It has long been noted that the Hebrew cardinal number יְאֹדֶה, “one,” can also be used in place of the ordinal number יִשְׂרֵאֵל, “first.” 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.” Most commentators support this understanding. The Jewish Publication Society’s Tanakh follows the Hebrew more closely, noting that no article is used in Hebrew, translating, “a first day.” A minority of English translations, however, does not view this as an instance of יְאֹדֶה functioning as an ordinal number and translate “one day.” 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 יְאֹדֶה as an ordinal number.

1. יְאֹדֶה AS AN ORDINAL NUMBER IN NUMBERING UNITS OF TIME

1. The numbering of days of a month. יְאֹדֶה is used to indicate the first day of a month. The usual formula is יְאֹדֶה לֹא or יְאֹדֶה לָא + one ל + month. It means “on the first day of the month.” This formula is used seventeen times. A closely related formula that is used only in post-exilic Hebrew...
employs the word “day”: בֵּית אָדָם לָאֵחָיו or b'$ + day one l' + article + month. This also means “on the first day of the month.” This formula is used four times. One slight variation, הבש אָדָם לָאֵחָיו, “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 לָאֵחָיו 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. In fact, ordinal numbers are never used in this formula, making it likely that this is not a special use of לָאֵחָיו, but a standard idiom in Biblical Hebrew for numbering days of a month. In all of these cases the definite article is used with month.

2. The numbering of years of a king’s reign. לָאֵחָיו is also used in the formula referring to the first year of a king’s reign. The standard formula is לָאֵחָיו תִּשְׁאָר, or b'$+year one l'+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. 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: הָעָשׁ אֵית יָמִלָּל, “in the first year of his (Darius’s) reign.” Once again, “first” is definite, this time by virtue of the pronominal suffix on יָמִלָּל.

Moreover, this use of לָאֵחָיו 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. In fact, it is rare to find an ordinal number used in this formula. 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 לָאֵחָיו 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
month are designated by ordinals, always with the use of an article (outside of Genesis 1). The occurrences are:


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


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

יָוֵר, the first (month): Gen 8:13; 12:18; Num 9:5; Ezek 29:17; 30:20; 45:18, 21
יָבֵשׁ, the third (month): Ezek 31:1
יָבָרִים, the fourth (month): Ezek 1:1; Zech 8:19
יָפִを使った, the fifth (month): Ezek 20:1; Zech 7:5
יָשָׁן, the sixth (month): Ezek 8:1
יָגֵר, the seventh (month): Ezek 45:25; Hag 2:1
יָהָר, the ninth (month): Hag 2:10, 18
יָגְרָא, 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:

יתנְנָה נָאָשֶׁנְא, the first year: 2 Chr 29:3; Jer 25:1
יתנֲנֶה נֹשְׁנָה, the second year: Exod 40:17; Num 1:1; 9:1; 10:11; 2 Kgs 19:29; Isa 37:30
יתנָנֶה נָשְׁנִית, the third year: Deut 26:12; 1 Kgs 18:1; 2 Kgs 19:29; Isa 37:30
יתנְנָה נָשֹׁנְטִית, 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
יתנְנָה נָשַׁס, the fifth year: Lev 19:25; 1 Kgs 14:25; 2 Chr 12:2; Jer 36:9; Ezek 1:2
יתנֲנֶה נֹשְׁנָה, the sixth year: Lev 25:21; Ezek 8:1
יתנְנָה נָשֹׁנְטִית, 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
יתנָנֶה נָשַׁס, the eighth year: Lev 25:22
יתנֲנֶה נֹשְׁנָה, the ninth year: Lev 25:22; 2 Kgs 17:6; 25:1; Jer 39:1; 52:4; Ezek 24:1
יתנְנָה נָשָׁר, the tenth year: Jer 32:1; Ezek 29:1

4. Summary of the use of דַּעַן as an ordinal when enumerating periods of time. דַּעַן may be used in place of the ordinal לָשָׁנָה 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 דַּעַן 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 רָאָשׁ as an ordinal number is for countables. Waltke and O’Connor note, “With a definite noun, רָאָשׁ 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.”\(^\text{14}\)

The occurrences of this use of רָאָשׁ are:

- הדנה, [Gen 2:11: “the first [river]” (of four rivers)]
- יְשִׁישוֹת דָּוִד, [Gen 4:19: “the name of the first [wife] was Adah” (of two wives)]
- לְבָשׁוֹת דָּוִד, [Exod 26:4, 5; 36:11: “the first curtain” (of two curtains)]
- לְבָשׁוֹת רָחָם, [Exod 28:17; 39:10: “the first row” (of four rows)]
- לֶבּוֹשׁוֹת דָּוִד, [Exod 29:40, Num 28:7: “for the first lamb” (of two lambs)]
- הַכּוֹרְבּ דָּוִד, [1 Kgs 6:24: “the first cherub” (of two cherubs)]
- יְשִׁישוֹת דָּוִד, [Job 42:14: “the name of the first [he called] Jemimah (of three daughters)]
- מֵאָה דָּוִד פִּנְתִּרְבָּה, [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 רָאָשׁ as an ordinal.\(^\text{15}\)

However, in this case all three detachments are described as ראש, with no use of any ordinal number and no use of the article with רָאָשׁ. רָאָשׁ 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 רֶאשׁ or an ordinal number used to describe subsequent elements in the series of countables. The description of the use of רָאָשׁ as an ordinal number for the first element in a small number of countable items should state:

With a definite noun, רֶאשׁ 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.

\(^{14}\) 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. רָ֣חֵשׁ I N G E N E S I S 1:5

How, then, are we to understand the use of רָ֣חֵשׁ in Gen 1:5? The verse reads, רָ֣חֵשׁ וּתְּלֶ֣תֶת הָֽיִ֥וְרָ֖בְּכָּ֣ן לְאָֽלֵךְ֗ מֵאָֽלֶֽךְ. 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 רָ֣חֵשׁ 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 רָ֣חֵשׁ as an ordinal to denote a first day by some commentators. 16

Moreover, this cannot be the typical use of רָ֣חֵשׁ to begin a list of countables. First, the lack of an article on both רָ֣חֵשׁ and וּתְּלֶ֣תֶת 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 וּתְּלֶ֣תֶת (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 רָ֣חֵשׁ 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.

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.”\textsuperscript{20} This, however, fails to explain why the sixth day is יֶשֶׁר, “the sixth day,” with an article on the ordinal number, but why there is no article on יְמֵי (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 יֶשֶׁר 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: יֶשֶׁר 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 יֶשֶׁר is used as a cardinal number here, what is the force of Gen 1:5?

ירקא אלוהים לארץ ים ותשב יאמ לילה וירדعب והרבק ים אתר

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 יְמֵי, 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 יְמֵי הָעָלֶה (Gen 2:3), with lack of an article on יְמֵי. This, also, the author is implying, was a regular

\textsuperscript{20} Gleason L. Archer, Jr., \textit{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

 Callable, 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. This alone has made the length of the days in Genesis 1 a perennially controversial subject. However, the use of רָאָשָׁה 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.

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 רָאָשָׁה 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 רָאָשָׁה could be used as a substitute for the ordinal number רָאָשׁ. 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.

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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.