

אָדָם AS AN ORDINAL NUMBER AND THE MEANING OF GENESIS 1:5

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It has long been noted that the Hebrew cardinal number אָדָם, “one,” can also be used in place of the ordinal number ראשון, “first.”¹ In addition, it has also been noted that Gen 1:5 uses the cardinal number for the first day of creation, whereas the other days are numbered using ordinal numbers (Gen 1:8, 13; 19, 23, 31; 2:2, 3). Most contemporary English translations understand the use of the cardinal number in Gen 1:5 as a case of the cardinal functioning as an ordinal, translating, “the first day.”² Most commentators support this understanding.³ The Jewish Publication Society’s *Tanakh* follows the Hebrew more closely, noting that no article is used in Hebrew, translating, “a first day.”⁴ A minority of English translations, however, does not view this as an instance of אָדָם functioning as an ordinal number and translate “one day.”⁵ This, in fact, is the translation found already in the LXX (ἡμέρα μία).

Which is the correct understanding of Gen 1:5, and does it make a difference in how one understands the meaning of this verse? To answer this, we must first explore the use of אָדָם as an ordinal number.

I. אָדָם AS AN ORDINAL NUMBER IN NUMBERING UNITS OF TIME

1. *The numbering of days of a month.* אָדָם is used to indicate the first day of a month. The usual formula is שְׁבַע יָמִים לְחֹדֶשׁ or b^e + one l^e + article + month. It means “on the first day of the month.” This formula is used seventeen times.⁶ A closely related formula that is used only in post-exilic Hebrew

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¹ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 274, §15.2.1b.

² NRSV, NIV, NKJV; *The English Bible in Basic English* (Ontario: Online Bible Foundation and Woodside Fellowship, 1964); *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1985).

³ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990) 118; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (1: The Pentateuch: Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976) 50; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (NAC 1A; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996) 149; Gordan J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1); Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 4; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 114.

⁴ *The TANAKH* (n.p.: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

⁵ NASB, NLT; *JPS Holy Scriptures* (n.p.: Jewish Publication Society, 1917).

⁶ Gen 8:5, 13; Exod 40:2, 17; Lev 23:24; Num 1:1, 18; 29:1; 33:38; Deut 1:3; 2 Chr 29:17; Ezra 7:9; Ezek 26:1; 29:17; 31:1; 32:1; 45:18.

employs the word “day”: *בְּיוֹם אֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ* or $b^e + day\ one\ l^e + article + month$. This also means “on the first day of the month.” This formula is used four times.⁷ One slight variation, *מִיּוֹם אֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ*, “from the first day of the month,” occurs at Ezra 3:6. It is important to note that in these formulas “first” is definite (“the first,” not “a first”) by virtue of the article with *month*.

This use of *אֶחָד* is not unique, since the cardinal numbers four, five, seven, eight, nine, and ten are frequently used in the same formula in place of the ordinal numbers fourth, fifth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth.⁸ In fact, *ordinal numbers are never used in this formula*, making it likely that this is not a special use of *אֶחָד*, but a standard idiom in Biblical Hebrew for numbering days of a month.⁹ In all of these cases the definite article is used with *month*.

2. *The numbering of years of a king’s reign.* *אֶחָד* is also used in the formula referring to the first year of a king’s reign. The standard formula is $X\ לַאֲחַת\ אַחַת$, or $b^e + year\ one\ l^e + X$, where X is a personal name. This formula means “in the first year of X” and occurs five times, always in exilic or post-exilic Hebrew.¹⁰ Like the designation of the first day of a month, in this formula “first” is always definite by virtue of the personal name, since proper nouns are definite in Hebrew. One variation on this formula is found in Dan 9:2: *בְּשָׁנָה אֶחָת לְמַלְכוֹ*, “in the first year of his (Darius’s) reign.”¹¹ Once again, “first” is definite, this time by virtue of the pronominal suffix on *לְמַלְכוֹ*.

Moreover, this use of *אֶחָד* is not unique, since the cardinals for two through eight are frequently used in the same formula in place of the ordinal numbers second through eighth.¹² In fact, it is rare to find an ordinal number used in this formula.¹³ Once again, it is likely that the use of cardinal numbers in numbering years, like their use in numbering days of a month, is idiomatic. Therefore, the use of *אֶחָד* in this formula is neither unique nor unexpected.

3. *Numbering other units of time.* All other units of time are numbered using ordinals. Days in a sequence that are not specific days of a particular

⁷ Ezra 10:16, 17; Neh 8:2; Hag 1:1.

⁸ Fourth day of the month (Zech 7:1); fifth day of the month (Ezek 1:1, 2; 8:1; 33:21); seventh day of the month (2 Kgs 25:8; Ezek 30:20); eighth day of the month (2 Chr 29:17); ninth day of the month (Lev 23:32; 2 Kgs 25:3; Jer 39:2; 52:6); tenth day of the month (Exod 12:3; Lev 16:29; 23:27; 25:9; Num 29:7; Josh 4:19; 2 Kgs 25:1; Jer 52:4, 12; Ezek 20:1; 24:1; 40:1).

⁹ Hebrew, of course, has no distinct ordinal numbers greater than ten. Above ten numbers function as both cardinal and ordinal numbers.

¹⁰ 2 Chr 36:22; Ezra 1:1; Dan 9:1, 2; 11:1.

¹¹ See 2 Chr 17:7 where the same expression occurs with the cardinal number “three,” and 2 Chr 3:2 where it occurs with the cardinal number “four.”

¹² Second year (1 Kgs 15:25; 2 Kgs 1:17; 14:1; 15:32; Dan 2:2; Hag 1:1, 15; 2:10; Zech 1:1, 7); third year (1 Kgs 15:28, 33; 2 Kgs 18:1; 2 Chr 17:7; Esth 1:3; Dan 1:1; 8:1; 10:1); fourth year (1 Kgs 22:41; 2 Chr 3:2; Zech 7:1); fifth year (2 Kgs 8:16); sixth year (2 Kgs 16:10); seventh year (2 Kgs 12:2; Ezra 7:7; Esth 2:16; Jer 52:28); eighth year (2 Kgs 24:12).

¹³ The only examples are 2 Kgs 17:6 (ninth year); 25:1 (ninth year); Jer 28:1 (fourth year); 32:1 (tenth year); 46:2 (fourth year); 51:59 (fourth year).

month are designated by ordinals, always with the use of an article (outside of Genesis 1). The occurrences are:

- הַיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן, the first day: Exod 12:15, 16; Lev 23:7, 35, 39, 40; Num 7:12; 28:18; Deut 16:4; Judg 20:22; Neh 8:18; Dan 10:12
- הַיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי, the second day: Exod 2:13; Num 7:18; 29:17; Josh 6:14; 10:32; Judg 20:24, 25; Neh 8:13; Esth 7:2; Jer 41:4; Ezek 43:22
- הַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי, the third day: Gen 22:4; 31:22; 34:25; 40:20; 42:18; Exod 19:11 (twice), 16; Lev 7:17, 18; 19:6, 7; Num 7:24; 19:12 (twice), 19; 29:20; 31:19; Josh 9:17; Judg 20:30; 1 Sam 30:1; 2 Sam 1:2; 1 Kgs 3:18; 12:12 (twice); 2 Kgs 20:5, 8; Esth 5:1; Hos 6:2
- הַיּוֹם הָרְבִיעִי, the fourth day: Num 7:30; 29:23; Judg 19:5; Ezra 8:33
- הַיּוֹם הַחֲמִישִׁי, the fifth day: Num 7:36; 29:26; Judg 19:8
- הַיּוֹם הַשֵּׁשִׁי, the sixth day: Gen 1:31; Exod 16:5, 22, 29; Num 7:42; 29:29
- הַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, the seventh day: Gen 2:2, 3; Exod 12:16; 13:6; 16:26, 27, 29; 20:10, 11; 23:12; 24:16; 31:15, 17; 34:21; 35:2; Lev 13:5, 6, 27, 32, 34, 51; 14:9, 39; 23:3, 8; Num 6:9; 7:48; 19:12, 19; 28:25; 29:32; 31:19, 24; Deut 5:14; 16:8; Josh 6:4, 15; Judg 14:15, 17, 18; 2 Sam 12:18; 1 Kgs 20:29; Esth 1:10
- הַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי, the eighth day: Exod 22:29; Lev 9:1; 12:3; 14:10, 23; 15:14, 29; 22:27; 23:36, 39; Num 6:10; 7:54; 29:35; 1 Kgs 8:66; 2 Chr 7:9; Neh 8:18; Ezek 43:27
- הַיּוֹם הַתְּשִׁיעִי, the ninth day: Num 7:60
- הַיּוֹם הָעֲשִׂירִי, the tenth day: Num 7:66

Months are always designated using ordinals. The article is always used. The occurrences are:

- הַחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן, the first month: Exod 40:2, 17; Lev 23:5; Num 9:1; 20:1; 28:16; 33:3 (twice); Josh 4:19; 1 Chr 12:16; 27:2, 3; 2 Chr 29:3, 17 (twice); 35:1; Ezra 6:19; 7:9; 8:31; 10:17; Esth 3:7, 12; Dan 10:4
- הַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי, the second month: Gen 7:11; 8:14; Exod 16:1; Num 1:1, 18; 9:11; 10:11; 1 Sam 20:27, 34; 1 Kgs 6:1; 1 Chr 27:4; 2 Chr 3:2; 30:2, 13, 15; Ezra 3:8
- הַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי, the third month: Exod 19:1; 1 Chr 27:5; 2 Chr 15:10; Esth 8:9
- הַחֹדֶשׁ הָרְבִיעִי, the fourth month: 1 Chr 27:7; Jer 39:2; 52:6
- הַחֹדֶשׁ הַחֲמִישִׁי, the fifth month: Num 33:38; 2 Kgs 25:8; 1 Chr 27:8; Ezra 7:8, 9; Jer 1:3; 28:1; 52:12
- הַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁשִׁי, the sixth month: 1 Chr 27:9; Hag 1:1, 15
- הַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי, the seventh month: Gen 8:4; Lev 16:29; 23:24, 27, 34, 39, 41; 25:9; Num 29:1, 7, 12; 1 Kgs 8:2; 2 Kgs 25:25; 1 Chr 27:10; 2 Chr 5:3; 7:10; 31:7; Ezra 3:1, 6; Neh 7:73; 8:2, 14; Jer 28:17; 41:1; Hag 2:1
- הַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁמִינִי, the eighth month: 1 Kgs 38; 12:32, 33; 1 Chr 27:11; Zech 1:1
- הַחֹדֶשׁ הַתְּשִׁיעִי, the ninth month: 1 Chr 27:12; Ezra 10:9; Jer 36:9, 22; Zech 7:1
- הַחֹדֶשׁ הָעֲשִׂירִי, the tenth month: 2 Kgs 25:1; 1 Chr 27:13; Ezra 10:16; Esth 2:16; Jer 39:1; 52:4; Ezek 24:1

In addition, the ordinal itself may be used to designate a month with the word חדש elided. This is often the case when both the month and the day of the month are given. The occurrences are:

הראשון, the first (month): Gen 8:13; 12:18; Num 9:5; Ezek 29:17; 30:20; 45:18, 21
 השלישי, the third (month): Ezek 31:1
 הרביעי, the fourth (month): Ezek 1:1; Zech 8:19
 החמישי, the fifth (month): Ezek 20:1; Zech 7:5
 הששי, the sixth (month): Ezek 8:1
 השביעי, the seventh (month): Ezek 45:25; Hag 2:1
 התשעי, the ninth (month): Hag 2:10, 18
 העשירי, the tenth (month): Gen 8:5; Ezek 29:1; 33:21

Likewise, years are designated by ordinal numbers with the article (except for the idiom that relates the year of a king's reign discussed above). The occurrences are:

השנה הראשונה, the first year: 2 Chr 29:3; Jer 25:1
 השנה השנית, the second year: Exod 40:17; Num 1:1; 9:1; 10:11; 2 Kgs 19:29; Isa 37:30
 השנה השלישית, the third year: Deut 26:12; 1 Kgs 18:1; 2 Kgs 19:29; Isa 37:30
 השנה הרביעית, the fourth year: Lev 19:24; 1 Kgs 6:1, 37; 2 Kgs 18:9; Jer 25:1; 28:1; 36:1; 45:1; 46:2; 51:59
 השנה החמישית, the fifth year: Lev 19:25; 1 Kgs 14:25; 2 Chr 12:2; Jer 36:9; Ezek 1:2
 השנה הששית, the sixth year: Lev 25:21; Ezek 8:1
 השנה השביעית, the seventh year: Exod 23:11 (*year elided*); Lev 25:4, 20; Deut 15:12; 2 Kgs 11:4; 18:9; 2 Chr 23:1; Ezra 7:8; Neh 10:32; Ezek 20:1
 השנה שמינית, the eighth year: Lev 25:22
 השנה התשעית, the ninth year: Lev 25:22; 2 Kgs 17:6; 25:1; Jer 39:1; 52:4; Ezek 24:1
 השנה העשירית, the tenth year: Jer 32:1; Ezek 29:1

4. *Summary of the use of אחד as an ordinal when enumerating periods of time.* אחד may be used in place of the ordinal ראשון when enumerating time periods, but only in two special idioms. One of these designates the day of a month, the other the year of a reign of a king. In all other cases of periods of time (days, months or years) the ordinal number is used. Moreover, this use of the cardinal number אחד is not exclusive to it, since any Hebrew cardinal number may be used in the same expressions, *and only in those expressions*. In addition, it should be noted that *in every case for numbering a time period where a cardinal number is used to represent an ordinal number as well as in every case where a cardinal number is used to number a time period, the number is always explicitly definite*, either by the presence of the article or

by the governing noun having a pronominal suffix or because the governing noun is a proper noun.

II. COUNTABLES

Another use of אָחַד as an ordinal number is for countables. Waltke and O'Connor note, "With a definite noun, אָחַד 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, the article may be omitted from the adjective."¹⁴ The occurrences of this use of אָחַד are:

- הָאָחַד [הַנְּהַר], Gen 2:11: "the first [river]" (of four rivers)
- שֵׁם הָאָחַת עֲדָה, Gen 4:19: "the name of the first [wife] was Adah" (of two wives)
- הַיְרִיעָה הָאָחַת, Exod 26:4, 5; 36:11: "the first curtain" (of two curtains)
- הַטּוֹר הָאָחַד, Exod 28:17; 39:10: "the first row" (of four rows)
- לִכְבֵּשׂ הָאָחַד, Exod 29:40, Num 28:7: "for the first lamb" (of two lambs)
- הַכְּרוּב הָאָחַת, 1 Kgs 6:24: "the first cherub" (of two cherubs)
- שֵׁם הָאָחַת יְמִימָה, Job 42:14: "the name of the first [he called] Jemimah (of three daughters)
- פְּנֵי הָאָחַד פְּנֵי הַכְּרוּב, Ezek 10:14: "the face of the first [creature] was the face of a cherub (of four creatures)

In each of these cases all of the subsequent countables are enumerated with ordinal numbers (second, third or fourth) with the article prefixed to each ordinal. Waltke and O'Connor would also include the three Philistine detachments mentioned in 1 Sam 13:17–18 as an example of the use of אָחַד as an ordinal.¹⁵ However, in this case all three detachments are described as הָרֵאשׁ אָחַד, with no use of any ordinal number and no use of the article with אָחַד. אָחַד is not used as an ordinal, and this passage should be translated, "One detachment turned toward the Orpah Road, toward the land of Shual, one detachment turned toward the Beth-Horon Road, and one detachment turned toward the mountain that looks down on the valley of Zeboim, toward the wilderness." Since this is Waltke and O'Connor's only example of when "the article may be omitted from the adjective," their statement needs to be revised. *The article is never omitted from the adjective numeral in a list of a small number of countable items*, whether that adjective is the numeral אָחַד or an ordinal number used to describe subsequent elements in the series of countables. The description of the use of אָחַד as an ordinal number for the first element in a small number of countable items should state:

With a definite noun, אָחַד 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

¹⁴ Waltke and O'Connor, *IBHS* 274, §15.2.1b.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

mention, the article is never omitted from the adjective or its governing noun. The following items are counted with ordinal numbers.

III. אָחַד IN GENESIS 1:5

How, then, are we to understand the use of אָחַד in Gen 1:5? The verse reads, וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד. If this means, as most translators and commentators understand it, "There was an evening and a morning, the first day," we can find no precedent for the use of אָחַד here. It cannot be the use of a cardinal number as an ordinal to enumerate a time period, since this only applies to days of a month or the years of a king's reign. Neither of these is the case here, despite the references to the use of אָחַד as an ordinal to denote a first day by some commentators.¹⁶

Moreover, this cannot be the typical use of אָחַד to begin a list of countables. First, the lack of an article on both אָחַד and יוֹם is unattested elsewhere in the OT for a list of countables. Secondly, none of the following ordinal numbers for the second through fifth days has an article, nor is there an article with יוֹם (Gen 1:8, 13, 19, 23). This, again, is unattested elsewhere in the OT. Finally, with the other countables only short descriptions intervene between the enumerated items. The longest gap is eighteen words (Gen 2:11–13). In Genesis 1, the shortest gap between enumerated items is thirty-six words (between the first and second days; Gen 1:5–8). Clearly, one cannot simply appeal to the use of אָחַד as an ordinal here based on analogy to its use as an ordinal in the lists of countables. However, it is common for scholars to make such an appeal.¹⁷

What other explanation is possible? Nachmanides suggested that the cardinal number "one" was used since no second day had yet taken place, and therefore no order could be properly spoken of until the second day.¹⁸ However, this explanation fails to explain why *any* cardinal number from one through ten, not just the number "one," may be used when designating a day of a month or a year of a king's reign. Certainly day two or day seven of a month imply that day one or days one through six have already taken place. Cassuto, while appealing to Nachmanides's argument, also supplemented it by stating that "even when all the objects enumerated together exist at the same time, we are able, momentarily, to pay attention only to the first of them, and must therefore designate it *one*."¹⁹ This fails to explain, however, the following days in Genesis 1. Certainly, as the chapter is being read, the reader or author may momentarily pay attention to the one at hand, even if it were the second, third, fourth, fifth or sixth day. Yet, only the first day is designated by a cardinal number.

¹⁶ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* 118, n. 4; Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary* 50; Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961) 30.

¹⁷ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* 118, n. 4; Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary* 50.

¹⁸ Cassuto, *Genesis* 30; Nachmanides, *Ramban (Nachmanides): Commentary on the Torah* (trans. Charles B. Chavel; New York: Shilo, 1971) 32–33.

¹⁹ Cassuto, *Genesis* 50.

Archer explains that the lack of a definite article means the numbered days “are well adapted to a sequential pattern, rather than to strictly delimited units of time.”²⁰ This, however, fails to explain why the sixth day is יוֹם הַשֵּׁשִׁי, “the sixth day,” with an article on the ordinal number, but why there is no article on יוֹם (Gen 1:31). Does the presence of the article mean that the sixth day (and the seventh day, Gen 2:2, 3) was a strictly delimited unit of time, but the first five days were not?

Given all of the evidence, we cannot simply state that אָחַד is used as an ordinal number at Gen 1:5 merely because it is used that way in some clearly defined idioms, none of which is reproduced in this verse. In fact, all the evidence seems to point in the opposite direction: אָחַד appears to be used as a cardinal number, since its use fits neither the idiom for numbering days of a month nor the idiom used for numbering a small number of countable items.

If אָחַד is used as a cardinal number here, what is the force of Gen 1:5?

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם וּלְצֶלַח קָרָא לַיְלָה וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד

God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” There was an evening and there was a morning: one day.

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 occurrence means the time during a daily cycle that is illuminated by daylight (as opposed to “night”). The second use 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 that 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 then explain the lack of 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 יוֹם, as would be expected. This would indicate that the sixth day was a regular solar day, but that it was also *the culminating day of creation*. Likewise, the seventh day is referred to as יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי (Gen 2:3), with lack of an article on יוֹם. This, also, the author is implying, was a regular

²⁰ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 61.

solar day. Yet it was a special day, because God had finished his work of creation.

IV. CONCLUSION

יום, 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.²¹ This alone has made the length of the days in Genesis 1 a perennially controversial subject.²² However, the use of אָחַד in Gen 1:5 and the following unique uses of the ordinal numbers on the other days demonstrates that the text itself indicates that these are regular solar days.²³

Just as important as this conclusion is another one: appealing to Hebrew grammar must be done with a thorough investigation of the grammatical usages themselves. The contention that אָחַד is used in Gen 1:5 as an ordinal number has been based on grammars that noticed a general phenomenon in Hebrew usage, but did not collate all of the evidence and carefully examine the situations under which אָחַד could be used as a substitute for the ordinal number הָרִאשׁוֹן. While grammars are useful tools, they are fallible. When interpreting an especially critical text such as Genesis 1, it is necessary to investigate any grammatical assertions of the grammars before relying upon them.

²¹ For instance, compare the two different meanings in Gen 1:5 with another meaning in Gen 2:4.

²² Note the disagreement on the meaning of “day” in Genesis 1 among otherwise conservative scholars committed to the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. E.g., Wenham (*Genesis 1–15* 6) argues that “day” must mean a twenty-four hour period, while Mathews (*Genesis 1–11* 149) argues that “day” is to be understood in a non-literal sense.

²³ Whether or not one believes in the veracity of the Genesis account of creation in six solar days is another matter altogether.