The Hebrew Corner

Biblical Hebrew is a language that is based on a triliteral (three-letter) root system. Changes to the base root, such as pronunciation changes, or application of prefixes or suffixes, are used to give a variety of meanings related to the root. An example of this is the Hebrew root whose basic meaning is to rule. Let's look at a passage to illustrate the root (1 Kings 1:11):

"Wherefore Nathan spake unto Bathsheba the mother of Solomon, saying, Hast thou not heard that Adonijah the son of Haggith doth reign, and David our lord knoweth it not?"

The Hebrew word translated as reign in the passage is malach (מלך, mah-LAHCH), an action verb. Yet the same three-letter root, with no change in spelling but a different pronunciation, takes on the form of a noun (Zephaniah 3:15):

"The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more."

Here the word king in the passage is the translation of the Hebrew word melech (מלך, MEH-lehch), accented on the first syllable and with different vowels. Application of a suffix, as shown in the next passage, changes the meaning again (Esther 1:9):

"Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus."

The word translated as queen in the passage is malka (מלכה, mahl-KAH). Commonly, the suffix heh (ה) placed at the end of a Hebrew word will change the gender of the word.

A similar pattern is observed with another common Hebrew root (Genesis 38:14):

"And she put her widow's garments off from her, and covered her with a vail, and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place, which is by the way to Timnath; for she saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given unto him to wife."

The Hebrew word translated as grown in the passage is gadal (גדל, gah-DAHL), a verb meaning to grow up or become great. In the next passage, a word from the same root is used to describe a type of priest (2 Kings 12:10):

"And it was so, when they saw that there was much money in the chest, that the king's scribe and the high priest came up, and they put up in bags, and told the money that was found in the house of the LORD."

The word translated as high is gadol (גדול, gah-DOHL). Here insertion of a vav (ו) converts the verb into an adjective, which can also mean great. Next we see a significant change in meaning from applying a prefix to the root (Isaiah 5:2):

"And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes."

Tower in Hebrew is migdal (מִגְדָּל, mihg-DAHL). Applying the prefix mem (מ) changes the original root to a noun. The connection to the root is that the tower is a high structure that allows the watchman of the vineyard to see for a great distance.

Next we will look at a root whose basic meaning is to set apart (1 Samuel 21:5):

"And David answered the priest, and said unto him, Of a truth women have been kept from us about these three days, since I came out, and the vessels of the young men are holy, and the bread is in a manner common, yea, though it were sanctified this day in the vessel."

Here we have a form of the Hebrew root qadash, translated as holy, which is the word qodesh (קֹדֶשׁ, KOH-dehsh). Similar to what we saw previously, application of the prefix mem gives us a word with a different, yet related meaning (Exodus 15:17):

"Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O LORD, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in, in the Sanctuary, O LORD, which thy hands have established."

Miqdash (מִקְדָּשׁ, mik-DAHSH) is the Hebrew word for sanctuary, as translated in the passage. The relationship to the root is that this a place that is set apart by God.

May you experience a great month that is set apart for the glory of God. Blessings to all.