

# The Days of Creation: A Semantic Approach

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The length of time represented by the ‘days’ of creation in Genesis has been a controversial subject among evangelicals for at least 150 years. During this time, ‘eisegesis has been as common as exegesis.’<sup>1</sup> Some have examined the history of the interpretation of the ‘days’ of Genesis 1;<sup>2,3</sup> others have studied the variety of definitions for the Hebrew word *yôm*, translated ‘day’.<sup>4,5</sup> To avoid the trap of eisegesis, this study will present a semantic analysis of the word *yôm* in the Old Testament. However, before discussing the meaning of any single word, it is wise to understand the purpose behind the words which are used in the Bible, and specifically in Genesis 1.

## I. THE BIBLE AND WORDS

### 1. The Bible As Communication

Why did the authors of the Bible write the specific words they did? The answer to this question reaches to the very nature and purpose of the Bible itself. Carl Henry, and most evangelicals, have observed that the purpose of the Bible is to communicate God’s message to mankind. This is accomplished by employing human language, comprised of words in a specific context, which is ‘serviceable as a means of God’s revelation to man and of man’s communication with God; it can and does convey an informed interpretation of divine reality.’<sup>6</sup> John Feinberg says that for any possibility of accurate communication to take place, words, as a component of language, must contain extra-linguistic referents.<sup>7</sup> These referents operate by tying language, which is a description of the perceived or actual reality, and the physical (or the spiritual) world together into a unified whole. Feinberg illustrates his point:

*‘For example, if meaning is determined in terms of use and convention alone without also some definite ontological tie to the world, then it would seem that if I want to warn my friend that he is about to be bitten by a snake, I can do so just as easily by saying, “It’s a beautiful day for a walk in the park!” (or even “Glippity glop is glipping!”) as I can by saying “Be careful! There is a snake near your foot!” However,*

*this seems to leave open the possibility, ontologically speaking, that there actually might not be any snake nor any foot. My utterance might be nothing more than a reflection of what is going on in my mind, but not a reflection of what is happening in the world.’<sup>8</sup>*

Another example of an extra-linguistic referent is the word ‘sunny’. This word denotes the physical reality of light and warmth coming from the sun; however, it can be used figuratively for an emotional light or warmth which exists in one’s personality (e.g. ‘You have a sunny disposition.’). When used in this context, however, it assumes knowledge of the physical reality of sunshine. It is this extra-linguistic factor which provides a means for checking whether the verbal statements are understood in the same manner in which the author intended.<sup>9</sup> When God spoke, through the human author, He intended that the words used in the biblical text were meant to communicate something about the entire reality which surrounds us. The result is that mankind, created in His image, is able to comprehend what His words were meant to communicate. When approaching the Bible, the reader must comprehend the extra-linguistic referents so he can be reasonably certain that his understanding of God’s message is correct.

### 2. The Bible and Semantics

The extra-linguistic component of language is but one means of ensuring the correct understanding of the biblical text. Another means of ensuring that the message of Scripture is understood is by the use of lexical semantics. The application of semantics to biblical studies is a recent discipline, yet it plays an important part in the accurate exegesis of the text. Moises Silva defines lexical semantics as ‘the branch of linguistics that focuses on the meaning of individual words.’<sup>10</sup> Lexical semantics is an examination of words and is ultimately based on likelihoods, that is, which word, or combination of words, an author is more likely to have used to communicate a particular meaning. This becomes clearer as some of the important concepts in semantics are defined.

Context is the first concept of semantics to be defined. It is said that context determines the meaning of words. J.

Vendryes states:

*'Among the diverse meanings a word possesses, the only one that will emerge into consciousness is the one determined by the context. All others are abolished, extinguished, or non-existent. This is true even of words whose significance appears to be firmly established.'*<sup>11</sup>

There are, of course, a variety of specific contexts used in the Bible. One can, for example, examine the immediate sentence, paragraph, or the entire book in determining the intended meaning of a single word. However, it is also necessary to keep in mind that even the genres (history, poetry, and prophecy) of the Bible are often contexts all unto themselves. As such, a word, or combination of words, could, at least in theory, have a different meaning from genre to genre. In studying semantics, four words must be defined: 'range', 'field', 'syntagmatic', and 'paradigmatic'. Range is simply a dictionary approach to determining the limits of the application of any one word. Field is the related meaning of various words around one idea. So then, range and field are concerned with the conceptual relationship of single words. One might consider the English word 'day' as an example. The range of the word would be the definitions contained in the dictionary, and the field would be all the synonyms and antonyms that might be found in a thesaurus.

A syntagmatic relation 'is a linear relationship with other words or units with which it is chained together.'<sup>12</sup> A paradigmatic relation is 'the relation between a word and another word which is not present in the actual utterance, but which might have been chosen in its place.'<sup>13</sup> These two concepts, syntagmatic and paradigmatic, are concerned with the spatial and contextual relationships of words. An example might be seen in the phrase; 'the house is large'. Here, 'house' is in a syntagmatic relation with 'is' and 'large', and is in a paradigmatic relationship to 'building', 'barn' or 'shed'. Choice is the last concept of semantics which must be noted. This concept illustrates the value of the words when used in a specific context. 'The value of a word is first known when we mark it off against the value of neighboring [syntagmatic] and opposing [paradigmatic] words. Only as part of the whole does the word have sense.'<sup>14,15</sup> So the interpreter must consider the words the author chose in the specific context, and then mark them off against the other possibilities which could have been chosen. Once this is done the author's intended meaning should be clear.

## II. SYNTAGMATIC RELATIONSHIPS OF YÔM

The meaning of 'day' in Genesis 1, begins with a study of the Hebrew word *yôm*. The following are observations regarding the semantic range of this word, and the general word combinations, patterns and the meaning denoted by them. Such a study must also take into account

the paradigmatic relationships to other words that might be used to signify a long period of time in the place of *yôm*.

### 1. The Semantic Range of Yôm

The range of *yôm* is well known. The word has five meanings:

- i. a period of light in a day/night cycle;
- ii. a period of 24 hours;
- iii. a general or vague concept of time;
- iv. a specific point of time; and
- v. a period of a year.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, the English word 'day' has fourteen different definitions.<sup>17</sup> There are many biblical occurrences of *yôm*: it appears a total of 2291 times with 1446 being in the singular (a slight majority, 729, appear with a preposition), and 845 in the plural (only 213 appear in a prepositional phrase).<sup>18</sup>

### 2. Syntagmatic Relationships of Yôm

The word *yôm*, in general, has a wide variety of possible combinations. As these combinations are carefully observed, some initial conclusions can be made regarding the syntagmatic relationships between *yôm* and numbers, morning, evening, light, night, and darkness.<sup>19</sup>

#### a. Yôm and Numbers

The word *yôm*, either singular or plural, is used with a number 359 times outside of Genesis 1. There are four prominent ways in which *yôm* could be combined with a number to bring forth a certain significance. First, when the plural noun-form is used with a cardinal number (e.g. one, two, three, etc.) it denotes a specific duration of time (exceptions which contain a singular form of *yôm* do occur, but are infrequent); this construction occurs 189 times. An example of this can be seen in Genesis 30:36, 'Then he put a three-day journey between himself and Jacob.' The second uses the prepositions 'on' or 'for' (Hebrew: *b*, *l*) to show that an action is to take place on a specific *yôm*. The number used in this construction is generally an ordinal (e.g. first, second, third, etc.) with *yôm* in the singular, and occurs 162 times. This can be illustrated by Exodus 24:16, 'For six days the glory covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud.' Although the construction in Genesis 1 does not precisely fit this pattern, it does appear that the phrase 'and it was evening, and it was morning' functions in a manner similar to the preposition (that is, on the xth day — comprised of an evening and morning), bringing out the semantic significance of a solar day. DeVries alludes to the same kind of function:

*'After all has been said, the fact that surprises us the most is that bayyôm hahû is used as often as it is in an epitome, i.e., a summarizing characterization concerning a particular day in which Israel's God was in some way seen to be active in crucial confrontation with his people.'*<sup>20</sup>

Although there is no hint of a confrontation in Genesis 1, it should be noted that the *way hî* phrases (translated ‘and it was’) function to summarize the activities of the previous *yôm*. So it seems reasonable to place the concluding phrases in Genesis 1 in this category. The last two types are few in number, but use prepositions to signify a certain *yôm* as a starting point or a terminal point of an action, and occur a total of 7 times; here too the word *yôm* is singular, and is associated with an ordinal number. An example of the starting point is in Ezra 3:6, ‘On the first day of the seventh month, they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord.’ The terminal point is seen in Leviticus 19:6, ‘. . . anything left over until the third day must be burned up.’ Terence Fretheim observes, ‘When the word “day” is used with a specific number, it always has reference to a normal day.’<sup>21</sup>

There is another point which should be brought out when discussing the syntagmatic relationships of *yôm* and numbers as they are used in a series. Fretheim observes that the use of *yôm* in a numbered series such as is found in Genesis 1, Numbers 7 and 29 ‘always has reference to a normal “day”.’<sup>22</sup> So, as Fretheim suggests, when the interpreter sees the word *yôm*, used with a number, occurring several times in succession and in a specific context, this construction serves to denote a solar day.

This also is in keeping with the use of numbers in human languages, for numbers point to things which can be properly enumerated — not something abstract, but something that is concrete. This can be seen in some of the things which the Hebrew language enumerated: people, places, objects relating to the tabernacle (rings, candlesticks, curtains), parts of the human body, building materials, etc. It would seem that the Hebrew language uses numbers to modify those things which are well known by human experience. Newman admits the view that *yôm* in Genesis 1 signifying a normal day ‘has the advantage that no clear counter-example [of *yôm* with an ordinal number] can be cited with *yôm* meaning a long period of time.’<sup>23</sup> So when the word *yôm* is combined with a number it would appear that it is meant to communicate a twenty-four hour day.

### b. *Yôm* and Other Words

There are other words which are often syntagmatically related with *yôm*: ‘morning’, ‘evening’, ‘night’, ‘light’, and ‘darkness’. These words, along with the use of numbers, will aid in establishing a particular pattern of use. This, in turn, will aid in an accurate interpretation of *yôm* in Genesis 1.

The two words, ‘morning’ and ‘evening’, are combined with *yôm* 19 times each outside of Genesis 1 (three times these words share the same reference cf. Numbers 9:15, Deuteronomy 16:4 and Daniel 8:26), and with each occurrence a twenty-four day is signified. This is true no matter what the literary genre or context might be. It should be further observed that when ‘morning’ and

‘evening’ occur together without *yôm* (this happens 38 times outside of Genesis 1, 25 of the 38 occur in historical narrative), it always, without exception, designates a literal solar day. So any combination of the words ‘morning’, ‘evening’, and *yôm* use their extra-linguistic referential value to its fullest extent; pointing to the length of time which is normally associated with these words. Saebo says that *yôm* is:

*‘the fundamental word for the division of time according to the fixed natural alternation of day and night, on which are based all the other units of time (as well as the calendar)’.*<sup>24</sup>

The word ‘night’ is similarly associated with *yôm*. These words are combined 53 times in the Old Testament outside of Genesis 1. The majority (26 times) appear in the historical sections; of the remainder, 16 are in the poetic sections and 11 in the prophetic. The meaning communicated by these combinations is also a solar day. Here too, the extra-linguistic factor (a literal cycle of light followed by a cycle of night, e.g. day and night) points to a reality outside of the word itself. It is thought that this use of *yôm* as the opposite of night represents its semantic core.<sup>25</sup>

Something slightly different is encountered when one examines the use of the words ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ with *yôm*. ‘Light’ appears with *yôm* 15 times outside of Genesis 1, and in most of the cases it refers to the cycle of time, with three observable exceptions: Isaiah 5:30, Amos 5:18, 20. The context makes it clear that the figurative language used in these verses refers to some future time when God will demonstrate His power to man. ‘Darkness’ is used in conjunction with *yôm* 11 times beyond Genesis 1, and most of these (seven of them) are figurative. These references are: Ecclesiastes 11:8, Isaiah 29:18, Joel 2:2, 31, Amos 5:18, 20, and Zephaniah 1:15. The Ecclesiastes passage uses ‘darkness’ as a time of trouble; the prophetic passages use eschatological language to denote some future time. It must also be noted that there are very few uses of ‘light’ or ‘darkness’ with *yôm* in the historical sections (‘light’ has three and ‘darkness’ has one). The majority occur in the prophetic genre where often these words have a symbolic meaning of blessing or judgment. However, when these words are used in historical narrative, they employ their referential value referring to that which is known by human experience.

### 3. Plural *Yôm* and Long Periods of Time

It appears that *yôm* was part of a variety of formulae, some of which could denote a long time. The plural use of *yôm* is the communicator of long time. This does not contradict the previous sections, because, in the illustrations that follow, *yôm* stands in a syntagmatic relationship that is different from the ones already discussed. The singular use tends to denote a short time. Once this is examined, the interpreter should be able to define con-

texts in which *yôm* would clearly communicate longer lengths of time.

It would appear, from the historical genre used in the Old Testament, that *yôm* in the plural tends to be part of a formula communicating a specific length of time. Gershon Brin observes that *yôm* is used for ‘naming eras in biblical times’.<sup>26</sup> This kind of formula has a personal name or title attached to the era; examples of this can be seen in Genesis 5 and 10, ‘days of *x* [name of patriarch]’. The names within the genealogies could be used to designate the era in which that person lived. This is also frequently observed in the book of Judges, where we read of the ‘days of *x* [name of a king or judge]’, and the author states how long it lasted. This formula can also be found in the prophetic genre following the same pattern, with one observable exception. Micah 7:15 is the exception where, instead of a name, this phrase is used, ‘when you came out of Egypt’. The reference points to the future when God will show His power to the Gentile nations, so the reference to ‘the days of’ signifies the period of the exodus from Egypt. The use of *yôm* in the plural signifies a set length of time, and the syntagmatic relationships within the context determines how long it is.

There are occurrences of *yôm* in the plural that appear to cover a period of thousands of years by using two Hebrew words for a great length of time. They are ‘of old’ (Hebrew: *qedem*) and ‘everlasting’ (Hebrew: *’ôl m*). Isaiah 51:9 illustrates the first word as it says, ‘. . . awake, as in the days gone by, as in the generations of old.’ The context is a metaphorical reference to God’s work of creation, and this is the same kind of work which will be undertaken for His people. These same words also appear in Jeremiah 46:26, Micah 7:20 and Psalm 44:1 to illustrate that humans had inhabited the earth for a long time (by then a period of some 3,000 years according to Genesis 5 and 10). The second Hebrew word is often used of ‘eternal’; it, too, designates a long time period when combined with the plural *yôm*. These can be observed in Isaiah 63:11 and Amos 9:11. The Isaiah passage refers to the time of Moses, ‘Then his people recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and his people’. The prophet Amos points back to the days of David, ‘In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, and wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old’.

So the interpreter should conclude that the use of *yôm* in the plural may signify a long period of time (when specified by the context). This can also be demonstrated by the use of two Hebrew words for a long time translated ‘of old’ and ‘everlasting’. It should be noted, however, that the context is one of history, and when the writers used these words for a long time, they did so with an eye to human history that began in Genesis 1:26. The observation can be made, from the plural use of *yôm*, that the time covered is of the order of a few thousand years, not orders of magnitude larger. Therefore, it does not appear that the

context of Genesis will allow the interpreter to fit what could possibly be billions of years into the singular *yôm* in the events of creation, as is alleged by some.

#### 4. Singular *Yôm* and Short Periods of Time

The significance of *yôm* in the singular, denoting a short time, should also be observed. This use, too, functions as a formula statement. As noted above, the singular is used 1446 times and most of these are used of a solar day. However, *yôm* has two other functions within Hebrew historiography which illustrate a time shorter than twelve hours.

The first use of *yôm* is a specific point in time. This can be observed when either a name or title is combined with *yôm*. Brin notes that the ‘phrase in the singular indicates a “moment” in history’.<sup>27</sup> When the context indicates a battle, this phrase, ‘the day of *x* [name of battle]’, refers to the height of the battle with the victory or defeat having occurred (cf. Psalm 137:7, Hosea 2:1–2, Isaiah 9:3). So the word *yôm* can indeed be used in reference to a specific point in history.

The syntagmatic relationships of *yôm* throughout the Old Testament have been examined. It appears that the Genesis 1 use of *yôm* was intended to refer to a solar day made up of a day/night cycle. This is the most natural interpretation for two reasons. First, the word-use pattern of *yôm* with numbers, ‘morning’, ‘evening’, ‘night’ and even ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ each suggest a solar day. Second, the extra-linguistic referential significance suggests that that which is communicated has its basis in physical reality and can be clearly observed by the reader. If something other than a literal day was intended by the use of *yôm* in Genesis 1, then the words of the text and reality have nothing in common. It seems clear, from the syntagmatic evidence, that the word, designated as a ‘day’ by Genesis 1, is a reference to a literal day of twenty-four hours.

### III. PARADIGMATIC RELATIONSHIPS OF *YÔM*

The paradigmatic analysis focuses on the choice of specific words used by the author, and seeks to answer the following question: ‘What choices of “time” words did Moses have available to use in Genesis 1?’ Once this question is answered, the interpreter should have a clear understanding of the meaning of the words used in Genesis 1, and what they were intended to communicate to the original audience.

#### 1. Stock of ‘Time’ Words

The vocabulary stock of biblical Hebrew words indicating ‘time’ is substantial. There are a total of 13 words which could have been chosen, and 11 of these words refer to a long period of time. At this point it will be sufficient to mention the words which make up the stock, and then select examples from that stock. The words that

denote a long time are: ‘*t*, which means ‘time’ in general; ‘*ad* is the word ‘forever’, and when it is used it occurs with prepositions; *qedem* sometimes is translated ‘of old’; *n sa* denotes ‘always’, ‘forever’; *t mîd* means ‘continually’ or ‘forever’; ‘*ôl m* is often translated as ‘perpetual’, ‘of old’ or ‘forever’; *dôr* signifies ‘generation’; ‘*rek* when used with *yôm* is translated ‘length of days’; *z m n* denotes a ‘season’ or ‘time’; and *mô‘ed*, which is also used for a ‘season’. There are also words in the vocabulary stock which denote a short period of time. One such word, which is used in biblical Hebrew, is *rega‘*. This word is translated by the English words ‘instantly’ or ‘moment’. The other word, although not used in biblical Hebrew, is the word for ‘hour’. It seems likely that the classical Hebrew language had this word within its vocabulary stock, and it could have been used if desired.<sup>28</sup> Together these words make up the semantic field for *yôm*. One can conclude that the Hebrew language had a good supply of words for ‘time’ of either a long or short duration.

## 2. Event in Long Time Past

The first aspect of time which could have been portrayed was one in which the author was in the present, and it reflects or describes events that took place a long time in the past. The simplest way of constructing this thought would have been to use the plural ‘days’ (Hebrew: *v mîm*) alone or with ‘morning’ and ‘evening’. A possible reading could be ‘and it was days of morning and evening’. This construction can be well documented throughout Hebrew historiography (for example, 664 out of 910 occurrences of *y mîm* can be found in the historical sections). If Moses had used these words together, it would have communicated at least two days with at least the possibility of a vast age. The second way that an ancient earth could have been portrayed would have been by using the word ‘of old’ (Hebrew: ‘*ôl m*) with ‘days’.<sup>29</sup> This could be constructed, ‘and it was from days of old’. There is a similar word for ‘of old’ (Hebrew: *qedem*) that might have been used by itself or with ‘days’.<sup>30</sup> So if God, through Moses, had desired to communicate an ancient creation there were ways of doing it, but He chose not to do so.

## 3. Continuing Event From the Long Time Past

The second type of ‘time’ designation which could have been signified was a creation starting in the past, but continuing on into the future. This would clearly support the concept of a protracted creative process like theistic evolution, or Robert Newman’s version of the ‘days’ of creation.<sup>31</sup> There are four words which could portray this kind of meaning. The first is ‘perpetual’ (Hebrew: ‘*ôl m* modified by the preposition *l*) used with ‘days’ or ‘morning’ and ‘evening’.<sup>32</sup> Second, would have been to have used the word ‘generation’ (Hebrew: *dôr*) by itself or in combination with ‘days’, ‘days’ and ‘nights’, or

‘morning’ and evening’.<sup>33</sup> One could illustrate this reading as, ‘and it was generations of days and nights’. The third word illustrating an on-going creation would have been ‘continual’ (Hebrew: *t mîd*) combined with ‘day’, ‘days’ and ‘nights’, or ‘morning’ and ‘evening’.<sup>34</sup> This could read, ‘and it was the continuation of days’. These last two usages are frequently seen in the historical sections portraying something that is on-going, especially of God’s statutes. The fourth word that could have been used to signify a continuing event is ‘forever’ (Hebrew: ‘*ad*). This word could appear by itself or in conjunction with ‘*ôl m*.<sup>35</sup> It could function in the summary statement, ‘and it was for ever’. If God wanted us to acknowledge that He used a protracted creative process, He had the perfect means of communicating it to us, but chose not to do so.

## 4. Ambiguous Time

There are, within the vocabulary stock of biblical Hebrew, three ways of communicating an ambiguous view of time. If this was the intended meaning, it would stress the fact that God accomplished the acts of creation in the past while giving no real time indication stating how long this process took to complete. The examples that follow are discussed simply for the sake of argument because they do not occur in Hebrew historiography. The first would be *yôm* combined with ‘light’ and ‘darkness’, and could be read ‘and it was a day of light and darkness’. This could be ambiguous because of the symbolic use of ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ elsewhere in the Old Testament, especially in the context of the ‘day of the Lord’ (this is exactly where one finds *yôm*, ‘light’ and ‘darkness’). It should be noted that ‘day’, ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ are figurative descriptions of an eschatological time called ‘The day of the Lord’. This construction could be strenuously debated, so that no dogmatic statement can be made. The second would be to combine ‘time’ (Hebrew: ‘*t*) with ‘day’ and ‘night’ (this occurs three times: Nehemiah 4:22, Jeremiah 33:20, Zechariah 14:7). The first verse is not ambiguous, as it refers to the day/night cycle. The other verses are cast into an eschatological context, so ambiguity would be expected. The third is similar in that it combines the same Hebrew word (‘*t*) with ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ (this is a theoretical construction, so it has no biblical examples). If any of these had been used the length of the ‘days’ of creation would be widely open for debate, but instead God chose to use the word *yôm*.

## 5. Event in a Moment of Time

The previous examples have all dealt with the possibility of a long or ambiguous time in Genesis 1, yet there was a possible construction for signifying a short period of time. The word is ‘moment’ or ‘instant’ (Hebrew: *rega‘*), and it could be combined with ‘time’ or ‘day’. There are four examples of this when it refers to the activity of God: Exodus 33:5, Numbers 16:21, 16:45 and Ezra 9:8. One could read Genesis 1 with this thought in

mind: *'and it was a moment of time'*. When this word is used of God, it is associated with something God has done, or is about to do. All the historical uses of this word portray the acts of God as being completed in a moment of time. So again, if God wanted to communicate that the activities of a certain creation 'day' were accomplished in an 'instant' He had that option available to Him, but chose not to use it.

As one examines the paradigmatic evidence, the impression is given that there were many possible choices available to Moses. In fact, he had eleven ways of communicating four very different thoughts. However, he chose the specific construction of *yôm* modified by a number and associated with 'morning' and 'evening'. The choice Moses made can now be marked off against the other available possibilities. The only reasonable choice which remains is that Moses meant to communicate that God created in a series of six consecutive twenty-four hour days.

#### IV. OBJECTIONS TO A LITERAL DAY

This paper has focused on presenting positive evidence that demonstrates the 'days' of Genesis 1 were solar days. This view, however, has been objected to for a variety of reasons, and for the sake of completeness a few of these objections need to be answered. Some have objected because of the semantic range of *yôm*; they argue that it is used figuratively in Genesis 1. Others have stated that *yôm* with a number can also be figurative, so that the length of the 'days' are defined by God. The final objection to be considered is that the first three days could not have been solar days, because the sun was not created until day four. These objections need to be examined in two ways: first, how do they handle the entire canon of Scripture, and second, how do they affect the ability of the Bible to communicate God's word to us?

##### 1. Semantic Range of *Yôm*

It is often declared that the meaning of *yôm* in the singular can denote a long time. Wilson observed that:

*"Day" is also put forth for a particular season or time when any extraordinary event happens, whether it be prosperous and joyful, or adverse and calamitous; which day is denominated either from the Lord who appoints it, or from those who suffer in it.*<sup>36</sup>

From this quote, Fischer<sup>37</sup> argues along similar lines: since the 'days' of creation are extraordinary, therefore they must be figurative in meaning. Excluding Genesis 1 from consideration, it appears that there are 60 references using *yôm*, in the singular and apart from any other 'long time' word (for example, *'ôl m* or *qedem*), that may refer to some form of figurative time. It is interesting that of those 60 references, 55 occur in the prophetic writings and five within poetic (three are used in Job and two in the Psalms). Those located in the prophetic genre, which use

*yôm* figuratively, designate this as the 'day of the Lord'. These 'days' are filled with all kinds of extraordinary events, as Wilson correctly observed. It should be admitted that *yôm* can connote a 'long time' in certain passages, but these connotations must be derived clearly from the context, not from the semantic range of *yôm* itself.<sup>38</sup> Another point which should be considered is that many times the prophets used a 'time' word in a figurative sense, for example, 'darkness', 'light' and 'day'. So it should not come as a surprise to find the majority of the figurative uses of *yôm* occurring in the prophetic genre; further noting that none of those 60 references use 'morning', 'evening' or a number to modify it. If one were to believe that the 'days' of creation lasted a long time, then he would have to prove his case from the context of Genesis 1, not simply citing the semantic range of *yôm*.

##### 2. *Yôm* with a Number

Zechariah 14:7 has often been used as an exception to the general use pattern (*yôm* with a number), and so with one exception many have stated that the 'days' of Genesis are 'eras'. The general axiom of biblical interpretation is: *'if the plain sense makes good sense, then seek no other sense'*. If we teach that the 'days' of Genesis 1 were eras, using Zechariah 14:7 as our basis, then we could be guilty of eisegesis, because the whole of Scripture must be searched to prove or disprove it. Second, the interpreter should seek to determine the contextual meaning of 'one day' in this verse. It would appear that verses 1–11 of Zechariah 14 are expressed as a chiasmic structure with verses 6 and 7 being the turning point. These verses are expressed in a figurative style, and hence there is wide variety of opinion regarding what this 'day' might be. It could very well be that the prophet wanted the passage to remain somewhat ambiguous,<sup>39</sup> for this is the only place where 'time', 'light', 'night', 'evening', and 'day' occur in the same verse. The passage makes good sense as a normal period of time leading into a long period of time, so the translation should be 'unique day' (following the NIV). This is by no means an exception to any of the normal use patterns. The result is that no dogmatic statement should be made either way.

##### 3. Creation Week as *Yôm*

The second reference that is often put forward as 'proof' that the 'days' of Genesis 1 are eras is Genesis 2:4.<sup>40</sup> It would appear that the use of *yôm* in this passage is a reference to all of the events of creation. However, before one believes he has found proof, two things regarding this passage need to be observed. First, there are no other 'time' words (for example, 'morning', 'evening', 'night', etc.) used with *yôm*, nor is there a modifying number. Second, it is typical Hebrew usage to translate 'in the day' as 'when'.<sup>41</sup> So using this verse as an exception is like comparing apples to oranges; both are fruit, but not really comparable, and comparing the 'days' of Genesis

1 with this ‘day’ of Genesis 2:4 is equally inappropriate.

#### 4. Days 1–3 Could Not Be Solar Days

This objection observes that the sun was not created until the fourth day, and therefore the first three days could not have been the kind of days we are familiar with today.<sup>42</sup> It seems that those who make this objection are not aware that the sun is not necessary to determine a ‘day’; all that is needed is some point of light. A ‘day’ can be defined as follows:

*‘The time taken for the Earth to spin once on its axis; by extension, the rotation period of any planet. The rotation of the Earth can be measured relative to the stars (sidereal day) or the sun (solar day).’<sup>43</sup>*

The thing the stars and sun have in common is light. The text states that light was created before a ‘day’ is defined as ‘morning’ and ‘evening’ in Genesis 1:5a. Therefore the summary of verse 5c could be a sidereal day of 24 hours. LaSor notes, ‘So to conclude, as some do, that the first three “days” could not have been days of one axial rotation is ridiculous, and is exegetical nonsense.’<sup>44</sup>

#### 5. God Defined Days

This objection has two different expressions, yet the thing they have in common is that they question the ability of God to communicate accurately. It has been argued that the ‘days’ are to be defined from God’s perspective, and so are called ‘God-divided days’.<sup>45</sup> If this is correct, and such ‘days’ are of unknown duration in human terms, then arriving at a correct interpretation of Genesis 1, or for that matter any biblical passage, is utterly hopeless.

The other form of this objection, which states that the ‘days’ of Genesis are actually ages of unknown length, is argued by Oliver J. Buswell, Jr:

*‘It may be true that this is the only case in which the word ‘day’ is used figuratively when preceded by any numeral, but the reason is that this is the only case in Scripture in which any indefinitely long periods of time are enumerated. The words aion in the Greek and ‘ol m in Hebrew are literal words for ‘age’, but we do not happen to have any case in which God has said ‘first age’, ‘second age’, ‘third age’, etc. The attempt to make a grammatical rule to the effect that the numeral preceding the word ‘day’ makes it literal, breaks down on the simple fact that this is the only case in all the Scriptures, and in all Hebrew language, I think, in which ages are enumerated one after the other.’<sup>46</sup>*

This kind of argumentation makes biblical interpretation a difficult task, if not impossible. The interpreter can never be certain if God means what He said in one place as opposed to another. If God cannot mean exactly what He says, then we have absolutely no hope of understanding the Scriptures. Also the inspiration and inerrancy of His Word can no longer be defended. The view expressed by Buswell opens the door for a return to the days of the

judges where ‘everyone does what is right in his own eyes’ at least in terms of biblical interpretation. God chose to communicate through the vehicle of human language, so interpretation must comprehend the extra-linguistic referents that are a vital part of human language.

It was asserted at the outset of this article that human language is an appropriate vehicle for God’s revelation. The God who created all of the reality we see around us should also be able to describe it accurately. The Scriptures, as God’s message to us, are intended not simply to imitate reality, but to make authoritative statements about it.<sup>47</sup> Even when the message is put in figurative language, it is used in a context of literal intent so the meaning will not be missed (an example of this would be parables). This message, even when presented figuratively, uses extra-linguistic referents to bring it in touch with the reality around us. The result of this objection, in its two forms, by arguing that the ‘days’ of creation are of unknown duration in human time, is to strip Genesis 1 of any reference to physical reality when God describes exactly what He did during creation. Instead, God defines the ‘days’ by some other means of which we are ignorant and cannot know.

There are two dangers present in stripping any portion of Scripture from its reference to reality. The first is that the interpreter has placed the idea of objective truth into the realm of impossibility. God is truth, and so anything He does must also be true. However, if one removes His communication from this realm of reality, God can still communicate truth to us, but the interpreter can never be even reasonably sure he understands it as the author intends. The second danger is that if the assertion, that God communicates with us, is consistently made, but that this communication is not within our realm of reality, then ultimately the resurrection of Jesus should also be defined as ‘God-divided days’ being placed in some mystical reality. It could be possible that even the resurrection, when defined by this ‘God-language’, means that maybe Jesus really did not physically rise from the dead. When these kinds of word-games are played with the Bible, we ultimately cut the ties that connect us with reality, and thus Christianity loses its life-changing power.

### CONCLUSION

The syntagmatic relationships of *yôm* in Genesis 1 have been considered and it has been demonstrated that, when used with a number, the pattern is always a normal time period. If ‘night’ is combined with *yôm*, it always denotes a 24-hour day. If *yôm* is used with either ‘morning’ or ‘evening’, they too refer to a literal day. When ‘morning’ and ‘evening’ are used together, with *yôm*, it always signifies a solar day. So the syntagmatic relationships that *yôm* has illustrate clearly that the meaning is to be considered a normal time period, consisting of one axial rotation of the earth, called a ‘day’.

The various words that could have been substituted for *yôm* have been considered by the paradigmatics. There was the possibility that an ancient creation might have been communicated. There were three good ways of saying this in Hebrew. The possibility that the events of creation could still be continuing (that is, theistic evolution) was examined. If this was the intended meaning for Genesis 1, then any one of four choices could have been selected. There is the possibility that the time factor was meant to be ambiguous. If this was the focus of the passage, then the Hebrew language had three possible ways of communicating this point. The Hebrew language also had the potential to communicate that all the events on a 'day' were done instantly. The paradigmatic relationships of *yôm* are indeed significant.

The point of discussing the semantic approach should be rather obvious. God, through the 'pen' of Moses, is being redundant for redundancy's sake. God is going out of His way to tell us that the 'days' of creation were literal solar days. He has used the word *yôm*, and combined this with a number and the words 'morning' and 'evening'. God has communicated the words of Genesis 1 in a specific manner, so that the interpreter could not miss His point. **God could not have communicated the timing of creation more clearly than He did in Genesis 1.**

The meaning of words is important for clear communication. It is by their use and contrast that we can accurately arrive at correct biblical interpretation. We can apply a semantic approach to Scripture and believe that we have understood what God wants us to know. As this approach is applied to Genesis 1, **the only meaning which is possible is that the 'days' of creation were 24-hour days.**

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- Barr, Ref. 15, p. 103. He points out that Aramaic, Akkadian and Egyptian all had a word for 'hour', and so Barr says that probably Hebrew did as well.
- The use of '*ôl m*' in the following verses refers to a specific span of time in human history, and all occur with the *m* prefix: Genesis 6:4; Joshua 24:2; 1 Samuel 27:8; Psalms 77:6, 119:52; Ecclesiastes 1:10; Isaiah 42:14,46:9,51:9,57:11,63:16; Jeremiah 2:20, 5:15; Ezekiel 26:20.
- The use of *qedem* is similar to '*ôl m*' in these verses: Nehemiah 12:16; Psalms 74:12, 77:6, 77:12, 143:5; Proverbs 8:23; Isaiah 45:21, 46:10; Jeremiah 30:20; Lamentations 5:21.
- Newman, Ref. 23, p. 84. This view is unusual for a progressive creationist, yet Newman bases it on Hebrews 4:1-11.
- One can observe that '*ôl m*' is used with 'day(s)' in Exodus 12:14; Deuteronomy 23:6; 1 Chronicles 28:7; Psalms 21:5; Isaiah 30:8, 34:10. It is used only once with 'morning' and 'evening' in Exodus 27:21.
- There are numerous verses which could demonstrate this use. The following is a sampling: Genesis 17:12; Exodus 3:15, 12:14, 12:42,

- 17:16, 30:7–8; Leviticus 23:14, 23:21, 23:41, 24:3; Psalms 10:6, 33:11, 49:11, 89:1, 89:4; Isaiah 34:10, 51:8; Lamentations 5:19; Joel 3:20.
34. Verses which illustrate these choices are: Exodus 27:20–21, 29:38; Leviticus 6:20, 24:3, 24:8; Numbers 9:16; 1 Chronicles 16:37, 16:40, 23:30–31; Psalms 72:15; Isaiah 21:8, 51:13, 52:5, 62:6.
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42. Fischer, Ref. 5, p. 18.
43. Ridpath, Ian (ed.), 1979. *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Astronomy and Space*, Thomas Crowell, New York, p. 56.
44. LaSor, W., 1987. Biblical creationism. *Asbury Theological Journal*, 42 (Fall 1987):11. He continues by saying:  
*'The account is told, as in novels once were told, by an all-seeing, all-knowing author . . . Either we accept the account as a revelation from God, or we reject it as the imaginations of a human author.'*
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47. Larkin, Ref. 9, p. 249.

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