

“... when Yahweh God made the earth and the heavens,”—a proposal for the right translation of בְּיוֹם [b^əyôm] in Genesis 2:4

David G. Graves

One tactic used to undermine the length of the days in Genesis 1:1–2:3 is the use of the phrase “in the day the Lord God made the earth and the heavens” in most English translations of the Bible. However, “in the day ...” is based on a faulty translation of the Hebrew phrase *b^əyôm* *‘ăśôt* (“when ... made”). This is shown by the usage of the prepositional phrase *b^əyôm* in its seven other occurrences in Genesis as well as the syntax of the infinitive construct. This demonstrates that the proper translation of Genesis 2:4 should be “when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.” This obviates this argument of the skeptics concerning the semantics of the word *yôm* as anything other than a 24 hour period unless otherwise modified.

Genesis 2:4 contains a prepositional phrase that some critics seek to use to undermine the historic position of a literal six day creation. Genesis 2:4 reads “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when Yahweh God made them.”¹ The KJV and most English translations contribute to the misinterpretation of Genesis 2:4 by translating the phrase hyper-literally as “in the day”. Even the entry in the Koehler–Baumgartner lexicon is misleading. It subsumes the translation of Genesis 2:4 under the category for בְּיוֹם (*b^əyôm*) + finite verb. It then gives an example of בְּיוֹם (*b^əyôm*) + infinitive construct used in a ritual context and renders it as “when”.² This hyper-literal translation is then used to assert that the word “day” in Genesis 1 cannot possibly mean an actual solar day. A good example is the old-earth creationist Hugh Ross:

“Here the word *day* refers to all six creation days (and the creation of the universe that took place prior to the first creative day). Obviously, then, this is a period longer than 24 hours.”³

However, the grammatical evidence from the Old Testament does not support the traditional English translation. Based on an examination of the other uses of the phrase בְּיוֹם (*b^əyôm*) and the participial forms of עָשָׂה (*‘ăśah*) in the book of Genesis, this article will seek to demonstrate that “when” is the most accurate translation of the phrase in Genesis 2:4. As Wolfgang Schneider notes, when Hebrew prefixes the preposition ב (b) to an infinitive construct it connotes temporality.⁴ As will be argued below, Genesis 2:4 employs the construction of בְּיוֹם (*b^əyôm*) + the infinitive construct עָשָׂה (*‘ăśôt* “to make”) to mean “when he made”.

The prepositional phrase בְּיוֹם (*b^əyôm*) occurs 198 times⁵ in the Masoretic Text with a schwa under the beth preposition as in Genesis 2:4, as opposed the 295 times when בַּיּוֹם (*bayyôm*) with a patach occurs. For the purposes of this article we will limit our analysis to the uses of these prepositional phrases in the Book of Genesis: since the numbers are reduced eight⁶ and thirteen⁷ for בְּיוֹם (*b^əyôm*) and בַּיּוֹם (*bayyôm*) respectively.

The uses of בְּיוֹם (*bayyôm*) in Genesis

The three Hebrew consonantal prepositions are always affixed to the noun or nominal verb.⁸ As one examines the thirteen uses of בַּיּוֹם (*bayyôm*), one discovers that it most naturally is rendered “in the day”. The patach (_ = a) under the preposition ב (b) indicates that the definite article has been “syncopated following the preposition,”⁹ i.e. הַ (ha the) has been removed from middle of the new phrase.

When one looks at the 13 uses of this prepositional phrase, one is not surprised that in all but Genesis 1:18 it is modified by either an ordinal number, (e.g. “on the seventh day”) or a demonstrative pronoun (e.g. “on that day”) indicating that the text refers to a particular day. Genesis 1:18 evinces a different usage. God speaks of the day in contradistinction from the night. Thus in this generic use one finds “the day” in opposition to “the night.”

The other uses of בְּיוֹם (*b^əyôm*) in Genesis

Prior to examining the use of בְּיוֹם (*b^əyôm*) in Genesis 2:4, it will be useful to look at the other seven uses of this prepositional phrase in the book of Genesis.

Genesis 2:17 and 3:5

תִּדְעַת טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכָלְךָ
מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת: וּבְמַעַן

*ûmē'ēs haddā'at ṭōb wārā' lō' ṭō'kal
mimmennû kî bəyôm 'ākolkā mimmennû môt
tāmût*

But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat from it. For *when* you eat from it you shall surely die.

יָדַע אֱלֹהִים כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכָלְכֶם מִמֶּנּוּ וְנִפְקַחוּ עֵינֵיכֶם
וְהִייתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וְרָע: כִּי

*kî yōdē'ac 'ēlōhîm kî bəyôm 'ākolkem
mimmennû wənipqəḥū 'ēnēkem wihyîtem
kē'lōhîm yōd'ê ṭōb wārā'*

For God knows that *when* you eat from it, then your eyes will be opened, and you shall be like God knowing good and evil.

Genesis 2:17 and 3:5 both refer to the probationary curse of death should Adam and Eve violate God’s command not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God demanded “perfect and in every respect complete obedience” from Adam and Eve.¹⁰ He also threatened terrible punishment should they disobey. Herman Bavinck observed that if one takes the prepositional phrase בַּיּוֹם (*bəyôm*) as “in the day” as opposed to idiomatically then God’s wrath miscarried and the curse proved to be a falsehood for Adam and Eve did not physically die that day.

Image courtesy of Earth Sciences and Image Analysis Laboratory, NASA Johnson Space Center.



“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1).

“Had the full punishment of sin been immediately carried out, in that first human couple the whole human race would have been annihilated, the earth laid waste, and the cosmos would have returned to chaos or to nothingness. In that case, however, Satan would have been victorious and God defeated.”¹¹

While many interpreters have sought to view the spiritual death meted out that day as the fulfillment of the promised מוֹת תָּמוּת (*môt tāmût*, “you shall surely die”), the curse surely includes physical death. Adam and Eve experienced the most profound death on that day, as Paul said when commenting on the Fall in Romans 5, “Therefore just as through one man, sin entered into the world and death through sin, and thus death unto all men, because all sinned.” Yet the curse was not meted out *in toto* on that day. So while God did indeed pronounce the doom of death on the day of the Fall, God mercifully delayed their physical death so that they could bear children, especially the one from whom the Seed would spring to crush the Serpent’s head. So while in these two instances one is not only allowed by grammatical construction to render בַּיּוֹם (*bəyôm*) as “when”, the theological implications demand it.

Genesis 5:1–2

זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדֹת אָדָם בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אָדָם בְּדְמוּת
אֱתוֹ² זָכַר וְנִקְבְּהָ בְרָאָם וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמֹם
אָדָם בַּיּוֹם הַבְּרָאָם ס אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה

*zeh sēper tōldōt 'ādām bəyôm bərō' 'ēlōhîm
'ādām biḏmût 'ēlōhîm 'āsā^h 'ōtō' zākār
ūnəqəḥā^h bərā'am wayəḥārek 'ōtām wayyiqrā'
eṭ-šəməm 'ādām bəyôm hibbār'am*

This is the book of the Genealogy of Adam *when* God created him. In the likeness of God he made him. Male and female he created them and blessed them, and he called their name Adam, *when* he created them.

These two verses have particular bearing on the proper interpretation of Genesis 2:4. Both times that בַּיּוֹם (*bəyôm*) occurs in Genesis 5:1–2, it has the same grammatical structure as in Genesis 2:4. בַּיּוֹם precedes an infinitive construct without an intervening preposition. In 5:1, the infinitive construct is the verb בָּרָא (*br'*, “to create”) in the qal. בָּרָא only occurs in the infinitive construct six times in the Old Testament: four times in the niphil, once in the hiphil, and here in the qal. Four times (Gen. 5:1, 5:2; Ezek. 28:13, 15) the infinitive construct of בָּרָא is preceded by a separate prepositional phrase that acts like the preposition

attached to the infinitive construct. Three times it is the prepositional phrase בַּיּוֹם (*bəyôm*) while Ezekiel 28:15 uses מִיּוֹם (*miyyôm*) “when”. In each of these instances, the grammatical collocation functions to denote “when” not “in/from the day.”

Genesis 21:8

וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּנְמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אֲבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֶּה גָדוֹל בַּיּוֹם
הַגָּמֵל אֶת־יִצְחָק:

wayyigdal hayyēled wayyiggāmal wayyā‘as
‘abrāhām mište^h gādōl bəyôm higgāmēl
‘eṭ-yiṣḥāq

And the child grew and he was weaned. And Abraham prepared a great feast *when* Isaac was weaned.

This verse actually serves as the greatest weakness to the thesis advanced in this article. However there is nothing in this verse nor in the 67 other times when בַּיּוֹם (*bəyôm*) prefixes an infinitive construct that necessitates a translation of “in the day”. Even here the normal pairing that signals the very day, for example הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה (*bayyôm hazeh*), is absent. Thus even in this verse nothing demands that the feast occurred on the last day that Isaac nursed from Sarah. Rather all that this verse requires is that Abraham held a great feast after Isaac was weaned.

Genesis 30:33

וְעֲנִתָּהּ בִּי צְדָקָתִי בַיּוֹם מִחֹר כִּי־תָבֹא עַל־שֹׁכְרֵי לְפָנַי
וְשָׁלוּא בְעֵינַי וְהוּם בְּכַשְׂבִּים גָּנוּב הוּא אֶתִּי:
כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־אֵינְנוּ נֹקֵד

wə‘āntā^h-bî ṣidqātī bəyôm māhār kî-ṭābō‘
‘al-śōḵārî ləpāne^h kōl ‘āšer-‘ēnennū nāqōd
wəṭālū[‘] bā‘izzîm wəḥûm bakkəsābîm
gānūb ḥū[‘] itî

“And my righteousness will answer for me *whenever* (lit. “at the time of tomorrow”), when you come to check concerning my wages. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats or black among the lambs, will be as if stolen by me.”

This verse contains בַּיּוֹם (*bəyôm*) in a construction with the adverb “tomorrow”. So while it does not have the same



Image courtesy of NASA

“These are the generations of the heavens and the earth *when* they were created, when Yahweh God made them” (Genesis 2:4).¹

construction of בַּיּוֹם followed by an infinitive construct, again it demonstrates that the prepositional phrase בַּיּוֹם does not necessitate the translation of “in the day” as most modern versions translate it. Jacob was not scheduling an inspection to occur the following day. He was rather giving Laban the right to come and inspect Jacob’s herds at whatever time Laban pleased.

Genesis 35:3

וְנִעַלָה בֵּית־אֱלֹהִים וְאָעֲשֶׂה־שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לְאֵל הָעֵנָה
אֲתִי בַיּוֹם צָרָתִי וַיְהִי עִמָּדִי בְּדֶרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר הִלְכֹתִי: וְנִקְוָמָה

wəna‘ālāh bēit-‘ēlōhîm wə‘ā‘ešē^h-ššām
mizbē‘^h lā‘ēl hā‘ōne^h ‘ōṭî bəyôm ṣārātî wayəḥî
‘immādî baddérék[‘] ‘āšer hālāktî

“Let us arise and let us go to Bethel. And there I will build an altar to the God who answered me *when* I was in distress and he has been with me in the way that I went.”

Jacob directs his clan to leave Shechem and go to the area of Bethel. He reminisces over God’s faithfulness to his promises and his answer to Jacob’s pleas for help. Jacob’s trouble cannot be restricted to one day. Rather Jacob used a substantive participle to refer to God’s action. Such attributive participles do not mark time or aspect.¹² So while Jacob plans to build the altar in response to the vow he had made years earlier in Genesis 28:16–22, the time of Jacob’s distress mentioned here lasted the whole period of his sojourn away from the land of Canaan.

Conclusions on the use of בְּיוֹם (*bəyôm*) in Genesis apart from Genesis 2:4

Genesis employs the prepositional phrase בְּיוֹם seven times outside of Genesis 2:4. In each of these instances, one can or must translate it as the adverb “when” as opposed to the prepositional phrase “in the day”. However in twelve of the thirteen uses of the similar prepositional phrase בַּיּוֹם (*bayyôm*), it requires a translation of “on X day” (where X is either an ordinal number or demonstrative pronoun). Five of the occurrences of בְּיוֹם occur in the same collocation as Genesis 2:4, namely, בְּיוֹם followed by an infinitive construct. In these instances this construction functions in a manner analogous to the infinitive construct with a proclitic ב (*b*) denoting the time of action, therefore logically it should be translated as “when”.

Genesis 2:4

	A	אֱלֹהִים תּוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ
	B	בְּהִבְרָאָם
	B'	בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת
	X	יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים
	A'	אָרֶץ וְשָׁמַיִם:
A		ʿēlle ^h tōldōt haššāmayim wəhāʿāreš
B		bəhibbārām
B'		bəyôm ʿāsōt
X		yhwh ʿēlōhîm
A'		ʿereš wəšāmayim

When one looks at Genesis 2:4 the most striking element is that it contains the first of the ten Toledoths that structure the narrative of Genesis. The next element that one notices is that it is a simple chiasm. A chiasm is a literary device that arranges the unit in an inverse style using inclusio, in other words ABB'A' structure. In this instance A and A' contain reference to the heavens and the earth and then the earth and the heavens. For this article interest is drawn to B and B'. B is an infinitive construct with a proclitic ב (*b*), best rendered “when they were created”. In fact, this infinitive construct suggests the proper translation of B' since B' also contains the infinitive construct עֲשׂוֹת (*ʿāsōt*) to do). The infinitive construct of עָשָׂה (*ʿśh*) occurs 301 times in the Masoretic Text. 285 times it employs a proclitic preposition of some sort; six times עֲשׂוֹת is preceded by a verb; and ten times, as in Genesis 2:4, it is preceded by a noun or prepositional phrase. Of these ten, the only other time that a participle of עָשָׂה is modified by בְּיוֹם (*bəyôm*) is in Ezekiel 43:18. There בְּיוֹם precedes the niph'al participle הֶעֱשׂוֹתוֹ (*hēʿāsōtō*) indicating the prescribed ritual after the altar was built.

Given the parallelism with the participial phrase בְּהִבְרָאָם (*bəhibbārām*) “when they were created”, the general usage of the prepositional phrase בְּיוֹם (*bəyôm*) “when”), and the usage of the participle עָשָׂה (*ʿśh*) it not only legitimates but necessitates the translation of Genesis 2:4 in the following manner: “These are the generation of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when Yahweh God made the earth and the heavens.”

References

- 1 All translations are mine.
- 2 Koehler, L. and Baumgartner, W., *The Hebrew Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Study Edition*, Baumgartner, W., Stamm, J.J. et al. (Rev.), Brill, Boston, MA, p. 401, 2001.
- 3 Ross, H.N., *Creation and Time*, p.52, Navpress, Colorado Springs, 1994.
- 4 Schneider, W., *Grammatik des Biblischen Hebräisch: Ein Lehrbuch* [*Grammar of Biblical Hebrew: A Text Book*], Claudius, Munich, § 49.3, 2001.
- 5 All usage data in this article was drawn from *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* in BibleWorks® 7.
- 6 Gen 2:4, 17; 3:5; 5:1–2; 21:8; 30:33; 35:3.
- 7 Gen. 1:18; 2:2; 7:11; 15:18; 22:4; 26:32; 30:35; 31:22; 33:16; 40:20; 42:18; 48:20.
- 8 Joüon, P. and Muraoka, T., *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, subsidia biblica 14, Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, §103b, 2003.
- 9 Joüon and Muraoka, ref. 8, §35e; Schneider, ref. 3, §12.3.
- 10 Witsius, H., *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity* Den Dulk Christian Foundation, Kingsburg, CA, vol. 1, p. 1, 1990.
- 11 Bavinck, H., *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, Bolt, J. (Ed.), Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, vol. 3, p. 197, 2006.
- 12 Joüon and Muraoka, ref. 8, §121i.

David G. Graves received a B.A. (1998) in Hebrew from Ohio State University. He also received both his M.Div. (2002) and PhD (2009) in Theological Studies with an emphasis on Old Testament from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. His areas of research interest include Hermeneutics, Hebrew Syntax, the interplay of Biblical and Systematic Theology, and Leviticus. He is currently seeking ordination in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.