

The numbering pattern of Genesis: does it mean the days are non-literal?

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The days of Genesis 1 have an interesting pattern in the Hebrew, which is not often reflected in English translations. The first day has a cardinal number (i.e. one, two, three ...), יָוֶם אֶחָד (*yôm echad*) Day One. The others have *ordinal* numbers (second, third, fourth ...). Also, days 2–5 lack a definite article (הַ , *ha*, ‘the’) while days 6–7 have one. So a literal translation of Creation Week would be Day One, a second day, a third day, a fourth day, a fifth day, the sixth day, the seventh day.

This pattern is enough to destroy one of the arguments against literal days by leading old-earth creationist Dr Hugh Ross:

“**The unusual syntax of the sentences enumerating specific creation days.** Looking at the word-for-word translation of the Hebrew text, one finds this phraseology: “and was evening and was morning day X.” ... The word arrangement is clearly a departure from simple and ordinary expression. ... This syntactic ambiguity does not constitute a proof. However, it does suggest that the “day” here is to be taken in some unusual manner.”¹

As shown above, Ross is simply wrong about the syntax, so his argument collapses. Unfortunately, it is one of many such examples of bluff using learned-sounding arguments about Hebrew, which turn out to be nonsensical.²

One Rev. Dr Rowland Ward, whose doctoral thesis was on the history of the Presbyterian Church in Australia, has a long history of vexatious opposition to the view that Genesis is straightforward history, even giving credence to the thoroughly scientifically and ethically discredited book *Telling Lies ...* by atheist Ian Plimer.³ Ward is more sophisticated than Ross, and points out the correct pattern. But he uses this to argue against a straightforward interpretation of Genesis. He later argues for the Framework Hypothesis, a view arising from abject capitulation to ‘science’, but also dissatisfaction with the poor exegesis required to claim that the days were really ages, as Ward himself notes.⁴ But the Framework Hypothesis has already been demolished,^{5,6} so

this article concentrates only on the number pattern. Ward says:

“These distinctions are not what we would expect if we have emphasis on a mere chronological ordering of events (cf. Num 29:17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 32, 35).”⁷

It’s worth noting the pejorative word ‘mere’, as if chronology is somehow unworthy, despite its importance in Scripture (cf. Luke 3:1–2). However, the argument is fallacious, and as will be seen, those who, unlike Ward, are specialists in Hebrew believe that the pattern actually *strengthens* the case for literal days.

Dr Andrew Steinmann, Associate Professor of Theology and Hebrew at Concordia University, Illinois, has analyzed the pattern in Genesis in detail. Far from being an exception to the ‘*yôm* + numeric = literal day’ rule, he argued that the pattern gives strong *support* for 24-hour days in Genesis:

“If אֶחָד is used as a cardinal number, what is the force of Genesis 1:5? [Quote in Hebrew and English]

“The answer may lie in the use of the terms “night”, “day”, “evening”, and “morning”. Gen 1:5 begins the cycle of the day. With the creation of light it is now possible to have a cycle of light and darkness, which God labels “day” and “night”. Evening is the transition from light/day to darkness/night. Morning is the transition from darkness/night to light/day. **Having an evening and a morning amounts to having one full day.** Hence the following equation is what Gen 1:5 expresses: **Evening + morning = one day.**

“Therefore, by using a most unusual grammatical construction, Genesis 1 is defining what a day is. This is especially needed in this verse, since “day” is used in two senses in this one verse. Its first appearance means the time during a daily cycle that is illuminated by daylight (as opposed to night). The second used means something different, a time period that encompasses both the time of daylight and the time of darkness.

“It would appear as if the text is very carefully crafted so an alert reader *cannot* read it as “the first day”. Instead, by omission of the article it must be read as “one day”, thereby **defining a day as something akin to a twenty-four hour solar period** with light and darkness and transitions between day and night, even though there is no sun until the fourth day. This would explain the lack of definite articles on the second through fifth days. Another evening and morning constituted “a” (not “the”) second day. Another evening and morning made a third day, and so forth. On the sixth day, the article finally appears. But even here, the grammar is strange, since there is no article on אֶחָד as would be expected. This would indicate that the **sixth day was a regular solar day**, but that it was

<p>וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד one day mor- and eve- and ning was ning was</p>	Genesis 1:5	<p>וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם הַחַמִּישִׁי fifth day mor- and eve- and ning was ning was</p>	Genesis 1:23
<p>וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי second day mor- and eve- and ning was ning was</p>	Genesis 1:8	<p>וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי the day mor- and eve- and sixth ning was ning was</p>	Genesis 1:31
<p>וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי third day mor- and eve- and ning was ning was</p>	Genesis 1:13	<p>וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי the on day God And seventh finished</p>	Genesis 2:2
<p>וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם רְבִיעִי fourth day mor- and eve- and ning was ning was</p>	Genesis 1:19	<p>מְלֶאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה had He which work His made</p> <p>וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי the day on And He seventh rested</p>	

also *the culminating day of creation*. Likewise, the seventh day is referred to as *יֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי* (Gen 2:3), with lack of an article on *יֹם*. 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.⁸

Note that the last section on the seventh day refutes the common claim by progressive creationists such as Ross that the seventh day is still continuing.⁹ This claim has been discredited on other grounds too.^{10,11}

Then Steinmann concluded, while also pointing out the fallacy of interpreting a word by its whole semantic range rather than the specific context,¹² that the Hebrew clearly teaches 24-hour days.

‘יֹם’, like the English word “day”, can take on a variety of meanings. It does not in and of itself mean a twenty-four hour day [ref]. This alone has made the length of days in Genesis 1 a controversial subject [ref]. However, the use of *אֶחָד* in Gen 1:5 and the following unique uses of the ordinal numbers on the other days demonstrates that **the text itself indicates these as regular solar days**.¹³

Conclusion

Creationists should be aware of the pattern of ordinals and cardinals, and the fact that there are definite articles on some days and not others. But far from it being a problem for creation, this pattern is a *clincher* for the 24-hour interpretation.

References

1. Ross, H., *Creation and Time*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, p. 48, 1994.
 2. For examples, see Sarfati, J., Shame on *Charisma!* <www.answersingenesis.org/rosspc>, 29 May 2003.

3. For thorough refutation, see <www.answersingenesis.org/plimer>.
 4. Ward, R.S., *Foundations in Genesis: Genesis 1–11 Today*, New Melbourne Press, Melbourne, Australia, p. 44, 1999.
 5. Pipa, J.A., From chaos to cosmos: a critique of the Framework Hypothesis, <capo.org/cpc/pipa.htm>, 13 January 1998.
 6. Kulikovskiy, A., A critique of the literary framework view of the Days of Creation, *CRSQ* 37(4):237–244, 2001; <www.kulikovskyonline.net/hermeneutics/Framework.pdf>
 7. Ward, Ref. 4, p. 45.
 8. Steinmann, A., אֶחָד as an ordinal number and the meaning of Genesis 1: 5, *J. Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)* 45(4):577–584, 2002; quote from pp. 583–584; *italics* in original, **bold** added.
 9. Ross, Ref. 1, pp. 48–49.
 10. Is the seventh day an eternal day, *Creation* 21(3):44–45, 1999.
 11. Kulikovskiy, A.S., God’s rest in Hebrews 4:1–11, *TJ* 13(2): 61–62, 1999.
 12. New Testament scholar Dr Don Carson referred to the exegetical fallacy of ‘*Unwarranted expansion of an expanded semantic field*. The fallacy in this instance lies in the supposition that the meaning of the word in a specific context is much broader than the context itself allows and may bring with it the word’s entire semantic range.’ *Exegetical Fallacies*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 2nd Ed., p. 60, 1996.
 13. Steinmann, Ref. 8, p. 584, bold added. He has a footnote, ‘Whether or not one believes in the veracity of the Genesis account of creation in six solar days is another matter altogether.’ As the ETS accepts biblical inerrancy, we can presume that the author himself doesn’t *intend* to advocate error in Genesis. Rather, he is pointing out that it is more honest to say that Genesis teaches 24-hour days but is wrong, than pretending that it’s right but teaches something else.

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