

# Classical Syriac

## Estrangela Script

### Chapter 5

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#### 5.1. Overview of Finite Verbs<sup>1</sup>

Finite verbs in Classical Syriac are verbs that indicate the person, gender, number, tense or mood, and the pattern of the verb.

*Person* refers to whether the subject of the verb is (1) the person doing the speaking (first person—“I” or “we”), (2) the person being addressed by the speaker (second person—“you”), or (3) the person/object/concept that is being referred to by the speaker (third person—“he”, “she”, “it”, “they”, or any noun that serves as the subject of the verb). **Finite verbs in Classical Syriac can be either first, second, or third person.**

*Gender* refers to whether the verb is grammatically masculine, feminine, or common (i.e. a single form for both masculine and feminine subjects). Unlike English, verbs in Classical Syriac have separate forms for second and third-person verbs based on gender. For example, in the English phrase, “you ran,” the person being addressed could be either male or female. In Classical Syriac, however, there would be one form if the person being addressed were male and a different form if the person being addressed were female. **Finite verbs in Classical Syriac can be masculine, feminine, or common.**

*Number* refers to how many people or things are functioning as the subject of the verb. **Finite verbs in Classical Syriac can be either singular or plural.**

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nöldeke §§158–60, 168; Muraoka §§48–49, 81–82; Duval §§179, 190–91; Mingana §§104–105, 107, 109, 112; Brockelmann §§177–78.

*Tense* in Classical Syriac refers to whether the action of the verb is being depicted as taking place in the past (the perfect tense) or the future (the imperfect tense).<sup>2</sup> **When marked for tense, finite verbs in Classical Syriac can be either perfect (past) or imperfect (future).** The present tense is normally expressed through the use of verbless clauses (see chapter 4).

*Mood* refers to whether the verb is being treated as an actuality (i.e. something that has happened, will happen, or is happening), a command, a possibility, or a wish. **In Classical Syriac, the only mood that has its own form is the imperative, which is used to give commands in the second person.** When analyzing verbs in the imperative, the imperative will be analyzed according to mood rather than tense. When analyzing verbs in the perfect or imperfect, it is not necessary to indicate the mood of the verb. For now, it can be assumed that verbs in the perfect or the imperfect are in the indicative mood (i.e. the mood of actuality).

*Pattern* refers to set ways that verbs can be formed to indicate, among other things, the voice of the verb (i.e. active, passive, or reflexive),<sup>3</sup> the intensity of the action of the verb (e.g. break vs. shatter), causation (go vs. cause to go), and other changes to the basic meaning of the root of the verb. Six basic patterns are used in Classical Syriac.<sup>4</sup>

| <b>Name</b>                      | <b>Simplified Explanation of their Functions</b> |
|----------------------------------|--|
| P <sup>es</sup> al (Peal)        | Simple action or state, active voice             |
| Pa <sup>ss</sup> el (Pael)       | Intensive action, active voice                   |
| ʔAp <sup>s</sup> el (Afel)       | Intensive or Causative action, active voice      |
| ʔEtp <sup>es</sup> el (Ethpeel)  | Simple action, passive voice                     |
| ʔEtpa <sup>ss</sup> al (Ethpaal) | Intensive action, passive or reflexive voice     |
| ʔEttap <sup>s</sup> al (Ettafal) | Intensive or Causative action, passive voice     |

These patterns take their names from the form that the verb ܥܒܕ ("to work") would take in each of these patterns in the third masculine singular of the perfect tense. It is important to memorize these names in their transliterated forms because they will provide you with the basic form that these patterns take in the perfect tense.

Note that each verbal root, at least in theory, could appear in each of these verbal patterns, with the meaning of the basic verbal root adjusted according to which pattern the verb is in. In reality, however, verbal roots normally appear in only two or three of these patterns. While the functions listed above are useful guidelines for determining the meaning of verbal roots when they appear

<sup>2</sup> Note that the terms “perfect” and “imperfect” have a different meaning in Syriac Grammar compared to English grammar. This has to do with the fact that in an earlier phase of Syriac/Aramaic, the perfect tense indicated completed action while the imperfect tense indicated incomplete action. Aspects of this distinction are sometimes still present in the use of these forms.

<sup>3</sup> Note that voice refers to whether the subject of the verb is performing the action (active voice), receiving the action (passive voice), or performing the action on one’s self (reflexive).

<sup>4</sup> Other patterns will be discussed in future chapters.

in these patterns, the meaning of each verb in their respective pattern needs to be determined by usage.

The following chart provides abbreviations that will be helpful when analyzing and discussing verbs:

| <b>Table 5.2 – Abbreviations for Analyzing Finite Verbs</b> |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Abbreviation</b>   | <b>Meaning</b>                                      |
| 3   | third person  |
| 2   | second person                                       |
| 1   | first person  |
| m.  | masculine   |
| f.  | feminine  |
| c.  | common (no separate form for masculine or feminine) |
| sg.   | singular  |
| pl.   | plural  |
| pf.   | perfect   |
| impf.   | imperfect   |
| impv.   | imperative  |
| inf.  | infinitive  |
| ptc.  | participle  |

When parsing finite verbs (i.e. analyzing verbs), the following order should be used:

| <b>Table 5.3 – Sequence for Parsing Finite Verbs</b> |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Order</b>   | Pattern, Tense, Person, Gender, Number              |
| <b>Example</b>                                       | P <sup>ec</sup> al Pf. 3msg                         |
| <b>Meaning</b>                                       | P <sup>ec</sup> al Perfect Third Masculine Singular |

## 5.2. Verbal Roots

As in other Semitic languages, verbs in Classical Syriac normally have three root letters (also called radicals). The pattern, tense or mood, person, gender, and number of the verb is indicated by (a) changes in the vowels used in the verb, (b) the addition of prefixes and/or suffixes, and (sometimes) (c) the doubling of the second root letter. When analyzing an unfamiliar verb, it is

important to identify the three root letters since verbs in Classical Syriac, regardless of which pattern they are found in, are normally listed in dictionaries according to their three root letters.<sup>5</sup>

### 5.3. P<sup>es</sup>al Perfect<sup>6</sup>

The P<sup>es</sup>al Perfect is the most basic form that a verb can take in Classical Syriac. This is why dictionaries list verbs according to how they appear in the P<sup>es</sup>al Perfect 3msg. The following chart provides (a) the forms of the P<sup>es</sup>al Perfect for most regular verbs using the verb ܡܠܟܐ (“to kill”), (b) an example from a different verbal root, and (c) the meaning of the inflected form (i.e. the form that has been changed to indicate person, gender, number, etc.):

|      | Pattern            | Example | Translation              |
|------|--------------------|---------|--------------------------|
| 3msg | ܡܠܟܐ               | ܚܘܒܐ    | he wrote                 |
| 3fsg | ܡܠܟܝܗ              | ܚܘܒܝܗ   | she wrote                |
| 2msg | ܡܠܟܝܗ              | ܚܘܒܝܗ   | you wrote                |
| 2fsg | ܡܠܟܝܗ <sup>7</sup> | ܚܘܒܝܗ   | you wrote                |
| 1csg | ܡܠܟܝܗ <sup>8</sup> | ܚܘܒܝܗ   | I wrote                  |
| 3mpl | ܡܠܟܝܗ <sup>9</sup> | ܚܘܒܝܗ   | they wrote <sup>10</sup> |
| 3fpl | ܡܠܟܝܗ              | ܚܘܒܝܗ   | they wrote               |
| 2mpl | ܡܠܟܝܗܐ             | ܚܘܒܝܗܐ  | you wrote                |
| 2fpl | ܡܠܟܝܗܐ             | ܚܘܒܝܗܐ  | you wrote                |
| 1cpl | ܡܠܟܝܗ              | ܚܘܒܝܗ   | we wrote                 |

<sup>5</sup> Note that Payne Smith (CSD) lists verbs whose second and third root letters are identical according to the form they take in the P<sup>es</sup>al Perfect, which only has two root letters. For example, the root ܝܘܘ is listed as ܝܘ (p. 595). Sokoloff (SL), on the other hand, lists this word according to the three root letters (p. 1611). See §12.1.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Nöldeke §§255–57; Muraoka §§55–56, 81; Duval §§62, 180, 185–86, 327; Mingana §§189–92, 195; Brockelmann §§179, 181, 218, 233.

<sup>7</sup> Note that the ܐ at the end of the word is not pronounced. This can be seen by the fact that there is no vowel associated with it. See §2.7.

<sup>8</sup> Note that Muraoka (§56), Mingana (§191), and Thackston (§2.1) have a zlāmāʾ pšīqāʾ (ܘ) under the third root consonant rather than a zlāmāʾ qašyāʾ for the 1csg (i.e. ܡܠܟܝܗ). Part of the reason for this is that the distinction between zlāmāʾ pšīqāʾ and zlāmāʾ qašyāʾ was not always consistent in East Syriac manuscripts (Nöldeke §8). For Muraoka, it is because his vocalization follows the West Syriac vocalization in many cases. In this textbook, we follow the vocalization used in the Mosul Bible for the sake of consistency. In the Mosul Bible, the third root consonant for the 1csg is a zlāmāʾ qašyāʾ (ܘ). For zlāmāʾ qašyāʾ (ܘ) as the vowel under the third root consonant for the P<sup>es</sup>al perfect 1csg, see Nöldeke §47.

<sup>9</sup> Note that the ܐ at the end of the word is not pronounced.

<sup>10</sup> Note also that mixed groups of males and females are referred to using the 3mpl.

The P<sup>es</sup>al Perfect for most regular verbs has the following characteristics: (a) no vowel written with the first root consonant, (b) the second root consonant is written with the vowel p̄tāḥā' (◌◌), which is referred to as a **theme vowel**, and (c) the person and number of the verb are indicated by suffixes. When the suffix begins with a vowel (3fsg and 1csg), the theme vowel disappears and the first root consonant is written with a z̄lāmā' p̄šîqā' (◌◌) to compensate for the loss of the theme vowel (◌◌\* → ◌◌\* → ◌◌).<sup>11</sup>

Some regular verbs have z̄lāmā' p̄šîqā' (◌◌) as their theme vowel instead of a p̄tāḥā' (◌◌). Note the following example:

|             | <b>Pattern</b> | <b>Translation</b> |
|-------------|----------------|--------------------|
| <b>3msg</b> | ◌◌◌            | he went up         |
| <b>3fsg</b> | ◌◌◌◌           | she went up        |
| <b>2msg</b> | ◌◌◌◌           | you went up        |
| <b>2fsg</b> | ◌◌◌◌◌          | you went up        |
| <b>1csg</b> | ◌◌◌◌           | I went up          |
| <b>3mpl</b> | ◌◌◌◌           | they went up       |
| <b>3fpl</b> | ◌◌◌◌           | they went up       |
| <b>2mpl</b> | ◌◌◌◌◌◌         | you went up        |
| <b>2fpl</b> | ◌◌◌◌◌◌         | you went up        |
| <b>1cpl</b> | ◌◌◌◌◌          | we went up         |

When memorizing paradigms, it is only necessary to memorize the paradigm of verbs that have p̄tāḥā' (◌◌) as their theme vowel. The paradigm of verbs with z̄lāmā' p̄šîqā' (◌◌) as the theme vowel can be figured out quite easily based on this paradigm.

As was mentioned earlier, the P<sup>es</sup>al Perfect is normally used when the action of the verb is being depicted as taking place in the past. In English, the P<sup>es</sup>al Perfect can be rendered with the simple past (he killed), the perfect (he has killed), or the pluperfect (he had killed).

Note that verbs in the perfect (as well as the imperfect) do not need to have a separate word to indicate the subject of the verb—the subject of the verb can be communicated by the ending of

<sup>11</sup> The theme vowel drops out because in Classical Syriac, short vowels cannot be in open syllables. In other words, short vowels drop out when the next letter is immediately followed by a vowel sound. See §2.5 (hidden consonant clusters). Note that the asterisk (\*) indicates that these forms do not exist in Classical Syriac.

the verb. In this textbook, this will be referred to as an **internal subject**. This means that the verb **ܚܠܝܬ** by itself means “he wrote” even though there is no separate word indicated for “he.”

In addition to internal subjects, verbs in the perfect (as well as the imperfect) can have **external subjects**. External subjects are subjects that are explicitly indicated by a separate word. In many cases, these subjects will be independent personal pronouns (i.e. he, she, you, I, we, they). When an independent personal pronoun is used, the verb will have the same person, gender, and number as the independent personal pronoun. For example, the pronoun “we” will be used with a 1cpl verb. Independent personal pronouns will be covered in week 6.

The most common type of external subject is a noun or other word that functions as a noun (i.e. a **substantive**). When a substantive is used as the subject of the verb, the verb is placed in the third person. For example, in the phrase “the king sat on a throne,” the external subject is “the king” and the verb “sat” would be in the 3msg.

When translating verbs, it is important to ask whether the subject of the verb is internal or external. This will be especially important when the external subject does not come before the verb, which happens quite frequently in narrative (see below). When no external subject appears, the subject is internal and should be translated accordingly.

The word order of verbal clauses in Classical Syriac is fairly flexible.<sup>12</sup> In narrative, when the external subject is a noun and the verb is in the perfect tense, the word order is often verb-subject-object or verb-subject-prepositional phrase depending on which elements are present in the clause. When the verb has an internal subject, the word order is normally verb-object or verb-prepositional phrase. When composing sentences in Classical Syriac, the default word order should be one of these possibilities (i.e. the verb should normally be placed in the first slot of the clause).<sup>13</sup> However, there are many instances when the subject or other elements are placed first in a clause.

#### 5.4. Direct Objects<sup>14</sup>

Direct objects are words that receive the action of a verb. For example, in the sentence, “The dog chased the ball,” “the dog” is the subject, “chased” is the verb, and “the ball” is the direct object. Direct objects in Classical Syriac can be identified by word order (i.e. the direct object can come after the subject when the order is verb-subject-object), context, or the preposition **ܕ**. In addition to its other functions, **ܕ** can also function as a definite direct object marker. The definite direct object marker **ܕ** can be used to identify the direct object when the direct object is definite in meaning. It is important to note that while a direct object marked by **ܕ** will always be definite in meaning, direct objects that are not marked by **ܕ** are not necessarily indefinite. Note the following examples:

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<sup>12</sup> Nöldeke §324.

<sup>13</sup> The word order can become more complex when other elements (e.g. a preposition with a pronominal suffix) are added.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Nöldeke §§287–88; Muraoka §97; Duval §342; Mingana §408; Brockelmann §226.

| Examples          |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Syriac            | English  |
| ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܝܚܐ ܕܥܒܕܐ | Possibility #1 – The king killed a slave.<br>Possibility #2 – The king killed the slave. |
| ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܝܚܐ ܕܥܒܕܐ | Only Possibility – The king killed the slave.  |

### 5.5. Negation<sup>15</sup>

Finite verbs are normally negated by the adverb ܠܐ (“not”). When ܠܐ negates a verb, ܠܐ normally comes immediately before the verb. Note the following examples:

| Examples               |                                    |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Syriac                 | English                            |
| ܠܐ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܝܚܐ ܕܥܒܕܐ.  | The king did not kill the Messiah. |
| ܠܐ ܡܘܨܝܐ ܕܡܠܝܚܐ ܕܥܒܕܐ. | Moses did not write the book.      |

When ܠܐ appears in front of two or more nouns in sequence with the conjunction ܘ (i.e. ܠܐ...ܘܠܐ), it means “neither...nor”. Note the following example:

| Example                  |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Syriac                   | English  |
| ܠܐ ܡܠܟܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܠܝܚܐ ܕܥܒܕܐ. | Neither the king nor the queen killed the slave. |

### 5.6. Asking Questions<sup>16</sup>

There are two types of questions that can be asked in Classical Syriac: yes-no questions and open questions.

As the name suggests, yes-no questions are questions that are normally answered with either a *yes* or a *no*. In English, yes-no questions are normally formed by placing the verb at the beginning of the sentence and the subject in the second position (e.g. Are you going to school today?).

Yes-no questions in Classical Syriac typically have the same sentence structure as normal sentences (i.e. declarative sentences). Since Classical Syriac does not have question marks, yes-no questions often need to be identified based on context. Note the following examples:

| Examples           |                               |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| Syriac             | English                       |
| ܚܘܢܐ ܕܡܠܝܚܐ ܕܥܒܕܐ. | You are the king of the Jews. |

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Nöldeke §§328–330; Muraoka §93; Duval §§380–81; Mingana §305; Brockelmann §234.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Nöldeke §§68, 231–34, 331; Muraoka §14; Duval §§319, 382; Mingana §§302-303; Brockelmann §95. Indirect questions will be dealt with in a future chapter.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>ܘܢܫܐ ܠܗ ܦܝܠܐܬܘܫ: ܦܝܠܐܬܘܫ ܗܘ ܗܘ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܝܗܘܕܐܝܢ.<br/>ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܝܗܘܕܐܝܢ.</p> | <p>And Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (Mk.15:2)</p> |
|---|--|

Yes-no questions can also be introduced by the particle ܠܡܢ. <sup>17</sup> In these cases, the particle ܠܡܢ is left untranslated. Note the following examples:

| Syriac  | English   |
|---|---|
| <p>ܠܡܢ ܦܘܪܝܐ ܕܘܬܐܒܪܗܡ ܕܘܬܐܒܪܗܡ ܕܘܬܐܒܪܗܡ.<br/>ܦܘܪܝܐ ܕܘܬܐܒܪܗܡ.</p>    | <p>Are you greater than our father Abraham?<br/>(Jn. 8:53)</p>        |
| <p>ܠܡܢ ܦܘܪܝܐ ܕܘܬܐܒܪܗܡ ܕܘܬܐܒܪܗܡ ܕܘܬܐܒܪܗܡ,<br/>ܕܘܬܐܒܪܗܡ ܕܘܬܐܒܪܗܡ.</p> | <p>Are you also one of the disciples of this man?<br/>(Jn. 18:17)</p> |

Open questions are questions that cannot be answered with a simple *yes* or a simple *no*. In English, open questions begin with question words like *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, *which*, and *how*. These words function as the subject of the sentence.

Open questions in Classical Syriac are formed the same way. The following chart provides several examples of question words in Classical Syriac:

| Syriac           | English | Example                              | Translation   |
|------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|---|
| ܗܘ               | Who?    | ܗܘ ܗܘ ܕܡܝܬܪܐ                         | Who is my mother? (Mk. 3:33)  |
| ܗܘ <sup>18</sup> | Who is? | ܗܘ ܗܘ ܕܡܝܬܪܐ                         | Who then is this? (Mk. 4:41)  |
| ܗܘܐ              | What?   | ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ ܕܡܝܬܪܐ<br>ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ ܕܡܝܬܪܐ     | And what is this? A new teaching? (Mk. 1:27)                              |
| ܠܡܢ              | Why?    | ܠܡܢ ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ ܕܡܝܬܪܐ<br>ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ ܕܡܝܬܪܐ | Why do your students transgress the tradition of the elders? (Matt. 15:2) |

Additional question words will be included in the vocabulary section of future chapters.

## 5.7. Steps for Translation

When first learning how to translate from Syriac to English or when translating an unusually difficult text, the following steps should be followed:

1. Do an initial translation of each word. It is often helpful to write these initial translations above the text itself with a light pencil.

<sup>17</sup> Note that the particle ܠܡܢ also means “Why?”

<sup>18</sup> The word ܗܘ is a combination of the word ܗܘ (who?) and the word ܗܘ (is).



2. Divide the sentence into clauses, paying particular attention to conjunctions and verbs, and translate each clause separately.
3. Determine whether the clause is a verbal or a verbless clause.
4. If the clause is a verbless clause, insert the verb “to be” in the appropriate tense and translate the clause. If the clause is a verbal clause, find the verb and determine whether the subject is internal or external.
5. Translate the remainder of the clause.

**5.8. Vocabulary**

| Verbs              |   |
|--------------------|---|
| ܐܝܬܐ <sup>19</sup> | (P <sup>ec</sup> al) to go                            |
| ܒܢܐ <sup>20</sup>  | (P <sup>ec</sup> al) to give, to permit, to place/put |
| ܚܘܒܐ               | (P <sup>ec</sup> al) to write                         |
| ܠܩܒܐ               | (P <sup>ec</sup> al) to take, receive                 |
| ܢܦܩܐ               | (P <sup>ec</sup> al) to go out                        |
| ܩܠܡܐ               | (P <sup>ec</sup> al) to go up                         |
| ܚܘܒܐ               | (P <sup>ec</sup> al) to do, make, appoint             |
| ܡܠܟܐ               | (P <sup>ec</sup> al) to kill                          |
| ܝܘܨܐ               | (P <sup>ec</sup> al) to love                          |
| ܥܒܕܐ               | (P <sup>ec</sup> al) to hear, obey                    |

| Adverbs |         |
|---------|---------|
| ܠܐ      | no, not |

<sup>19</sup> Note that the first root consonant of the verb ܐܝܬܐ is written with a *zlāmāʾ pšiqāʾ* (ܐ) throughout the paradigm. This happens with all verbs that begins with ܐ (Mingana §43). Note that the 3fsg and the 1csg of ܐܝܬܐ are irregular: the form of the 3fsg is ܐܝܬܐ (ʿezzaṭ; see Mk. 7:30) and the 1csg is ܐܝܬܐ (ezzēṭ; see Gal. 1:17). In both of these cases, the ܐ has been absorbed (i.e. assimilated) into the ܐ, resulting in the ܐ being doubled. This happens with the verb ܐܝܬܐ when the ܐ and the ܐ appear side-by-side with no vowel between. The rest of the paradigm follows the normal pattern.

<sup>20</sup> Note that the verb ܒܢܐ is irregular. The theme vowel that should have been written with the second root consonant, which is silent, has been placed on the first root consonant. The ܢ remains silent throughout the paradigm in East Syriac. See Nöldeke §39. The 3fsg is ܒܢܐ while the 1csg is ܒܢܐ. Muraoka (§67) follows the pronunciation used in West Syriac, which retains the pronunciation of ܢ in the 3fsg and 1csg (ܒܢܐ and ܒܢܐ).

| Prepositions |  |
|--------------|--|
| ܐ            | to, for, of (genitival), [definite direct object marker],<br>on (in the phrase “on the day”) |

| Conjunctions        |   |
|---------------------|---|
| ܐܝܢܐ                | but, except, unless                     |
| ܥܕܐ                 | when, after, while                      |
| ܡܝܗܘܠܐ (meḥūlā)     | because of, for the sake of, concerning |
| ܡܝܗܘܠܐ ܐ (meḥūlā ܐ) | because                                 |

| Question Words |                                |
|----------------|--------------------------------|
| ܡܝܢ            | Who?                           |
| ܡܝܢܐ           | Who is?                        |
| ܡܝܗܘܠܐ         | What? Why?                     |
| ܠܡܢܐ           | [Yes/No Question Marker], Why? |
| ܠܡܢܐ           | Why?                           |

| Proper Nouns |         |
|--------------|---------|
| ܐܒܪܗܡܐ       | Abraham |
| ܐܕܡܐ         | Adam    |
| ܐܦܪܝܡܐ       | Ephraim |
| ܐܝܨܚܐܩܐ      | Isaac   |
| ܫܪܗܐ         | Sarah   |

### 5.9. Homework

- Using practice sheet 5.1, memorize the paradigm for the P<sup>ca</sup>l Perfect in Table 5.4.
- Memorize the vocabulary in 5.8 above. Make sure you can translate the words from Syriac to English as well as English to Syriac. The following link on Quizlet can be used to help you learn the vocabulary: <https://quizlet.com/ca/591442267/classical-syriac-chapter-4-flash-cards/>.
- Using exercise sheet 5.2, translate the sentences from Syriac to English.