

One, Two, Three, and an Ordinal for Thee - Grammatical Irregularities, Definitions, and Genesis One

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It has come to my attention that some proponents of the Young-Earth (24-hour) interpretation of Genesis 1 have been citing a paper by Professor Andrew Steinmann of Concordia University called "ECHAD as an Ordinal Number and the Meaning of Genesis 1:5"¹ in support of their position. I decided to make a trip to the local divinity library and have a look at the article. Because of the importance of his research, I am adding this as an addendum to my paper "Genesis One and Beyond: An Investigation of the Temporal Questions of Creation in the Biblical Texts."²

For background:

One, two, three, and ten are cardinal numbers.

First, second, third, and tenth are ordinal numbers.

To use a cardinal number as an ordinal number is to literally say "one day" when "first day" is actually the author's meaning.

PAPER SUMMARY

Professor Steinmann's paper is organized as follows:

He begins by noting that many bible translations choose to translate the Hebrew cardinal number 'ECHAD' (lit. 'one') in Genesis 1:5 as 'first' so that the text reads "the first day". It is a common assumption that this is a valid translation because ECHAD often functions as an ordinal. If this cardinal often functions as an ordinal in the biblical text, then it's probably doing the same thing in Genesis 1:5, so goes the majority thinking.

Steinmann intends to explore the use of ECHAD as an ordinal number and see if this assumption holds. The major sections of his paper break down as:

- I. A discussion of how the cardinal number ECHAD is used to function as an ordinal in numbering units of time
- II. A discussion of how ECHAD is used as an ordinal number for 'countables', for example, "the first row" (of four rows)
- III. The implications of his findings on how ECHAD is to be understood as functioning in Genesis 1:5

1. Steinmann, Andrew, "ehad As an Ordinal Number and the Meaning of Genesis 1:5," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 2002, 45, 577-84.

2. Available at <http://www.upper-reigster.com/> under the "other studies" page.

I. ECHAD as an Ordinal Number in Numbering Units of Time

Steinmann begins section I with a discussion of how ECHAD (a cardinal) is used as an ordinal in numbering:

1. the days of a month
2. the years of a king's reign
3. other units of time

Without going into unnecessary detail, his conclusions are:

1. *The days of a month.* Using cardinal numbers to function as ordinals is a standard idiom in biblical Hebrew for numbering the days of a month. This doesn't apply just to ECHAD, but to all cardinals. There are no exceptions to this rule either. Ordinal numbers are never used in the formula "the X day of the month." Additionally, in these cases 'first' is always definite by virtue of using the article with 'month.'

The pattern is cardinal, cardinal, cardinal, etc.

2. *The years of a king's reign.* Using cardinal numbers to function as ordinals is a standard idiom in biblical Hebrew for numbering the years of a king's reign, though there are some rare occasions where one finds ordinal numbers used. Additionally, 'first' is always definite by virtue of the fact that it's used with a personal name, which is always definite.

The pattern is cardinal, cardinal, cardinal, etc.

3. *Other units of time.* All other units of time are numbered using ordinals and are definite by virtue of having the article. He discusses and cites examples for:

- a. days not part of a "the X day of the month" formula
- b. months ("the first month")
- c. years not part of the "the first day of X's reign" formula

The pattern for all other units of time is ordinal, ordinal, ordinal, etc.

Here I'll quote his summary of his major point:

"4. Summary of the use of ECHAD as an ordinal when enumerating periods of time. ECHAD may be used in place of the ordinal RISHON [unsure of best transliteration] 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."

and, as a secondary point:

"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."³

II. Countables

ECHAD can also be used as an ordinal number when counting things, such as "the first row" as found in Exodus 28:17 and 39:10. In the cases Steinmann cites, all the subsequent countables have ordinal numbers, not cardinals. In addition, the cardinal and following ordinals all have the article, making them definite.

So (in contrast to the above) the pattern is cardinal, ordinal, ordinal, etc.

III. ECHAD in Genesis 1:5

Steinmann begins this section as follows:

"How, then, are we to understand the use of ECHAD in Gen 1:5? This verse reads, [he quotes the verse in Hebrew]. 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 ECHAD 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 ECHAD as an ordinal to denote a first day by some commentators."⁴

Steinmann also argues that "it cannot be the typical use of ECHAD to begin a list of countables." for the following reasons:

- a. The lack of an article on both ECHAD and YOM.
- b. The lack of an article on the following cardinals of days 2-5.
- c. The other countables are separated by only short descriptions.

After ruling out the above two options, Steinmann discusses some proposals by previous scholars for using ECHAD as an ordinal and dismisses them as well. His conclusion is that it is to be used not in the function of an ordinal, but as a cardinal. Up to this point Steinmann has made a good case. His research was excellent and his argumentation was persuasive. It was beginning to cause the first hints of doubt to arise in my mind about the strength of my case for the Framework Interpretation. Not because anything said so far challenges it, but because this paper has been cited as support for the 24-hour view, and I found myself agreeing with him. However, it is when I came to his conclusion, his answer to the question "how are we to understand this phenomena?" that I found his argumentation lacking. Here is what Steinmann says:

3. Steinmann, p 580-581. (italics in original)

4. Steinmann, p 582.

"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."

and his conclusion:

"Therefore, by using a most unusual grammatical construction, Genesis 1 is defining what a day is."⁵

CRITIQUE

Here follows my reasons for disagreeing with his conclusion.

I. Non-Sequitur and Petitio Principii as an Argument for the 24-hour View

One point is that his conclusion is simply a non-sequitur. All Steinmann does is offer this initially as a possibility ("it *may* lie in the use of...") and then move to it as *the* answer. Another is that he doesn't argue that the 24-hour interpretation is the right paradigm in which to understand this issue, but simply assumes it. This is not to say his article is, necessarily, flawed at this point. If his intended audience were those who already shared a conviction that the 24-hour view is the correct one, then he need not argue for it. However, this paper could not be used as an argument *for* the 24-hour view when it's that view which he presupposes in his discussion, and thus it is begging the question (petitio principii) to say that this paper supports the 24-hour view.

II. On Defining Words

Disregarding whether or not his target audience is those who share the 24-hour conviction, is his suggestion that the unusual grammatical construction indicates that Moses is defining what YOM means anything more than a possibility?

No it's not. What we have to remember about texts like the Bible is that they are using language that is *already understood* by the communities that they are speaking to. These texts don't define the words they use, they use words already defined. Even in our own modern era, writings use language that is already understood by those intended to read or hear it. In my last sentence I used the word 'read' without defining the term, and I could do so because those of you reading this will understand what I mean. There are texts that deal with defining words, and those are called dictionaries.

5. Steinmann, p 583.

It is true that in some writings an author will discuss certain terms and how he is using them, but these are technical or disputable terms. While the content of 'apocalyptic' might be highly debatable, and an author may want to argue for his own view, the words 'book,' 'water' and 'sun' require no definition. When we use these words, their content is so well known that no definition is necessary or expected. It is also the case that one way we (us and the ancients) work on changing the concepts contained in words is by telling stories that subvert the 'normal' meaning of something, e.g. the phrase 'kingdom of God.' However this only applies to contentious and idea-packed words and phrases.⁶ It does not apply to common everyday words like 'water'.

So, when we analyze ancient texts in order to determine "the definition of a word" we are examining the text to help us understand how those words *were already used* by those writing and receiving the texts. Moses' audience defined the day by the rising of the sun.⁷ That's how YOM was already understood.

The point here is that the Jews would not have thought Moses was redefining a word that was already in common parlance any more than you'd think I was redefining words if I saw you near the refrigerator and said "Water, I need!" You'd recognize that I'm using a grammatically uncommon way to form the sentence, and even if you didn't know the specific reason I chose to say it like that (perhaps I'm a big fan of Star Wars and like to talk like Yoda) you wouldn't even consider that I'm redefining what 'water' means. Thus, it would take a lot more than a grammatical irregularity to redefine a word as common as 'day.'

So as it turns out, Steinmann's hypothesis that the grammatical irregularity is being used in the service of redefining what YOM means is actually a poor possibility at best. Can a solution be offered? I believe so.

III. Hey Moses, Why Buck the Trend?

Here is a review of the results of Steinmann's research relevant for this section.

1. For enumerating periods of time in the two idiomatic exceptions above, the pattern is: Cardinal, cardinal, cardinal, etc. (definites with article for months, definites via proper noun for the king's reign)
2. For enumerating periods of time other than the two exceptions discussed, the pattern is: Ordinal, ordinal, ordinal, etc. (definites with article)
3. For enumerating countables, the pattern is:

6. N.T. Wright has discussed this in some depth in his book *The New Testament and the People of God*. I highly recommend that and the other works in the series that follow.

7. Or perhaps the setting of the Sun. There was disagreement on this in the various biblical dictionaries I examined. T. Desmond Alexander says that in the NT times the day began at sunset, but that there was a change in the way the day was reckoned in the sixth century BC when the Jews switched from sunrise demarcation to sunset demarcation, following the Babylonian system. See his *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 1st ed., p 80, note 4.

Cardinal, ordinal, ordinal, etc. (definites with article)

4. The Genesis pattern is:

Cardinal, ordinal, ordinal, etc. (mix of definites with article and indefinites)

The first and most important thing to note is that the Genesis text does not adhere exactly to *any* of the standard patterns. In section II above I discussed how, in their attempts to communicate, authors use language that their communities already understand and how this cashed out in terms of words already being defined before the texts are written. The same applies in this situation where the patterns for how to enumerate time periods (both regular and idiomatic) were already known. It's obvious that Moses bucks the trend when he chooses to avoid the standard time-period-enumeration grammatical pattern (#2) of ordinal, ordinal, ordinal in composing his creation narrative. Why would he choose to purposely avoid such a pattern? Here I think Steinmann was extremely close when he said:

"It cannot be the use of a cardinal number as an ordinal to enumerate a time period..."⁸

He is right. It wasn't the use of a cardinal as an ordinal to enumerate a time period. Moses purposely avoided the normal pattern because *he wasn't intending to enumerate a time period at all*, whether with a cardinal as an ordinal, or a cardinal as a cardinal. Independent of the other problems with taking the account as a chronological enumeration, if Moses really had wished to indicate that the narrative was giving an enumeration of time periods, he had a well-established pattern of ordinal, ordinal, ordinal, that he could have followed. He chose instead to write using a different grammatical pattern to indicate that the narrative was a literary framework instead of an enumeration of time periods. This fits perfectly with what Framework Interpretation proponents have been claiming all along, that the Genesis creation account is not a strict chronological enumeration of time periods, but a literary framework.

It might be possible to be even more specific about what Moses intended to do, though these comments are tentative. Moses may have been intentionally using a pattern that fits countables instead of time periods as part of his program to indicate the narrative being a literary device. This would account for the cardinal, ordinal, ordinal pattern. His decision to use the article only with Days 6 and 7 ('the' X day) draws special attention to those days. Day 6 is unique because it is the only creation day revisited in the next major section of Genesis (starting with the toledoth in 2:4) in order to add more detail about what happened. Day 7 is unique because it is the day of God's rest and a capstone to the six creation days that preceded it. Steinmann did argue that the Genesis use couldn't be "the typical use" for countables, which I fully agree with. Moses didn't use the typical pattern because the days of creation weren't the normal list of countables. Much description went with them, and certain days were more prominent than others. Moses avoided the standard pattern to give emphasis to days 6 and 7.

Again, this is only a suggestion about getting more specific than "Moses avoided the standard time-period-enumeration pattern in order to indicate that he didn't want to enumerate time

8. Steinmann, p 582.

periods." It may or may not hold water as we learn more and more, but I think it's a plausible explanation. Hopefully future research will bring ever more clarity to our understanding of this wonderful story of Yahweh the Creator God and his forming of the world.

SUMMARY

I'd like to reiterate that Professor Steinmann's research was thorough and well laid out. It is worth reading if you have the opportunity. That his conclusions don't follow from his research shouldn't take away from the importance and helpfulness of his work.

The results show that Moses purposely avoided using the standard grammatical pattern of enumerating time periods in his construction of the Genesis narrative. Steinmann's proposal that Moses is using a highly unusual grammatical construction to redefine the word YOM is prohibited from being anything more than a mere possibility when we understand how authors draw upon the common parlance when writing their texts.

The most straightforward explanation for Moses avoiding the time-period-enumeration pattern is that he did not intend to enumerate time periods, but was constructing a narrative according to a literary framework. This finding is an additional support for the Framework Interpretation and cuts against those interpretations that espouse a time-period-enumeration view such as the 24-hour and Day-Age views.

As unbelievable as it may sound, no longer can 24-hour proponents claim that the 'straightforward reading' of Genesis 1 supports their view, since we now see the opposite is actually the case. When Gleason Archer (a Day-Age proponent) says "From a superficial reading of Genesis 1, the impression received is that the entire creative process took place in six twenty-four-hour days"⁹ it is only true for us in the modern day that were not embedded in the Hebrew language of 3000 years ago. For them, the straightforward reading purposely avoided a chronological enumeration of days and signaled that literary framework usage was afoot.

9. Archer, Gleason L. Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, revised (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994) p187.