

The Hebrew Word “Yom” Used with a Number in Genesis 1

What does “yom” mean in Genesis 1 ?

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Recently, a reader of my book *Reading Genesis One*¹ asked about the use of a number with the Hebrew word “yom.” Specifically, I was asked to comment on the statement, **“Day” with numerical adjectives in Hebrew always refers to a 24 hour period.**, which appears in John MacArthur’s Study Bible in reference to Genesis 1:5.

The quoted statement is one which is commonly offered to justify eliminating the long “extended period of time” meaning of the Hebrew word “yom” in Genesis 1:3-31. Eliminating the “extended period” or “age” meaning would then give support for a 24 hour interpretation for the duration of the creative times. In the first chapter of Genesis, the singular Hebrew word יוֹם “yom” appears with a number at the conclusion of each of the creative times. Subsequently, in this article, “yom” refers to this singular Hebrew word form.

In order to illustrate the differing opinions which have been offered as interpretation, I will very briefly quote two well-known Bible scholars about the numbering of the word “yom.” Both scholars hold “extended period” or “age” views of the meaning of “yom” as describing the duration of the creative times. Subsequently, I will explain why the opinion of these two scholars has substantial support in the Hebrew, in contradiction to the claim in the MacArthur Study Bible. First the quotes:

Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, pages 60-61, Baker 1982:

“There were six major stages in this work of formation, and these stages are represented by successive days of a week. In this connection it is important to observe that none of the six creative days bears a definite article in the Hebrew text; the translations “the first day,” “the second day,” etc., are in error. The Hebrew says, “And the evening took place, and the morning took place, day one” (1:5). Hebrew expresses “the first day” by *hayyom harison*, but this text says simply *yom ehad* (day one). Again, in v.8 we read not *hayyom hasseni* (“the second day”) but *yom seni* (“a second day”). In Hebrew prose of this genre, the definite article was generally used where the noun was intended to be definite; only in poetic style could it be omitted. The same is true with the rest of the six days; they all lack the definite article. Thus they are well adapted to a sequential pattern, rather than to strictly delimited units of time.”

Gleason Archer was Associate Editor of the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. In the quote above, the first two italicized letters *ha* of words like *harison* indicate the Hebrew prefix הַ “heh” meaning “the.”

Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, page 271, Zondervan 1999:

“Numbered days need not be solar. Neither is there a rule of Hebrew language demanding that all numbered days in a series refer to twenty-four-hour days. Even if there were no exceptions in the Old Testament, it would not mean that “day” in Genesis 1 could not refer to more than one twenty-four-hour period. But there is another example in the Old Testament. Hosea 6:1-2 Clearly the prophet is not speaking of solar “days” but of longer periods in the future. Yet he numbers the days in series.”

Now, given MacArthur’s statement and the above two quotes, a reader of the Bible is faced with contradictory claims by established authorities. How is this to be resolved? My view is that MacArthur’s statement is not supported by the underlying Hebrew text, and that the Hebrew text does support Archer and Geisler. My analysis will first consider the numbering of the singular word “yom” from the numbers two (second) through six (sixth).

1. **READING GENESIS ONE:** Comparing Biblical Hebrew with English Translation ISBN 0-9728782-0-3 The book is available from Amazon.com The Table of Contents is available for viewing online at the website creationingenesis.com

A review of the Hebrew text of the Bible finds:

- (1) Each of the Hebrew numberings expressed by “yom” + ordinal number used in Genesis 1:8, Genesis 1:13, Genesis 1:19, Genesis 1:23, and Genesis 1:31 (i.e., five of the six creative times) appear only one time in the Bible.
- (2) Where “yom” is numbered in other verses, the reader almost always finds that the number is prefixed by the Hebrew letter ה “heh” the prefix meaning “the.” This is illustrated by Archer’s *harison* “the first” and *hasseni* “the second.” In these words, the Hebrew letter ה is pronounced with a following “a” vowel leading to *ha + rison* and *ha + sseni* , where the *ha* represents the phonetic pronunciation of the Hebrew prefix and the following vowel.
- (3) In other verses where “yom” is numbered, the reader almost always finds **one** of the following:
 - a. “In yom,” i.e., “yom” prefixed by the letter “beth,” a preposition meaning “in” or “on.”
 - b. “And in yom,” i.e., “in yom” with the added prefix “waw” meaning “and.”
 - c. Or, infrequently, “yom” with a different preceding prefix or preposition. These may be the attached prefixes meaning “to,” “and,” or the unattached preposition meaning “until.”

Note: In almost every case, **both** “yom” and the number are prefixed. As a consequence, the numberings in Hebrew differ significantly from the pattern found in Genesis 1:8, Genesis 1:13, Genesis 1:19, and Genesis 1:23.

A computer search of the possible Hebrew wordings that could number “yom,” using “second” gave the results listed below. As listed, the entire Hebrew word with attached prefixes is translated enclosed in quotation marks and represents successive words:

“yom” “second” ————— one verse, Genesis 1:8
 “in yom” “the second” ——— 8 times [This is Archer’s *hayyom hasseni*.]
 “and in yom” “the second” — 3 times

Searching the KJV Old Testament for second day, I found 15 verses. Two of the 15 verses do not have the Hebrew word “yom”; the English word *day* appears in italics. Another verse, 1 Samuel 20:34, has an intervening word and reads “in yom” “of the month” “the second.”

When the search was extended to include numbering by two through six, the Hebrew words appear 56 times as described by **both** 2) and 3) above. 1 Chronicles 26:17 is an exception which uses “to yom” “four.” Genesis 1:31 is an exception reading “yom” “the sixth,” a combination which appears only in this verse. Of the six creative times only Genesis 1:31 prefixes the number; the word “yom” remains unprefixes.

The above pattern of prefixing both the ordinal number and the word “yom” also, almost always, describes the numbering of “yom” by “the seventh,” (44 times) and “the eighth” (17 times). The exceptions being “and yom” “the seventh” which appears two times, and “yom” “the seventh” which appears one time in Genesis 2:3. The Hebrew pattern is not always visible in English translation. For example, the Hebrew of Exodus 20:11 reads “on yom” “the seventh,” but some translations read “the seventh day” omitting the prefix “on.” The NAS, NIV, and many recent translations now more correctly translate “and rested” “on the seventh day.”

By consulting the Hebrew text of the Bible it can be established that:

- A. The repeated pattern of the numbering of the creative times in Genesis One is unique. Each of the Hebrew numberings expressed by “yom” + number used in Genesis 1:8, Genesis 1:13, Genesis 1:19, Genesis 1:23, and Genesis 1:31, appear only one time in the Bible.
- B. The pattern of the numbering of the “yom” in other verses of the Bible **almost always** includes both of procedures (2) and (3) above for numbers two through six.

These results confirm Geisler’s: “Neither is there a rule of Hebrew language demanding that all numbered days in a series refer to twenty-four-hour days.”

These results and the uniform absence of the definite article “the” prefixing the Hebrew word “yom,” confirms the basis of Archer’s:

“. . . none of the six creative days bears a definite article in the Hebrew text; the translations “*the* first day,” “*the* second day,” etc., are in error.”

Returning to the Bible reader. How are the different claims to be resolved? Clearly the underlying Hebrew must take precedent. Why the confusion about the numbering? Consider Genesis 22:4 as an example; both “yom” and “third” are prefixed in the Hebrew.

Heb **Genesis 22:4** “in yom” “the third” . . .

NIV **Genesis 22:4** On the “third” “day” Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.

The reader of the Hebrew text sees the first two words as “in yom” “the third”

The reader of the English translation sees two words, “third” “day,” not “in yom” “the third.”

This difference in perception also occurs for Genesis 1:13:

Heb **Genesis 1:13** And there was evening, and there was morning — “yom” “third.”

NIV **Genesis 1:13** And there was evening, and there was morning— the “third” “day.”

The Hebrew reader knows that the “in yom” “the third” of Genesis 22:4 differs from the Hebrew “yom” “third” of Genesis 1:13.

A person reasoning on the basis of English translations can (erroneously) conclude that the numbering **third day** of Genesis 22:4 is equivalent to the “yom” “third” of Genesis 1:13 because:

- 1) The English reader does not know that “the third” of the NIV Genesis 1:13 is “third” in the Hebrew, and does not know that the “the” in NIV Genesis 1:13 is not in the Hebrew text.
- 2) The English reader does not associate “on” with “day” as one word, “on day.”

Conclusion: What does all the foregoing mean for understanding Genesis 1?

- 1) **The uniqueness of the Hebrew numbering of the creative “yom” actually supports the view that the creative “yom” are not ordinary (24-hour) days.**
- 2) **The numbering of the creative “yom” does not exclude the “extended period” or “age” meaning of the Hebrew word “yom” when referring to the six creative times. The unique numbering of the creative times adds support for the “extended period” or “age” meaning.**
- 3) **There are no other applicable examples of the numbering of a sequence that is equivalent to the numbering of the creative “yom.” Assertions which attempt to interpret numberings which read “yom” “second” using numberings which read “in yom” “the second” are flawed.**

To many readers of English translation, the difference in meaning between “a second day” and “the second day” will not be apparent. Because of this, the Hebrew phrases are better translated another way.

This author prefers translating “a second time,” “a third time,” etc., which avoids the confusing use of the English word “day” with two different meanings in Genesis 1:1-31. The translations “the second day,” “the third day,” etc., conceal the fact that the Hebrew does **not** use the ordinal numbering used in other verses when referring to the activities of an ordinary daytime. Some recent translations, such as the NAS, now translate “a second day,” “a third day,” etc., for Genesis 1:8, Genesis 1:13, Genesis 1:19, and Genesis 1:23.

As was already noted, the Hebrew of Genesis 1:5 reads “yom” “one,” and does not use the Hebrew word *rison* meaning first. In other verses, when *ehad* (one) is used as an ordinal, it appears as *haehad* including the prefix *ha* meaning “the.” Genesis 2:11 is an example of this use. The absence of the prefix *ha* in Genesis 1:5 shows that the *ehad* should be translated “one” and not “first.”

I hope this provides some useful information and clarification.

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