

## DOES GENESIS 1 PROVIDE A CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE?

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I was first pulled into the vortex of controversy about Genesis during my senior year in public high school. A course called *The Bible as Literature* debated the Noahic flood and its scope. Other debates erupted in college when the School of Science at Purdue University held a panel discussion on evolution in response to recent campus visits by James Whitcomb, Henry Morris and A. E. Wilder-Smith.<sup>1</sup> This was my first encounter with creationists and evolutionists in conflict.

Since my odyssey began over fifteen years ago, I have made one important observation. Two kinds of errors can be and have been made by some Christians: (1) to see something in the Biblical text that is not there; (2) to miss something in the Biblical text that is there. (A perfect analogy exists with some scientists and their data as well.) One objective of evangelicals (and scientists) is to minimize such errors. Submitting our ideas to others for critical evaluation is one way of trying to avoid these errors. Therefore I submit this article for your consideration.

The seven days of creation in Gen 1:3–2:3 are the present focus of my attention. These days appear to have some kind of organizing relationship rooted in the literary structure of the passage. This idea is now being popularized, for example, in the study notes of *The NIV Study Bible*.<sup>2</sup> But the idea has been carried even further than just organization. Mark Throntveit suggests that this structural relationship with some textual hints points to the fact that the sequence of days is not chronologically ordered at all.<sup>3</sup> This is a quantum leap. It is one thing to suggest that a factual or historical account has a literary structure. It is something else to say that such an account is not chronologically ordered even though it is saturated with chronological terminology. It is essential, then, that the text be scrutinized for any and all clues about chronology or its absence.

### I. THE SEQUENCE OF DAYS IN GEN 1:3–2:3

The pertinent phrases in the MT read *yôm ʿehād* (Gen 1:5), *yôm šēnī* (1:8), *yôm šēlišī* (1:13), *yôm rēbīʿī* (1:19), *yôm ḥāmīšī* (1:23), *yôm haššīšī* (1:31),

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<sup>1</sup> The panel consisted not only of representatives of the various departments in the School of Science but also a Roman Catholic priest, apparently to sanction Christian acceptance of evolution.

<sup>2</sup> R. Youngblood, "Notes on Genesis," *The NIV Study Bible* (gen. ed. K. L. Barker; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985) 6.

<sup>3</sup> M. Throntveit, "Are the Events in the Genesis Account Set Forth in Chronological Order? No," *The Genesis Debate* (ed. R. Youngblood; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986) 36–55.

*bayyôm haššēbîʿî* (2:2b).<sup>4</sup> One observation I would like to point out is that the noun *yôm* (“day”) does not have the definite article with the possible exception of day seven, *bayyôm haššēbîʿî*. A second observation is the absence of the definite article on the numbers <sup>ʿ</sup>*ehād* through *ḥāmīšî* (“one” through “fifth”), while the article is present on *haššīššî* and *haššēbîʿî* (“sixth,” “seventh”). The third observation is the use of cardinal and ordinal numbers in the sequence: <sup>ʿ</sup>*ehād* (the cardinal “one”), *šēnî* through *šēbîʿî* (the ordinals “second” through “seventh”). One final observation is that the critical apparatus of *BHS* shows no textual variation concerning these observations. Let us examine each observation in more detail.

The pattern all these days share is that the noun *yôm* is followed by its number. Each occurrence of *yôm* is without the definite article. The missing article may be an attempt to avoid its original function as a demonstrative pronoun. When *hayyôm* refers to a particular calendar day or solar day (21:26) or to a particular but unspecified period of time (19:37) it means “today.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore the absence of the article may not indicate that the noun is indefinite. In fact the number that modifies *yôm* can determine whether it is definite or indefinite.<sup>6</sup>

So what do the numbers tell us? Since the first five numbers have no definite article, *yôm* is likely to be indefinite for the first five days. But this can only be said with reasonable certainty for days two through five. It seems possible that the first day is definite because of the nature of <sup>ʿ</sup>*ehād* and that *yôm* is determined by it. Waltke and O’Connor suggest that “the indefinite noun [*yôm*] plus <sup>ʿ</sup>*ehād* “has a definite sense,” even though they say in the next phrase that “this pattern is found nowhere else.”<sup>7</sup> Tentatively, Gesenius offers a possible explanation that <sup>ʿ</sup>*ehād* by its very nature does not require the article, and he cites several instances.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless the article is present on <sup>ʿ</sup>*ehād* in the very next sequence of the Bible just one chapter away in 2:11. This suggests to me that the author of Genesis had reasons for using (2:11) and not using (1:5) the article on <sup>ʿ</sup>*ehād*. So the complete absence of the article on the noun *yôm* and the number <sup>ʿ</sup>*ehād* in day one may indicate that the author wanted to describe day one as indefinite. Thus the first day could be definite or indefinite. Later in the article I will try to resolve this matter.

The second through seventh days are not so ambiguous. The second through fifth days are indefinite with no article present on the noun or the number.<sup>9</sup> In light of these first five days, it is very interesting that the au-

<sup>4</sup> The textual variation in *BHS* of Gen 2:2a, *haššīššî* versus *haššēbîʿî*, is best resolved by giving the MT priority by virtue of being the more difficult. See J. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (gen. ed. F. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 2:39; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1982) 7.

<sup>5</sup> J. Mauchline, *Davidson’s Introductory Hebrew Grammar* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1966) 37; GKC §126 b.

<sup>6</sup> GKC §126 w.

<sup>7</sup> B. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 274.

<sup>8</sup> GKC §134 l. The important phrase is “would also be a very simple explanation of <sup>ʿ</sup>*ehād*.”

<sup>9</sup> GKC §126 g and u. No exceptions are cited in §126 (about articles) nor in §134 o and p (about ordinal numbers).

thor of Genesis chose to put the definite article on the numbers of days six and seven. It is even more interesting that the article is still absent on *yôm* in day six in spite of the definite number *haššiššî*. The data for day six illustrate that the number can determine whether *yôm* is definite (as in day six) or indefinite (as in days two through five). In fact this is one of the verses cited by Gesenius to make this very point (see n. 6 *supra*).

*Bayyôm* for day seven is less helpful. Even though it is pointed as if it is definite with the definite article elided, the vowel points are not authoritative and therefore do not bring any resolution to the question at hand. So the only certain clue in day seven is the definite article on the number. Now that all seven days have been considered, it is time for a brief summary.

The seven days can be classified into three groups. The first group, day one, could be read as indefinite or definite. The second group, second through fifth days, is most likely to be read as indefinite. The third group, sixth and seventh days, appears definite. Recall that there also remains an unexamined observation about the cardinal number *ʿehād* used in conjunction with ordinals. In order to explore the cardinal/ordinal sequence and attempt resolution on whether day one is definite or indefinite, it is necessary to go outside this passage.

## II. OTHER PASSAGES AND NUMERIC SEQUENCES IN THE OT

*Yôm ʿehād* (as in day one) and *bëyôm ʿehād* (pointed without the definite article) occur nine and thirteen times respectively.<sup>10</sup> *Bëyôm ʿehād* (“on day one”) and *yôm ʿehād* (“day one”) are what O’Connor and Waltke call “specific indefinite.”<sup>11</sup> It can have the sense of “one day” emphasizing singularity (Num 11:19; 1 Sam 9:15) or signifying an indefinite future time (27:1). But I have serious reservations about using such passages for insight because they are not part of a sequence.

In a calendar formula the phrase is translated “the first day” of a month (Ezra 10:16–17; Hag 1:1). Some use this formula to substantiate that (*bë*)*yôm ʿehād* can mean “(on) the first day” in the seven days of Genesis 1.<sup>12</sup> This seems to ignore the fundamental difference, however, between the calendar formulas and the sequence in Genesis. They are not included in sequences of several days. But even if we consider an individual day of a month part of a sequence, each numbered day always uses cardinal numbers and never ordinals in the calendar formulas.<sup>13</sup> Since the Genesis sequence is a cardinally numbered day followed by ordinally numbered days, there is no real

<sup>10</sup> The references for these collocations listed by A. Even-Shoshan (*A New Concordance of the Bible* [Jerusalem: Kiryat-Sefer, 1990]) under *ʿehād* are not comprehensive. Omitted under *yôm ʿehād* are Num 11:19, 1 Sam 9:15, Ezra 10:17 and Zech 14:7, and under *bëyôm ʿehād* Ezra 10:16, Neh 8:2 and Hag 1:1.

<sup>11</sup> Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction* 273.

<sup>12</sup> H. Orlinsky *et al.*, *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1970) 56–57; V. Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 118.

<sup>13</sup> Since these calendrical formulas end with (*bë*)*yôm* + number + *lahōdeš*, I examined each entry in Even-Shoshan, *Concordance*, under *lahōdeš* to draw this conclusion.

analogy with calendar formulas. Moreover the literal translation of the formulas is still completely understandable and retains the distinction between ordinal numbers on months (and sometimes years) and cardinal numbers on days. For example, Hag 1:1 would read literally: "In year two of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on day one of the month." The NIV smooths it out as follows: "In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month." But this change to ordinals is a matter of English style, not Hebrew syntax.

One occurrence of *yôm ʿehād*, however, that is omitted from the list of collocations in Even-Shoshan (see n. 10 *supra*) may be helpful. Zechariah 14:7 is part of a vision of a new creation.<sup>14</sup> Could this be an allusion to the creative activity on *yôm ʿehād* in Genesis 1? Consider the concepts that are common to both texts. They both are about light, daytime, nighttime, and the commencement of a created order. Also they both use the phrase *yôm ʿehād*. If Zechariah is using the language of the old creation to describe the new creation, then *yôm ʿehād* in Zech 14:7 is borrowed from the imagery of Gen 1:5. Most English versions converge on the singularity of that day in Zech 14:7 rather than the firstness of it. So the immediate context of day one in Gen 1:5 (no article on the noun or number plus the indefinite days two through five) and the possible allusion in Zech 14:7 lead *yôm ʿehād* toward the meaning "one day," not "day one" or "the first day."

This completes my discussion of what I would call the first layer of meaning for the sequence in Genesis 1. So let me summarize by giving my best attempt at translating the sequence in light of the previous discussion: "one day . . . a second day . . . a third day . . . a fourth day . . . a fifth day . . . the (or a?) sixth day . . . the (or a?) seventh day" (cf. RSV, NASB).<sup>15</sup> But the text has more to say about the chronology or achronology of this sequence of days. To better appreciate the textual clues, we must look at other numeric sequences in the Bible.

In the course of my research I attempted to locate all sequences that use the pattern of a noun followed by a number. I looked up all the occurrences of the masculine and feminine forms of *šēni* ("second"), searching for sequences in the context of each occurrence. This yielded about 55 sequences with the noun/number pattern, all of which share one characteristic: The noun is always determined by either the definite article or a pronominal suffix, and the number is always determined by the definite article. Let me qualify "always." There are two nouns found in sequences without the definite article. They are *yôm* and *šēm* ("name," "fame"). I have already addressed the syntax of an indefinite noun followed by an attribute. If the attribute is definite (or indefinite), then so is the noun. *Šēm* probably has its aversion to the article rooted in "The Name" (YHWH) versus "a name." *Yôm*, as I mentioned earlier, may have its aversion rooted in the old demonstrative function of the definite article. But these nouns and their idiosyncrasies are not central to this paper. The numbers that modify them are the focus of my attention because they determine the noun.

<sup>14</sup> W. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 200.

<sup>15</sup> The RSV has "a," not "the," sixth day.

Three passages call for explanation. Numbers 28:4, 1 Sam 1:2 and 1 Chr 3:1 have sequences with definite articles missing on one number in each sentence. This would at first glance seem to strain my syntactical pattern of “(definite article +) noun” followed by “definite article + number.” The critical notes of *BHS*, however, suggest that the missing articles in Num 28:4, 1 Sam 1:2 and 1 Chr 3:1 can or should be added to the numbers in question. With this textual evidence I feel reasonably certain that there is a syntactical pattern for these sequences. Therefore when the author of Genesis 1 uses a different pattern—a pattern used in no other sequence in Scripture—we might expect a nuanced meaning in the text.

The pattern in Gen 1:3–2:3 is the absence of the definite article on the first five numbers and its presence on the sixth and seventh. What subtle shade of meaning does this different pattern suggest? The short answer I am proposing is that the text is not implying a chronological sequence of seven days. Instead it is simply presenting a list of seven days. It is not that the list is definitely not chronological. It may be chronological, but the syntax of the list does not require that we read it as such. But three things require discussion: (1) the presence of definite articles on the sixth and seventh days of creation, (2) defining what purpose is served by abandoning chronology, and (3) the difference between a list and a chronological sequence.

The Hebrew definite article does not always translate into English as being definite. For example, in Gen 6:4 “men of fame” is *ʿanšê haššēm*, literally “the men of the fame.” This illustrates the phenomenon but does not elucidate its meaning in Genesis. Gesenius has an extensive explanation of this syntax. He says in part:

Peculiar to Hebrew is the employment of the article to denote a single person or thing (primarily one which is as yet unknown, and therefore not capable of being defined) as being present to the mind under given circumstances. In such cases in English the indefinite article is mostly used.<sup>16</sup>

He then gives many examples of this and how they should be translated. I have chosen to cite two that use *yôm*. The first phrase is *wayêhî hayyôm* (“and the day was”). It occurs in 1 Sam 14:1. About this phrase Gesenius says that “it is used like our ‘one day’ (properly meaning on the particular day when it happened, i.e. ‘on a certain day’).” A more dramatic example is *wayêhî kēhayyôm hazzeh* (Gen 39:11), which means “one day.”<sup>17</sup> The essence of these untranslated articles (and demonstratives) is their emphatic force, not their definitive function.

Therefore the purpose and meaning of the article on the sixth day is to emphasize its uniqueness. It is the only day described as “very good.” Structurally it is the last creative act in a list of acts that expands like a pyramid with each step of creation more full than the one before, concluding God’s creative acts with this climactic day.<sup>18</sup> It is not just “a” sixth day but “the” sixth day, emphasizing its special importance as “the” sixth day in the list (not sixth in chronological order). So both the syntax of the article and the

<sup>16</sup> GKC §126 *q*. The complete explanation is §126 *q–t*.

<sup>17</sup> GKC §126 *s*.

<sup>18</sup> M. Fishbane, *Text and Texture* (New York: Schocken, 1979) 8–9.

structure of the text work together to communicate the message that this sixth creative day was the greatest of creative acts.

The seventh day also has the definite article. The text indicates that there is no more creative activity but only rest. It is the final day in the complete list of days, whereas the sixth day was the last creative day but not last overall. So the uniqueness of day seven is marked by its attributive description, "the seventh" (including the definite article), and also by its structural position in the account (last). The structure and syntax work together to emphasize (among other things) that God's work of creation is complete by the arrival of the last (seventh) day. Moreover creation lacks nothing, allowing God to rest from further creative activity.

Now that the emphatic function of the articles on days six and seven has been explained, we must return to the remaining two issues. As it turns out, they are intertwined. The difference between a list and a chronology is inseparable from what I think motivated the author of the Pentateuch to abandon chronology.

Consider a more modern illustration. Imagine that you were sent by your spouse to get some things from the grocery store. Unknown to her (or him), you also went to other stores in order to get some surprise gifts. The chronological order of the stops is listed below. When you get back from your errands you decide that you will present the gifts in order of increasing value, not the order they were purchased. Just then your spouse asks why it took so long to go to the store and where you were all this time. You want to answer truthfully, but you also want to present everything in the special order you devised. How can you do both?

*Chronological Order*

*Presented Order*

1st Audio shop for a CD player	1st Grocery store for bread and milk
2d CD shop for a couple of CDs	2d Video shop for a video
3d Video shop for a video	3d CD shop for a couple of CDs
4th Grocery store for bread and milk	4th Audio shop for a CD player

Here is one answer you could give. "Well, honey, one stop I made was the grocery store. A second stop I made was the video store, and I got you that video you've wanted. A third stop was the CD store to get these CDs for you. And a fourth stop was the audio shop to get a CD player."

Notice that the stops were not presented in their chronological order. The phrases "one stop . . . a second stop . . . a third stop . . . a fourth stop" carried the sense of "one stop . . . another stop . . . yet another stop . . . still another stop" because they were indefinite ("a" second stop, not "the" second stop). This presented the stops as a list, not an ordered sequence. Therefore the list was not conveying a chronology. It was merely listing each separate stop in a way that is part of a strategy. The plan was to gradually build up from the least valuable stop to the most valuable one.

I think the author of the Pentateuch had similar thoughts while composing the account of the seven days of creation. On the one hand was a commitment to the truth in reporting the account in the text. On the other was the desire to use a literary structure to further reinforce his message. One way to achieve

literary freedom and still maintain truth in the process was to remove the confines of chronological syntax. So the author chose to leave the days indefinite and used the article in days six and seven for emphasis, not determination.

Michael Fishbane cites Rashi to make the point that this list of days is not ordered: "Scripture has not taught us anything regarding the sequential order (lit., 'the order of the first and the last')."<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately their basis for abandoning the literal continuity of the passage appears to be the logistical problems of the chronological order of events, not the syntax of the passage. They both are in essence saying that the text presents itself as a chronological sequence but that it cannot be taken literally because the sequence makes no sense.<sup>20</sup> This method of reasoning is not tenable for me. My whole contention is that the text itself does not actually require that it be read as a chronological sequence. Mark Throntveit and Ronald Youngblood observe the same syntax I do (the missing articles on days one through five) and suggest the possibility of nonchronological order.<sup>21</sup> I have attempted, however, to provide a detailed syntactical analysis of this text and other sequences in Scripture to further support this claim. Additionally I also attempted to explain the emphatic function of the article on days six and seven.

At first, this choice to abandon chronology may seem strange and therefore unlikely. But it is not so peculiar. Youngblood indicates that this is not uncommon in Biblical literature and cites several examples. One example is the entire book of Jeremiah with all its chronological convolutions. A better example is the temptation of Christ, which is far more interesting. Two accounts are found, one in Matthew 4 and the other in Luke 4. Youngblood points out that at least one synoptic account is indifferent to chronology since they do not recount the three temptations in the same order.<sup>22</sup> What I find so fascinating about the two accounts in Matthew and Luke is the authors' technique for connecting the events. Matthew is inclined to use *tote* ("then") to connect events, emphasizing their order within the pericope. On the other hand Luke simply connects events with *kai* ("and"), which requires no specific order. So Luke is most likely to have let structure supersede sequence when forming his concatenation of events. Ultimately my main point is that finding Biblical texts that are not chronological (like Luke 4), and finding syntactical clues that indicate it, is not so unusual.

### III. THE SEPTUAGINT

It is interesting to note how the LXX reflects the syntactical pattern of the MT of Genesis. It reads *hēmera mia* (1:5), *hēmera deutera* (1:8), *hēmera tritē* (1:13), *hēmera tetartē* (1:19), *hēmera pemptē* (1:23), *hēmera hektē* (1:31), *tē hēmera tē hebdomē* (2:2b).<sup>23</sup> This reflects the combination of a cardinal

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 9–10; Rashi, *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Prayers for Sabbath and Rashi's Commentary* (London: Shapiro, Valentine, 1929) 1.2–3.

<sup>21</sup> Throntveit, "Events," 53; R. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 26.

<sup>22</sup> R. Youngblood, "Moses and the King of Siam," *JETS* 16/4 (1973) 216–217.

<sup>23</sup> L. C. L. Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1851 [reprint 1987]).

number followed by ordinal numbers, the absence of the article on the noun, and the absence of the article on the number for days one through five. On the sixth day, however, the number is also missing the article in contrast to the MT, which has the article on the number for the sixth day. Perhaps the translator read the article in the MT emphatically, as I am suggesting. If so, this gives additional support to my earlier point that the article on the sixth day in the MT has an emphatic function instead of a determinative one. The seventh day is more problematic.

The LXX makes a clear departure from the MT in Gen 2:2a. The LXX says that God finished his work on the sixth day (*kai synetelesen ho Theos en tē hēmera tē hektē ta erga autou*), while the MT says that God (had?) finished his work on (by?) the seventh day (*wayēkal ʔēlōhīm bayyôm haššēbīʿi mēlaʿktô*). The LXX appears to be based on a reading that attempts to resolve the difficulties presented by the MT.<sup>24</sup> This departure from the more difficult reading of the MT renders the LXX of little or no value in understanding the syntax of day seven (see n. 4 *supra*).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The text of the seven days of creation clearly has a literary structure. The question I have raised is whether this structured text requires us to read it as a chronological sequence. Wayne Grudem points out that structure does not exclude a chronological sequence in the seven days and holds up both as being complementary.<sup>25</sup> I concur with him that structure does not exclude chronological sequencing. Further, I am not suggesting that the syntax I have explained excludes chronological sequencing. What I am saying is that the syntax of the text does not require chronological sequence. Scholars such as Fishbane emphasize structural elements and state clearly that they do not view the seven days chronologically, but they do not provide grammatical justification for excluding chronology.<sup>26</sup> I have attempted to detail and explain that the seven days of creation have a special syntactical pattern that does not require chronology. The seven days are more like a numbered list. To claim that the text requires us to read it chronologically is to err by exceeding the meaning in the text. Each day was apparently numbered on the basis of its content, not its order in time. This may have allowed the author the freedom to arrange the list of days in an order that better suited his compositional strategy than the actual chronology.<sup>27</sup> It also avoided misrepresenting the true order of events by not using the syntax of chronology.

<sup>24</sup> Speiser, *Genesis* 7.

<sup>25</sup> W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 303.

<sup>26</sup> Fishbane, *Text* 10 ff.

<sup>27</sup> It is fair to ask why I ever questioned the chronology of this text. The answer is I never did, but when I read that others questioned it, I decided to examine the text for myself. This paper is the result of that investigation.