The meaning of *yôm* in Genesis 1:1–2:4

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Some preliminary considerations

The question often arises as to the correct meaning of 'day' in the opening verses of Genesis. There are those who argue that the word signifies a long period of time (e.g. progressive creationists like Hugh Ross). Others contend that the passage in question (Genesis 1:1–2:4) is not meant to be an actual historical account of the creation but is rather a theological reflection on God's creative power and His sovereignty over the created order (e.g. the 'framework hypothesis' of Meredith Kline, Henri Blocher *et al.*). In the latter case the text is seen as having no relevance in determining the sequence of events at the time of origins.

The traditional view has been that the text is meant to communicate a straightforward account of God's creation of the universe. The account is, therefore, of six 24-hour days of creative acts followed by a seventh 24-hour day of divine rest.

Theological reflection approach

Regarding this approach it is important to note that it is *not* really a question of Hebrew textual exegesis but rather a hermeneutical conclusion driven by factors *external to the text*. Taking the 'framework hypothesis' as an example, at an initial glance, Days 1–3 seem to be showing the creation of three empty 'realms' or 'domains' and Days 4–6 showing the creation of their respective 'kings' or 'rulers'. Even if this was true, it would simply inform us that God created the universe in a specific order of divine acts. It would not annul the historicity of the account unless the reader felt compelled for other reasons to see the pattern as purely literary.[1] In fact the structure of Genesis 1:1–2:4 does not really lend itself fully to the schema. For further details the reader is invited to consider the analyses of Wayne Grudem[2] and Jonathan Sarfati.[3]

Poetry or prose?

A question arises as to the genre of the passage: is it poetry or is it prose narrative? If it is poetry, then perhaps there is greater flexibility in the meaning of the words. If it is prose narrative, then it would be appropriate to read it as intending to give a historical account of the creation.

Regarding the issue of genre, even if it is poetry, the passage would not necessarily be overly flexible in its interpretation. Psalm 78 is clearly poetic and yet gives an accurate account of Israel's history from the Exodus to the anointing of David.

Furthermore, it can be easily demonstrated that Genesis 1:1–2:4 in fact is not a poem. Hebrew poetry is characterized by certain syntactical features. A thorough grammatical/syntactical treatment of Hebrew poetry is that of M. O'Connor.[4] A simple test is the use of parallelism where a second grammatical clause repeats the idea of the preceding clause either by way of rewording it, or further explicating it, or by expressing its antithesis. O'Connor's analysis goes far beyond these simple observations but does not nullify them. Reading the Hebrew text shows that it lacks these requisite poetic markers. Therefore, the Hebrew text is most reasonably read as prose narrative.

Secondly (and more objectively), in prose narrative there is a different ratio of verbal forms than there is in poetry. This has long been recognized by Hebrew scholars and has most recently been exhaustively analyzed by Steven Boyd.[5] By way of explanation there are four forms of the finite verb in biblical Hebrew: the preterite (*vayyiqtol*), the imperfect (*yiqtol*), the perfect (*qatal*) and the *vav* perfect (*veqatal*). To quickly summarize, in passages that are universally recognized as historical narrative there is a marked preponderance of preterites over the other three forms. In poetry there is a preponderance of imperfects (*yiqtol*) and perfects (*qatal*).

Boyd demonstrates that, given the ratio of verbal forms, the statistical evidence for the text being prose is overwhelming. Indeed it would be irresponsible to read it any other way.

The use of the word *yôm* in Genesis 1:1–2:4 with particular reference to the use of the cardinal number *echad* in 1:5b

Regarding the word '*yôm*' in Genesis 1:1–2:4, it is apparent that there are three different uses of the term in the passage. In 1:5a it denotes 'daylight' as opposed to 'night'. In 1:5b it denotes the combination of the two. The word '*echad*' is most probably to be read as a cardinal number ('one') as opposed to an ordinal ('first') in contrast to many translations. Thus it appears that the text is in fact defining what a 'day' is in the rest of the Creation Week. Finally in Genesis 2:4, *yôm* is part of an anarthrous[6] prepositional compound $b_e yôm$ meaning not 'in the day' but simply 'when'.

The fact that for the bulk of the passage, the word *yôm* is accompanied by sequential numerical denotation and the language of 'evening and morning' gives a *prima facie* case that regular 24-hour days are in view.

Concerning the use of the cardinal as opposed to the ordinal in 1:5b, it will be helpful to examine this a little further. For a more detailed examination of *echad* in Genesis 1:5, the definitive study is that of Andrew

Steinmann.[7] After examining *echad* as an ordinal number in numbering units of time he concludes that it may be used in place of the ordinal *r'ishon* in only two idioms: namely to 'designate the day of a month, the other the year of a reign of a king'.[8]

In addition, in a non temporal sense, the cardinal can stand for the ordinal when dealing with a small number of 'countable' items.[9]

In contrast it has sometimes (often) been claimed that when a list of ordinal numbers is given, the cardinal form '*echad*' is to be rendered as an ordinal ('first').[10] BDB under usage #7 states 'as ordinal, *first* …'[11] and then cites Genesis 1:5, 2:11; Exodus 39:10; Ezekiel 10:14; Job 42:14 and then adds references to the *first* day of a month or *first* in a verbally compound ordinal number (thirty *first* …).

This claim, as noted in the preceding comments, can be challenged. The word *echad* occurs 960 times in the Hebrew Old Testament.[12] In the AV it is rendered by the English 'first' a total of 32 times. The majority of these cases are part of a formulaic expression 'day one of the nth month'. Another cluster of ordinal renderings of *echad* is found in compound numbers, e.g., 'thirty-first year of Asa' (1 Kings 16:23) (lit. 'in year of thirty and one of year'). These two clusters of citations are the very exceptions noted by Steinmann.

Another distinction that may be noted is that between simple 'countable'[13] lists and 'temporally sequential' events. To illustrate this distinction I will consider as examples of the former category five lists where the cardinal form (*echad,* 'one') is followed by ordinals ('second, third …') and can itself be considered as an ordinal.

1. Genesis 2:11: the list of the four heads of rivers flowing out of Eden follow this pattern.
2. Exodus 28:17: the same pattern is used to denote the four rows of jewels on the High Priest's breastplate.
3. Exodus 39:10–13: the same pattern appears, again in reference to the same article of clothing.
4. Ezekiel 10:14: the four heads of a cherub are enumerated in this way.
5. Job 42:14: the three daughters of Job are designated using this convention.

There are six other lists which share this same pattern.[14] Furthermore, in each of these cases the article is included. Steinmann concludes:

'The description of the use of *echad* as an ordinal number for the first element in a small number of countable items should state: *With a definite noun,* echad *serves (as an ordinal) to count the first of a small number of things. In this construction the noun may be elided after a recent mention,*[but] *the article is never omitted from the adjective or its governing noun. The following items are counted with ordinal numbers.*'[15]

In effect, this means that when *echad* is unaccompanied by the article and used adjectively it is reasonable that it be considered as a cardinal ('one'). Some may challenge this conclusion claiming that it may be an example of 'denying the antecedent' but it does seem to have merit.[16]

Another observation is that in lists, which particularly stress sequential events, the ordinal *r'ishon* ('first') is used. I consider six such occasions:

1. Numbers 7:12–89 gives the offerings of the twelve tribal leaders on succeeding days. The first day uses the ordinal *r'ishon*. This text illustrates another feature—namely that once you reach the compound Hebrew numbers (11 and up) the terms are in the cardinal form.[17]
2. Numbers 28:16: *r'ishon* is used to describe the first day of unleavened bread. In verse 25 the text refers to the

Hebrew	English	Reference
וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד	and was / eve-ning / and was / mor-ning / day / one	Genesis 1:5
וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי	and was / eve-ning / and was / mor-ning / day / second	Genesis 1:8
וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי	and was / eve-ning / and was / mor-ning / day / third	Genesis 1:13
וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם רְבִיעִי	and was / eve-ning / and was / mor-ning / day / fourth	Genesis 1:19
וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם חֲמִישִׁי	and was / eve-ning / and was / mor-ning / day / fifth	Genesis 1:23
וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשִּׁשִׁי	and was / eve-ning / and was / mor-ning / day / the sixth	Genesis 1:31
וַיְכַל אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי	And / God / on day / the seventh	Genesis 2:2
מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה	work His / which / had He made	
וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי	And He / rested / day on / the seventh	

'seventh' (ordinal) day of the feast. Intervening ordinals are not present in verses 17–24.

3. 1 Chronicles 24:7–18: the sequence of 24 lots is cast for the divisions of the priesthood who serve in successive order. Again the ordinal *r'ishon* is used to begin the sequence.

4. 1 Chronicles 25:9–31 gives a similar sequential ordering of the 24 families of temple singers and *r'ishon* is used to commence the list.

5. 1 Chronicles 27:2–15 gives the monthly rotation of David's 12 army divisions (24,000 men per division) who served in sequence throughout the year. The ordinal *r'ishon* is used for the first division.

6. Zechariah 6:2–3 lists the four angelic chariots are listed but it appears from the text that they are 'coming out from between the two mountains' possibly in temporal order. This latter point depends on whether they are pictured as emerging in single file and not coming out four abreast. I would tend to opt for the former since *r'ishon* is used instead of *echad*. Nevertheless, certainty eludes us in this case.

From this survey it does appear that a list emphasizing a temporal sequence of events tends to commence with the ordinal *r'ishon* as opposed to the cardinal *echad* which we found employed in the five lists of 'countable items' (plus the further six cited in the endnote).

Given that Genesis 1 is describing a sequence of creative acts one would expect to find the first day designated by the ordinal *r'ishon*. Instead, we find the cardinal form *echad*. From the preceding overview of lists it would seem clear that this initial appearance of the cardinal form is in fact signifying a cardinal meaning.

Furthermore, both *echad* and *yôm* are without the article indicating that the expression denotes 'one day'. In fact the article does not appear until the sixth day—*yôm hašišiy*.

Steinmann comments:

'But even here the grammar is strange, since there is no article on *yôm,* as would be expected. This would indicate that the sixth day was a regular solar day, but that it was *the culminating day of creation*. Likewise, the seventh day is referred to as *yôm hašₑbiʿiy* (Gen. 2:3), with lack of an article on *yôm*. This also, the author is implying, was a regular solar day. Yet it was a special day, because God had finished his work of creation.'[18]

An additional comment to Steinmann's which I believe reinforces his point is that the prefix *beth* attached to *yôm* in Genesis 2:2a and 2:2b is both times pointed by the Massoretes with the *pathach*, implying the presence of the article. He is quite correct that in the concluding use of 'day the seventh' in Gen. 2:3b that *yôm* is anarthrous. Thus the pattern is actually:

Gen. 1:31: 'day the sixth'
Gen. 2:2a: 'in the day the seventh'
Gen. 2:2b: 'in the day the seventh'
Gen. 2:3: 'day the seventh'

This pattern highlights the peculiar nature of the concluding citation. Since the two prepositional phrases employ the expected use of the article, the fact that in the final reference the article is absent from *yôm* we are alerted to its uniqueness

Further emphasizing the special nature of the seventh day is the fact that it is the only one to have the day + ordinal occurring more than once.

In light of the preceding, it is clearly preferable to read 1:5b as defining a *yôm* for the following sequence of ordinals-namely one cycle of evening and morning, signifying a complete 24-hour day embracing both the period of darkness and the period of light. Having used the cardinal *echad* to establish that definition of *yôm*, the chapter then goes on in the expected ordinal sequence.

The only other passage in the entire Bible that makes reference to the Creation Week as a six-day sequence followed by a seventh day of rest is Exodus 20:8–11, where a one to one correspondence is seen between the regular 168 hour week of humans and God's work of creation and rest.

From the standpoint of Hebrew exegesis it is would be unreasonable to read another meaning into the text. The only reason for so doing would appear to be based on considerations other than a careful reading of the actual narrative.

A final observation

It has been my experience that those who question the normal historical narrative reading of Genesis 1:1–2:4 tend to be my fellow evangelicals. Theological liberals recognize the text as saying that God created the universe in six 24-hour days. They see evangelicals who adopt alternative readings of the text as engaged in a form of suspect apologetics. I believe the liberal critique to be accurate. Where I differ from them, however, is that I believe the text is *correct* in what it is teaching. A more effective apologetic therefore lies in simply admitting what the text proclaims and showing that it has far more explanatory power than many people think. In that light, I am excited by the kind of research being conducted by CMI and likeminded creation science organizations. God means what He says and He did it just as Genesis says he did!

References

1. Wenham, G.J., *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books, Waco, TX, 1987. On p. 19 he states: '… "day". There can be little doubt that here "day" has its basic sense of a 24-hour period. The mention of morning and evening, the enumeration of the days, and the divine rest on the seventh show that a week of divine activity is being described here.' Then on p. 39 he contends, 'It has been unfortunate that one device which our narrative uses to express the coherence and purposiveness of the creator's work, namely, the distribution of the various creative acts to six days, has been seized on and interpreted over-literalistically, with

the result that science and Scripture have been pitted against each other instead of being seen as complementary. Properly understood, Genesis justifies the scientific experience of unity and order in nature. The six-day schema is but one of several means employed in this chapter to stress the system and order that has been built into creation. Other devices include the use of repeating formulae, the tendency to group words and phrases into tens and sevens, literary techniques such as chiasm and inclusion, the arrangement of creative acts into matching groups, and so on.' In the main body of my text I point out that elegance of order and literary finesse do not preclude the historicity of a narrative account.

2. Grudem, W., *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 302, 1994.

3. Sarfati, J., *Refuting Compromise*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, pp. 94–101, 2004.

4. O'Connor, M., *Hebrew Verse Structure,* Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, Indiana, 1980.

5. Boyd, S.W., Statistical Determination of Genre in Biblical Hebrew: evidence for an historical reading of genesis 1:1–2:3; in: Vardiman, L., Snelling, A. and Chaffin, E. (Eds.), *Radioisotopes and the Age of the Earth (Vol. II)*, Institute for Creation Research, El Cajon, CA, and Creation Research Society, Chino Valley, AZ, pp. 631–734, 2005.

6. I.e. lacking the definite article. If the definite article (represented by the vowel marking *pathach* under the *beth*) then it would signify 'in the day'. Its lack signifies an idiomatic use meaning 'when' as in the NIV translation.

7. Steinmann, A., *echad* as an ordinal number and the meaning of Genesis 1:5, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* **45**(4):577–584, 2002.

8. Steinmann, ref. 7, p.580.

9. Steinmann, ref. 7, pp. 581–582.

10. e.g. Davidson, B., *The Analytical and Chaldee Lexicon*, Zondervan Edition, 8th printing, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 17, 1976, 'II *first*, only in the enumerating of time, where the cardinal stands for the ordinal.' He cites the usage when dealing with the first day (day one) of the nth month. See my comments in the main text.

11. Brown, F., Driver, S.R. and Briggs, C.A., (Eds.), *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, UK, reprinted with corrections, p. 25, 1972.

12. Harris, R.L., Archer, G.L. and Waltke, B.K., *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament, Volume 1*: Moody Press, Chicago, IL, p.30, 1980. This also corresponds to my count in Wigram, G.V., *The Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance*, Zondervan Edition, 7th printing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1978 where I counted 966.

13. Steinmann, ref. 7., p. 581; Waltke, B.K. and O'Connor, M.P., *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Winona Lake, IN, Eisenbrauns, p. 274, § 15.2.1b, 1990.

14. Genesis 4:19: 'the *name of the first* [of two wives] *was Adah*'; Exodus 26:4,5; 36:11: '*the first curtain*' [of two]; Exodus 29:40, Numbers 28:7: '*for the first lamb*' [of two]; 1 Kings 6:24: '*the first cherub*' In each case *echad* is followed by ordinal forms (*second, third …*).

15. Steinmann, ref. 7, p.582. This is a refinement (indeed, correction) of Waltke and O'Connor's treatment.

16. 'Denying the antecedent', i.e.

    a) *echad* with the article signifies an ordinal use.

    b) In this text *echad* does not have the article.

    c) Therefore, in this text *echad* has a cardinal use.

   'Denying the antecedent' since the premise does not assert that an ordinal use of *echad* necessarily has the article. However, in this case it is still reasonable to take it as a cardinal usage since the default meaning of *echad* is cardinal. Its ordinal usage is apparent from the context and in these cases the article is always present. Context shows that in the vast majority of cases the default cardinal meaning is implied and in those cases the article is missing. For the few cases where the meaning may be disputed, the burden of proof lies with those who would challenge the regular pattern. I note this mild caveat since Steinmann (see above) does maintain that the ordinal use is always accompanied by the article. Therefore, he would restate the premise as: *a) echad* with, and only with, the article signifies an ordinal use. b) and c) would, therefore, logically follow. I believe Steinmann is correct and I simply note a mild objection that might conceivably be raised.'

17. Actually 'eleven' is interesting in that it uses *'ashtēy* in construct with the cardinal *'asar* ('ten'). The etymology is uncertain and is only found in the plural construct form attached to 'ten'.

18. Steinmann, ref. 7, p.583–584.

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