֶּן "lest" (Gen 3:3), בַּעֲבוּר "so that" (Gen 21:30), לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר "so that" (Num 17:5), יַעַן אֲשֶׁר "so that" (Ezek 12:12), and לְבִלְתִּי "that . . . not" (Ex 20:20). We find a negative final clause following וְלֹא in Deut 17:17, but rarely after וְ alone (1 Sam 9:1). Within an interrogative clause, however, we sometimes have a final clause formed by וְ on the imperfect (Ex 2:7; Ruth 1:11).

   Deut 4:40   *"in order that it <u>might go well</u> with you . . ."*

אֲשֶׁר	יִיטַב	לְךָ
that	he-may-go-well	with-you