

How Scholars' Perceptions of the Semantic Range of יום Have Affected Their Discussions of the Age of the Universe: Part 2

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Abstract

Before the Enlightenment, most theologians believed the earth was created in the space of a literal week, a notable exception (among others) being Augustine, who interpreted the days of creation figuratively. Most believed that the universe began sometime between approximately 3600BC and 7000BC. However, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries—with the growing acceptance of geological uniformitarianism and, later, Darwinian evolution—an increasing number of eminent scholars advocated a multi-billion-year-old universe and questioned the validity of the biblical account. In order to accommodate billions of years into the Genesis account of origins, theologians proposed a range of new interpretations. Some, such as the Gap Theory, sought to retain a literal understanding of יום. Others, particularly the Day-Age Theory, maintained that the term had a broad semantic range that could include a sense of vast periods of time. Over the past two centuries, the issue of the meaning of יום in relation to the age of the universe has been vigorously debated by many scholars, though ignored as irrelevant by others.

Following an introductory survey of the biblical, historical and theological, and linguistic contexts of this issue, the study looks at delineations and definitions of יום in Scripture, and in lexical and other sources. The central analysis examines how the semantic range of יום has been discussed in the context of the creation account and in relation to the age of the universe, both historically, and, more particularly, by 40 scholars (or teams of scholars) over the past 50 years. It is evident that a great variety of opinion exists regarding the semantic range of יום. It is also clear that there is a considerable disconnection between lexicography regarding יום and the formation of creation theology. Most respected lexical sources do not allow for a broad semantic range for יום, yet many theologians believe it to be rather flexible.

Keywords: יום; ימים; יום as period of daylight; יום as 24 hours; יום in Creation account; daytime-nighttime cycles; Genesis 1; Genesis 1:5; Genesis 1:14–18; Genesis 2:4; idiomatic uses of יום; lexical and dictionary definitions of יום; literal uses of יום; non-literal, analogical/metaphorical uses of יום; reckoning of biblical days; semantic range of יום; sequence of daytime and nighttime; sunrise-to-sunset view of a day.

Prologue

I am very thankful for having had the opportunity to do this study, which was facilitated through the guidance of Drs. Richard E. Averbeck and Eric J. Tully at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Hebrew Bible quotations are taken from the text of the 1997 2nd ed. of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (based on the Leningrad Codex B19^A), as found in *Accordance* and *BibleWorks*, “which has been edited over the years to bring it into greater conformity with the Leningrad Codex” (*BibleWorks*, WTT Version Info). Both the *Accordance* and *BibleWorks* versions of *BHS* include the 2010 *WTM* Release 4.14.

Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture translations into English are my own rendering.

Unless stated otherwise, all instances of emphasis within a quotation are those of the cited author. I have indicated wherever I have added my own emphases, except in the case of Scripture quotations. My preferred means of emphasis is italics. If the quotation already contains italics, then I resort to underlining (and specify so). Additionally, even where

the quotation does not contain italics, I sometimes still use underlining for the sake of consistency with underlining in other nearby quotations.

Introduction

This work examines how scholars' perceptions of the semantic range of יום have affected their discussions of the age of the universe. While each of the key elements in this relationship—the semantic range of יום and the age of the universe—have indeed been studied before, I am not aware of any other study that specifically focuses on the interaction between the two, across a range of scholarly works.

The subject of creation and origins is popular and is often vigorously debated. A key element of enquiry and discussion within this topic is the age of the universe. Some scholars feel that the Bible does not speak to the question of the age of the universe. Certainly, the Bible does not make any outright statement like, “The universe was created by God x thousand or million or billion years ago.” However, other scholars believe that the biblical text does

indeed give indications concerning the age of the universe. In their interactions with the text, many such scholars make reference to the Hebrew word יום, usually translated “day,” which occurs 15 times in the 35 verses of the Genesis creation account (Genesis 1:1–2:4). This work examines (1) how scholars have understood the semantic range of יום—whether as always having a narrow, restricted sense, or as having a broad range of meanings across different contexts, or as somewhere in between these two extremes—and (2) how these perceptions have affected their discussions of the age of the universe. Must the word יום always indicate a normal day, or can it refer to a longer period of time? Does its flexibility or inflexibility of meaning have anything relevant to say regarding the age of the universe according to the Genesis account of creation?

There are several reasons why this subject might be viewed as important. Within the Christian church there has been much discussion, sometimes heated and confused, on the issues of creation and, in particular, the age of the universe. It is often asked what the word יום could potentially mean in Genesis. It would be helpful to gain a degree of clarity on the breadth of views regarding the semantic range of יום—including those of lexicographers, theologians, and other scholars—and the kind of reasoning employed in their discussions of יום with respect to the age of the universe. All of this could potentially aid people in making better-informed decisions about how they see the place of יום within the creation debate, and in better understanding those with different opinions from their own.

Outside the Christian church, many people view the Bible as irrelevant or unreliable, especially when it comes to science. Even some biblical scholars believe that the Genesis account of creation has little, if anything, that is pertinent or authoritative to say regarding modern science. The biblical word יום in the creation account can be seen as irreconcilable with the prevailing view of origins. This work may help people understand the various ways that some biblical scholars, by engaging with the semantic range of the word יום, have explained the Genesis account of creation as being relevant to the issue of the age of the universe.

Definitions and Delineations of יום

In order to provide a benchmark for the central analysis (appearing in the part 3 paper of this study), this second part of the larger work now examines definitions and delineations of יום, first within the Bible itself, and then as presented in lexicons, dictionaries, and other scholarly works. While most comments regarding how theologians have interpreted יום are reserved for the part 3 paper of

this study, a few instances are included in this paper either because they illuminate the discussion, or because they pertain specifically to theologians’ use of lexicons and dictionaries.

The distinction between lexicographical work on יום (part 2) and theological interpretation (part 3) is one of emphasis and expertise. Lexicographers specialize in researching the limits of, and categorizing the nuances of, the semantic range of a term; theologians specialize in applying lexical insights to expound theological truth from the Bible. However, the distinction is not clear-cut, and there is overlap between the two. Much lexicography includes theology, as is evident from the titles of works such as the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, the *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, and the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. And, conversely, lexical insights are not limited to lexicographers—theologians are sometimes able to enhance, or even correct, information found in published lexical works.

Thus, in using the term ‘benchmark’ for this paper, I do not mean to imply that lexicons are perfect, or even consistent. However, they do provide a helpful standard against which we may compare the writings of theologians. They may not be our only source, but “Hebrew dictionaries are our primary source of reliable information concerning Hebrew words” (Leupold 1942, 57).

Biblical Delineation of יום

The word יום occurs approximately 2,300 times in the Old Testament. It is found in every book of the OT canon.

In Genesis 1:5, God delineates יום (“day”), the first of five terms that He defines in Genesis 1, the other four being לילה (“night,” v.5), שמים (“heavens,” v.8), ארץ (“earth,” v.10), and ימים (“seas,” v.10). In addition to the primary delineation of יום on the first day (v.5), God provides further explanation on the fourth day of its setting and function (vv.14–18). יום is to be separated from night by the “lights in the expanse of the heavens” (v.14a), and to be ruled over by “the greater light,” i.e., the sun (vv. 16–18). In contrast, the night is to be ruled over by “the lesser light,” i.e., the moon (also vv. 16–18), and is further to be distinguished from daytime by the appearance of “the stars” (v. 16b). Moreover, יום is set forth as one of several temporal markers (and collocated, specifically, with “years”—implying a shared semantic domain) for whose purpose the same heavenly lights were created (v. 14b).

The pertinent verses from Genesis 1 are reproduced in Table 1.

It is from these verses, particularly v.5, that many scholars draw some of their conclusions about the

Table 1. Genesis 1:5, 14–18 in the Hebrew Masoretic text, with the *ESV*.

<p>⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day . . .</p> <p>¹⁴And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, ¹⁸to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.</p>	<p>וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹרֶךְ יוֹם וְלְחֹשֶׁךְ קֶרָא לַיְלָה וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד: פ . . .</p> <p>וַיִּצְוֶה אֱלֹהִים יְהִי מְאֹרֹת בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַיּוֹם וּבֵין הַלַּיְלָה וְהָיוּ לְאֹתוֹת וּלְמוֹעֲדִים וּלְיָמִים וּשְׁנָיִם: ¹⁵וְהָיוּ לְמְאֹרֹת בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאִיר עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי־כֵן: ¹⁶וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־שְׁנֵי הַמְּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים אֶת־הַמְּאֹר הַגָּדֹל לְמַשְׁלַת הַיּוֹם וְאֶת־הַמְּאֹר הַקָּטָן לְמַשְׁלַת הַלַּיְלָה וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים: ¹⁷וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאִיר עַל־ הָאָרֶץ: ¹⁸וּלְמֹשֶׁל בֵּינָם וּבֵין הַלַּיְלָה וְלְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב:</p>
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semantic range of יום. For this reason, I will discuss below a few of the pertinent exegetical issues in Genesis 1:5.

In his article, “The Light He Called ‘Day,’” Robert E. Grossman (1987, 7) sets forth what he sees as the significance of Genesis 1:5 for interpreting the time frame of the creation account:

Gen. 1:5 tells us that on the very first day of the creation week God defined the meaning of “day.” This divine definition has implications for understanding the other “days” of Genesis 1 . . .

It is the conviction of this writer that Gen. 1:4-5 deserves a great deal more serious attention than it has usually received from Scripture commentators . . . What we are contending here is that the Holy Spirit inspired Moses to define the period of light-separated-from-darkness by the word “day” (Hebrew *yom*) on the very first day of creation; that this definition can only be taken in the sense of an ordinary “earth day”; and that it must apply throughout the days of creation.

In the Jewish ArtScroll Tanach commentary series, Meir Zlotowitz comments, “The intent of this verse is not that God changed the name of ‘light’ to ‘day’. Additionally the name ‘day’ does not refer to light itself, but to the duration of its radiance. Similarly, night is not a title of darkness, but the term that defines its duration” (Zlotowitz and Scherman 1995, 43). Likewise, Walton (2001, 79) explains, “It was not the light itself that God called

yom, but the *period* of light.” According to this line of reasoning, (1) from the outset יום is used primarily as a temporal marker, which, (2) after the appearance of light becomes associated with light, and (3) after the creation of the sun on the fourth day, becomes fixed in association with the regular period of daylight.

But how can we explain the second occurrence of יום in Genesis 1:5? Many commentators have interpreted v. 5b as inferring that יום primarily means a full 24-hour cycle, incorporating both the daylight period *and* the nighttime period. P. Zerafa (1986, 532) notes, “Most Scripture scholars take it for granted that the Old Testament day uniformly covered a 24-hour period; they only disagree about the start of this period.” Yet, this seems to contradict the designation that God has just given to the word in v. 5a. One possible way of solving this apparent quandary, is to read v. 5b as indicating how days are to be reckoned (see fig. 1):

1. the daytime-nighttime cycle begins with the daytime and is followed by the nighttime;
2. in any daytime-nighttime cycle, the daytime is counted, but the following nighttime is not counted.

Sequence of Daytime and Nighttime

With regard to the first point, this traditional interpretation of daytime preceding nighttime is deduced from a *prima facie* chronological reading of Genesis 1:5, in which the second half of the verse, “And there was evening, and there was morning—

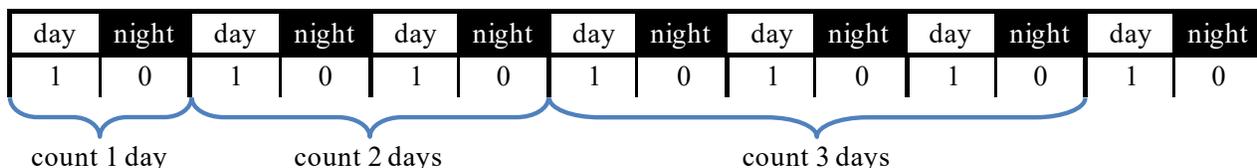


Fig. 1. The reckoning of days according to Genesis 1:5.

one day,” follows the events of the first day. A potential alternative reading is that the evening came first, as עֶרֶב precedes בֹּקֶר in the word order of 5b; in which case 5b would constitute a summary of the events of the first day. Against this idea, and supporting the traditional reading, is the fact that *wacyiqtol*s (וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד) often convey sequentiality in narratives, hence, “and [subsequent to the aforementioned events] there was evening, and [subsequent to the evening] there was morning—one day.” Umberto Cassuto (1883–1951) observes,

When day-time had passed, the period allotted to darkness returned (and there was evening), and when night-time came to an end, the light held sway a second time (and there was morning), and this completed the first calendar day (one day), which had begun *with the creation of light*.

This method of reckoning the day [i.e. a day and a night] from sunrise appears to be at variance with the accepted Israelite practice of connecting the day-time with the preceding night, that is, the custom of regarding sunset as the starting-point of the day. (Cassuto [1944] 1989, 28)

Cassuto ([1944] 1989, 29) proceeds to note a number of inadequate explanations, before setting forth his own solution:

Throughout the Bible there obtains only one system of *computing time*: the day is considered to begin in the morning; but in regard to the festivals and appointed times, the Torah ordains that they shall be observed also on the night of the *preceding day*. This point is explicitly emphasized whenever a certain precept has to be observed particularly at *night*, like the eating of unleavened bread on the night of Passover and fasting on the evening of the Day of Atonement. In the case of the Sabbath and the other festival days, however, there was no need to *stress* that work was prohibited on the night preceding, since agricultural tasks (and it is specifically these that the Torah has in mind) are performed only by day. There is no discrepancy, therefore, in our verse at all.

Pieter A. Verhoef (1996, 2:412) observes,

In the OT the earlier practice seems to have been to consider that the day began in the morning. Even in the creation account the formula “Evening came, and morning came” (REB, Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31), must be interpreted in the sense that the day began in the morning, because in the context of God’s creation, יוֹם in the broader sense does not have another beginning than יוֹם in the narrower sense of daylight only. In Genesis 19:34 the phrase “the next day” (מָחָרָה) clearly denotes the morning after the preceding night. Judges 19:5–10 also offers clear evidence that early Israel did count the days from sunrise to sunrise. As the importance of the lunar

festivals increased, it became the common practice to count the days from the evening (Exod 12:18; Lev 23:32; Esth 4:16; Isa 27:3; 34:10).

However, not all scholars are convinced that daytime precedes nighttime. Averbek, for example, feels that the Genesis account indicates that each day starts in the evening (personal communication, April 12, 2018).

Reckoning of Days

Regarding the second point concerning the reckoning of days Zerafa (1986, 534–535) writes,

The peculiar phraseology of the first creation narrative, « and it was sunset and it was sunrise the first (or second, third, etc.) day », Gn 1,5.8.13.19.23.31; has often been explained with reference to a 24-hour day, beginning at sunset or sunrise. Most probably, however, sunset and sunrise in this narrative are not to be understood as chronometric indications determining the span of the biblical day. They stand for a full day (sunset) and a full night (sunrise).... God resumed his creative activity after a full day and a full night.

This sunrise-to-sunset view of a day is corroborated by the existence of interchangeable wording, in both Old and New Testaments, of “x days” and “x days and x nights.” Trevor Craigen (2008, 202) explains,

The basic meaning [of *yôm*] is the period of light, that is, from dawn until sunset, which means that it often occurs in contrast to the night (e.g., Gen. 8:22; Num. 11:32). The whole period from sunrise to sunrise, or sunset to sunset, is also covered by that basic unit of time, for example, 40 days and 40 nights (Exod. 24:18, with both nouns in the singular), whereas the same time span elsewhere is just “40 days” (Gen. 50:3, with the noun in the singular), obviously, the latter incorporating the nights as well.

In the New Testament, Matthew tells us, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil....[for] *forty days and forty nights*” (Matthew 4:1-2, *ESV*). Mark records the same event, omitting “nights,” hence, “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness *forty days*, being tempted by Satan” (Mark 1:12–13, *ESV**). “Forty days” is identical with “forty days and forty nights” for the simple reason that nights are not reckoned in the counting of days, because a day is the daylight portion of the daytime-nighttime cycle (see fig. 2).

Lexical and Dictionary Definitions of יוֹם

Lexicons and dictionaries vary considerably in the way that they delineate the various uses of יוֹם, some having numerous divisions and sub-divisions, especially *BDB* and *DCH*. As an example of a scholarly lexical discussion of יוֹם we will examine M. Sæbø’s entry in *TDOT*.

day 1	night 1	day 2	night 2	day 3	night 3	day 4	night 38	day 39	night 39	day 40	night 40
1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1

count “forty days” (Mark 1:13) = “forty days and forty nights” (Matt 4:2)

Fig. 2. The forty days (and nights) of Jesus’ temptation.

M. Sæbø’s Discussion of יום in TDOT

In his discussion of יום, M. Sæbø (1990, 6:22) contrasts its “literal usage” (strictly, “the daylight period”) with its “extended usage,” and further categorizes its “theological usage,” though he concedes, “The transition from what might be called ‘secular’ usage (in temporal and extended senses) to explicitly religious or theological usage is...fluid and therefore difficult to define precisely” (6:26). Of particular significance are his various suggested extended uses of יום, which include the following:¹

1. in the singular,
 - a. to designate a full 24 hour period,
 - b. as a general word for time, e.g., the “day/time of harvest’ [Prov. 25:13],”
 - c. “*hayyôm*, ‘today,’... [used] to refer not to a single day but to the present time of the speaker in contrast to a past situation or past events,”
 - d. with reference to an historic event, e.g., “the day/catastrophe of Jerusalem’ [Ps. 137:7]”;
2. in the plural,
 - a. “with reference to an historical period or epoch,” e.g. “in the days/reign of David’ [2 S. 21:1],”
 - b. as meaning “lifetime,”
 - c. as meaning “year” (Sæbø 1990, 6:21).

Sæbø (1990, 6:26) acknowledges, “As a general rule, it is often difficult to make precise distinctions among the extended uses of the word.”

Elsewhere, Sæbø (1990, 6:16–17) mentions a few instances where יום can refer to “a lengthy period of indefinite duration (e.g., Isa. 2:20; 3:18; 4:2; 7:18; Jer. 4:9; Am. 8:3,9; Zec. 14:6f.)” and where it can “sometimes be used in the extended sense of a human lifetime, e.g., Job 30:25” (6:19). Many scholars regard יום יהוה as falling within the former category, viz., a lengthy period of indefinite duration. Sæbø (1990, 6:31) comments,

Although with the passage of time the eventful nature of the “day of Yahweh” came increasingly to be emphasized, along with other attributes, its temporal nature still was preserved. This is shown by the various words for time that cluster about the “day of Yahweh”: *bayyôm hahû*, “on that day”; *bayyāmîm hahēm*, “in those days”; *bā’ēl hahî*, “in that time”; *hinnēh yāmîm bā’im*, “behold, days are coming”; *b’aharūl hayyāmîm*, “at the end of the days.” Most of these formulas, which have undergone some development and take on eschatological

character only in the later texts, not only define an eventful point in time, but refer to actual “days” or “time,” the “time of the end.”

Even-Shoshan’s Dictionary Definition of יום

Avraham Even-Shoshan’s (1991, 267) widely respected *המילון העברי המודרני*, drawn from all periods, defines יום in its most literal senses,¹ the time from the hour of the rising of the sun and until its setting. 2, a calendar day, day and night, period of 24 hours” (my translation).

Rationalization of Lexical Representation of the Semantic Range of יום

The semantic range of יום, as represented across the range of lexicons and dictionaries, can be rationalized into three major categories:

1. literal uses, primarily “daylight,” but also, by extension, “a period of 24 hours”;
2. idiomatic uses, when יום is in construction with another word, including
 - a. as the *nomen regens*, when it is said to have the meaning “a/the time of,” e.g., *בְּיוֹם קְצִיר* (Proverbs 25:13, “in the time of harvest,” *ESV*), *יוֹם יְהוָה* (Isaiah 13:6, “the Lord’s time,” *LB*)—this category also includes instances in which יום is preceded by an inseparable preposition, especially בְּ, with the meaning “when,” e.g., *בְּיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ* (Genesis 2:17, “when you eat,” *NIV*);
 - b. in *הַיּוֹם* (“the present time”);
3. non-literal, analogical/metaphorical uses, where יום is said to stand for something significantly different from its basic sense.

Regarding the literal uses there is relatively little contention. The main issue here is whether “a period of 24 hours” is understood as the primary sense, or as an extension of the “daylight” meaning.

Some scholars argue that instances of the second category support the idea of יום having the meaning of an indefinite period of time. This is particularly noticeable when it comes to *בְּיוֹם* in Genesis 2:4. Among many, Beall (2017, 159) believes, “*Yôm* may mean an indefinite period of time in 65 instances in the OT (such as Gen. 2:4);” and Lewis and Demarest (1990, 24) assert, “*Yôm* in Scripture frequently connotes an extended period of time (Gen. 2:4...)” However, others believe that, in such idiomatic uses, the meaning of יום does not greatly diverge

¹ All the following citations are from Sæbø (1990, 6:25–26) unless noted otherwise.

from its primary literal sense. Sæbø (1990, 6:15) suggests, “*Beyôm* with an infinitive (almost 70 times) [is used] as a general indication of time or a temporal conjunction meaning ‘when,’ although the basic meaning ‘day’ need not be totally absent (cf. the important passage Gen. 2:4b following the seven-day schema of creation).” A similar dichotomy of interpretation exists concerning the phrase *הַיּוֹם הַהוּא*, with many scholars reading it as an extended period of time, while others see it as an ordinary day.

It is the third category that is of particular interest to this study, and especially where *יוֹם* occurs in the singular, as is primarily the case in the creation account. Most, if not all, scholars would agree that the plural, *יָמִים*, can be used to designate a long stretch of time. But such an observation does not necessarily impinge upon the semantic range of *יוֹם*?. Indeed, Simon J. DeVries (1975, 43) notes,

There is a striking contrast between the singular and plural use of *yôm*. The plural is used... to identify and specify the duration of a period of time, whether this be limited or unlimited, definite or indefinite. The definite length of such a period could be stated by adding a specific number to the plural, *yamim*. An indefinite period might be *yāmîm* alone or *yāmîm ’ehādîm* (“some days,” “a few days”) if it was short; if it is was long it would be *yāmîm rabbîm* (“many days”).

For example, the phrase *יָמִים רַבִּים* (“many days”) is seen to equate to time frames extending from a lengthy period of a woman’s bleeding (Leviticus 15:25), or mourning for the dead (Genesis 37:34; 2 Samuel 14:2; 1 Chronicles 7:22), or the 180 days during which King Ahasuerus “showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness” (Esther 1:4, *ESV*), right up to 400 years (compare Genesis 15:13 with Numbers 20:15). But this is a function of the flexibility of the adjective *רַב*—it is not a function of the semantic range of *יוֹם*.

Observations Regarding Extended Lexical Meanings of *יוֹם*, and *יָמִים* in the Creation Account

Table 2 presents data on *יוֹם* from the most respected lexicons and dictionaries. Specifically, it

shows (1) any discussion regarding unambiguously non-literal, analogical/metaphorical uses of *יוֹם* (singular, or of unspecified number), where it may stand for something significantly different from its basic sense; and (2) any discussion of *יוֹם* in the creation account. For example, in *TWOT*, Coppes (1980, 1:370–371) (1) asserts that *יוֹם* “can denote... a general vague ‘time,’” and (2) acknowledges his belief that the days of Genesis 1 are “of indeterminable length.”

Several points can be discerned from the lexical entries regarding the semantic range of *יוֹם*, and its meaning in the creation account:

1. There is scant support among most respected modern lexicons and dictionaries for the notion that *יוֹם* can refer, intrinsically, to an indefinitely long period of time. Sæbø’s (1990, 6:16–17) article in *TDOT* makes reference to such possible meanings. But even then, he points only to a couple of specific contexts: primarily in the phrase *bayyôm hahû*, when it occurs in future-oriented texts,³ and one example in Job (Job 30:25).⁴
2. A cursory glance at the sub-headings in lexical entries may give the false impression that *יוֹם* can, intrinsically (i.e., in the singular), mean a long time. But in most instances it is the plural form, *יָמִים*, that is in view. For instance, Koehler and Baumgartner’s (2001, 400–401) seventh category is “period of time: year,” but upon closer inspection it becomes evident that all the examples given are plural.
3. Two popular sources, in particular, give the overt impression that *יוֹם* intrinsically has a broad semantic range, and can readily be understood as referring to an extended period of time, viz., Coppes (1980) in *TWOT*, and Wilson ([1870] 1990) in *WOTWS*. As noted earlier, the former asserts that *יוֹם* “can denote... a general vague ‘time,’” and discloses his belief that the days of Genesis 1 are “of indeterminable length” (Coppes 1980, 1:370–371). The latter is even bolder regarding the flexibility of *יוֹם*, stating from the outset, “*יוֹם* a day; it is frequently put for time in general, or for a long time; a whole period” (Wilson [1870] 1990, 109). That this has impacted the interpretation of the days of Genesis 1 as long periods of time is evident,

² For example, Douglas F. Kelly’s (2017, 150) assertion, “‘Day’ (*yom*) can... occasionally be used of a portion of the year, such as wheat harvest (Gen. 30:14),” seems redundant, since this verse has the plural, not the singular, form of *יוֹם*. Similarly, Lewis and Demarest (1990, 44) argue, “‘Day’ meant a month (Gen. 29:14), seven sabbaths of years (Lev. 25:8), ‘a long time’ (forty years) in the desert (Josh. 24:7), and another ‘long time’ when Israel was without the true God (2 Chron. 15:3),” but all of these examples have the plural form of *יוֹם*, which, in the latter two references, is part of the phrase *יָמִים רַבִּים* (“many days”).

³ In such texts, he suggests, “The formula often gives the impression that the ‘day’ can refer not just to some short period but equally well to a lengthy period of indefinite duration (e.g., Isa. 2:20; 3:18; 4:2; 7:18; Jer. 4:9; Am. 8:3,9; Zec. 14:6f.), which is otherwise generally expressed by the pl. *yāmîm*, ‘days.’ Here the formula approaches such similar formulas as *bayyāmîm hāhēm(mā)*, ‘in those days’ (e.g., Jer. 3:16; 5:18; Zec. 8:6) or *bā’ēl hahî*, ‘in that time’ (e.g., Isa. 20:2; Jer. 3:17; 4:11). Here it also comes close to the special prophetic expression *yôm YHWH*, ‘day of Yahweh.’”

⁴ “The singular can... sometimes be used in the extended sense of a human lifetime, e.g., Job 30:25... But an extended period of time is more usually expressed by the pl. (*hay*)*yāmîm*” (1990, 6:19).

Table 2. Extracts from respected lexical and dictionary sources where definitions of יום (1) discuss unambiguously non-literal, analogical/metaphorical uses of יום (singular, or of unspecified number), where it may stand for something significantly different from its basic sense; or (2) indicate its meaning in the creation account. Bold typeface has been added to draw attention to significant points.

Source (s.v. יום)	Discussion regarding unambiguously non-literal, analogical/metaphorical uses of יום (singular, or of unspecified number), where it may stand for something significantly different from its basic sense	יום in Creation Account
BDB (Brown, Driver, and Briggs [1907] 1979)	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “1. day, opp. night... Gn 1:5, 1:14, 1:16, 1:18” (398) • “2.d. day as defined by <i>evening and morning</i> Gn 1:5, 1:8, 1:13, 1:19, 1:23, 1:31” (398) • “7.d. יום in cstr. bef. vbs., both literally, <i>the day of</i>, and (oft.) in gen. sense = <i>the time of</i> (forcible and pregn., representing the act vividly as that of a single day): (1) bef. inf., ... (γ) יום ביום Gn 2:4” (399–400)
Coppes (1980) in TWOT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[יום] can denote ... a general vague ‘time’” (1:370) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “One of the most debated occurrences of יום is its use in reference to creation. The difficulties in exegesis there are complicated by many factors (see E. J. Young, <i>Studies in Genesis One</i>, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964, pp. 43ff.). Like Young, this writer believes the days of Genesis 1 to be intentionally patterned, chronological, of indeterminable length, initiated with 1:1, intended to show step-by-step how God ‘changed the uninhabitable and unformed earth of verse two into the well-ordered world of verse thirty-two,’ and ‘straight-forward, trustworthy history’ (ibid., p. 103ff.) (1:371)
DCH (Clines 1993)	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “1. day, as opposed to night, daytime (e.g. Gn 1₅...)” (4:166) • “2. day, of 24 hours (e.g. Gn 1₅...)” (4:166) • “[Construct] יום day of, i.e. day when, followed by ... inf. cstr. of verb ... לַעֲשֶׂה <i>make</i> Gn 2₄” (4:172)
Fohrer	n/a	n/a
Jenni (1997) in TLOT	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The basic meaning of <i>yôm</i> is ‘day (from sunrise to sundown)’ ...; consequently, contrasts and series of ‘day’ and ‘night,’ ... are frequent (e.g., Gen 1:14, 18 ...)” (527) • “This basic meaning broadens to ‘day (of 24 hours)’ in the sense of the astronomical or calendrical unit ... In contrast to Syr., Hebr. has no terminological distinction between the day as daytime (Syr. <i>imāma</i>) and the day as a calendrical unit (Syr. <i>yawmā</i>), although the semantic distinction is apparent throughout. Thus e.g., in P’s creation account, the older creation narrative with its distinction between ‘day’ and ‘night’ (Gen 1:5a, ‘God called the light day,’ the preliminary description with → ‘<i>ôr</i> ‘light’ is replaced with the normal designation; further vv 14, 16, 18) is overlaid by the later seven-day pattern that enumerates the days of the week (1:5b, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31; 2:2[bis], 3)” (528) • “In many cases <i>yôm</i> loses the specific meaning ‘day’ and becomes a rather general and somewhat vague word for ‘time, moment,’ competing with → ‘<i>ēt</i>. The construction <i>beyôm</i> + inf. ‘on the day when’ = ‘at the time when’ = ‘as/when’ is relatively frequent; <i>min</i> ‘since’ or ‘ad ‘until’ can replace <i>beyôm</i>, just as a rare pf. or impf. can replace the inf. (e.g., Gen 2:4 ‘at the time when the Lord God made the earth and heaven’ with inf. ...)” (529)
Koehler and Baumgartner (2001) in HALOT	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “2. day of 24 hours: Gn 1₅” (399) • “10. with prep.; a) יום ... i) with inf. (THAT 1:711) יום עשׂוֹת in the day that Yahweh made Gn 2₄” (401)
Sæbø (1990) in TDOT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In future-oriented (primarily prophetic) texts [DeVries, 281–331], the formula often gives the impression that the ‘day’ can refer not just to some short period but equally well to a lengthy period of indefinite duration (e.g., Isa. 2:20; 3:18; 4:2; 7:18; Jer. 4:9; Am. 8:3,9; Zec. 14:6f.)” (6:16–17) • “The singular can also sometimes be used in the extended sense of a human lifetime, e.g., Job 30:25, where <i>q^sšēh-yôm</i>, ‘one whose day is hard,’ stands in parallel to ‘<i>eb̄yôn</i>, ‘poor.’ But an extended period of time is more usually expressed by the pl. (<i>hayhāmim</i>)” (6:19) • “The formal and syntactic manifestations of the singular and plural have been seen to be analogous, so that it is not necessary to treat the singular and plural separately. There is nevertheless a significant difference: <i>yôm</i> always designates some fixed point in time, while <i>yāmim</i> often expresses temporal duration by indicating periods of time of various sorts” (6:21) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “From its outset at creation (Gen. 1:3–5), <i>yôm</i> as ‘full day’ [of 24 hours] had the same beginning as <i>yôm</i> in the narrower sense [of the day as ‘daylight’], namely morning” (6:23) • “The basic meaning ‘day’ need not be totally absent [from <i>beyôm</i>] (cf. the important passage Gen. 2:4b following the seven-day schema of creation)” (6:15)
Verhoef (1996) in NIDOTTE	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[The] primary meaning [of יום] is the time of daylight as distinct from the period of darkness, the night. For example, in Gen 1:5 God called the light ‘day’” (2:412) • “The term is also used for day in the sense of the complete cycle that includes both daytime and nighttime, e.g. Gen 1:5: ‘And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day’ ... In the creation account ... יום in the broader sense [of a complete period of light and darkness] does not have another beginning than יום in the narrower sense of daylight only” (2:412) • “‘In the day that’ means ‘when’ (Gen 2:4 ...)” (2:412)
Wilson ([1870] 1990) in WOTWS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “יום a day; it is frequently put for time in general, or for a long time; a whole period under consideration, as, in the day signifieth in the time when; in that day, at that time. Day is also put 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 it: Job xviii. 20 : Ps. cxxxvii. 7 : Ezek. xxi. 25. ‘Day of the Lord,’ a day of visitation or of judgment. Hos. vi. 2, ‘two days,’ two seasons of calamity” (109). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Peculiarities may be seen and easily accounted for in the several translations: Gen. i. 5, &c” (109)

for instance, in the writings of Fischer (1990, 17; citing Wilson [1870] 1990), and those of the influential evangelicals, Ross and Archer (2001, 125; citing Coppes [1980] and Wilson [1870] 1990). Additionally, even Stambaugh (2003, 52), who defends a young universe interpretation, draws from Coppes (1980) for his “basic semantic range of יום.”

4. Regarding the meaning of יום in the creation account, the majority unequivocally supports a literal reading. Only Coppes (1980, 1:371) in *TWOT* (“days...of indeterminable length”) explicitly departs from this position.

Lexical Competence

DCH is an example of a lexicon that provides a comprehensive and detailed appraisal of the range of uses of each lexeme. This includes giving priority “to the most commonly attested sense,” (Clines 1993, 1:15) and providing examples of each potential semantic and syntactic construction. Not all lexicons attain such a high standard. Milton Eng (2011, 25) observes, “A common lament among linguists is the unsystematic and confusing classifications of meanings within typical dictionary entries.”

Indeed, a major, general shortcoming in some lexicons is that they give little, or misleading, information about the frequency of occurrence and validity of each suggested sub-category of meaning for any given term. For example, Coppes (1980, 1:370) lists five possible denotations for יום, with no indication of frequency, such that the reader may be left with the impression that “a general vague ‘time,’” is as valid and as common a gloss as “the period of twenty-four hours.” Worse still, Wilson ([1870] 1990, 109, emphasis added) provides erroneous information when he asserts that “יום...is frequently put...for a long time; a whole period.” Even a cursory glance through a concordance demonstrates the falsity of this claim—יום is given its literal meaning in the vast majority of occurrences.

This problem can lead to a ‘candy-store’ approach to exegesis, where the interpreter picks the lexical sub-category that best suits their presuppositions, with little discernment as to the appropriateness of applying that sense in the given context. For example, Fischer (1990, 17) cites Wilson ([1870] 1990) in *WOTWS*, and then concludes, “The ‘days’ of creation certainly do appear to be periods of extraordinary happenings which fit ‘a long time’ definition better than a 24-hour definition” (emphasis added). Even Stambaugh (2003, 52), who goes to great lengths in trying to demonstrate in various ways that יום in Genesis 1 is a literal day, claims, “The semantic range of יום does allow the interpreter to select from a variety of meanings of ‘day.’” Thomas R. Schreiner

([1990] 2011, 126) comments, “The careful interpreter will always carefully consider the semantic range of a word and the particular context in which a word is used....Lexical study is one of the most important elements of the exegetical process. Unfortunately, it is also an area that suffers from great abuse.”

In 1942, H.C. Leupold (1891–1972) asserted, “There ought to be no need of refuting the idea that *yôm* means period. Reputable dictionaries like Buhl, B D B or K. W. know nothing of this notion. Hebrew dictionaries are our primary source of reliable information concerning Hebrew words” (Leupold 1942, 57). Similarly, in discussing the Day-Age theory, Weston W. Fields (1976, 169) advises, “As in the case of other problems involving meanings of words, our study must begin with Hebrew lexicography. Nearly all the defenders of the [Day-Age] theory fail, however, to give any lexical backing to the theory. The reader is left completely uninformed concerning the uses of *yôm* (day) in the Old Testament.” Fields’ statement could be qualified by noting that, while some Day-Age advocates do indeed draw upon lexical definitions of יום to support their position, they tend to make use of, arguably, the two poorest examples, *TWOT* and *WOTWS*.

Fields (1976, 172) proceeds to reproduce, in abridged form, the lexical entries for יום in *BDB* and *KB*, before concluding,

Now *these* are the meanings the lexicons give. For the reader interested in *all* the evidence, here it is. We must immediately raise the question: where is the lexical support for identifying the *days* of Genesis as *long periods of time*? Far from supporting the notion that the creative days of Genesis 1 are vast ages, extending, perhaps, over millions of years, the lexicons suggest that “day,” as used to refer to creation is of the normal 24 hours duration. This is the *natural* interpretation.

Fields’ appraisal may be regarded by some as simplistic. Yet, others may feel he is right to expose the inadequacy of arguments for long creation days that either have no lexical support, or that cherry-pick from questionable sources. Earlier, Bernard Ramm (1954, 222), while not favoring a literal-days reading of Genesis 1, nevertheless had admitted, “Though not closing the door on the age-day interpretation of the word *yom*, we do not feel that lexicography of the Hebrew language will as yet permit it” (underlining added).

Other Scholarly Studies Pertaining to the Semantic Range of יום

In his article on “Time” in one of the *IVP Dictionaries of the Old Testament*, Todd Pokrifka (2008, 820) begins his discussion of יום by noting that

the “primary meaning is the period of light as opposed to night.” However, he immediately follows this with the assertion, “Yet it is an exceptionally flexible term,” adding that it can be “used to refer to... a more general time period (Job 15:23; 21:13; 38:23; Ps 102:2; Prov 11:4; Lam 2:16, 21)” (821). Thus, readers are given the idea that יום has a broad semantic range.

A different impression is obtained from one of the most substantial monographs relating to יום, DeVries's 1975 book, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. Concluding his tome, DeVries (1975, 336–337) wrote,

Little may have been added to the dictionary meaning of time-words, but our study has proven to have important implications for the Hebrew language of time in the broader sense.

Yôm [is] the elemental Hebrew word for time. This reflects the psychological and ideological impact of the day upon the primate Hebrew (and early Semite) mentality. Only the day (and alternating night) had independent significance; all other divisions of time, whether extensions of the day (week, month, year, etc.) or fragments of it (“watches” of the day and night) were artificialities and semi-abstractions.

There is little wonder, then, that so much emphasis seems to be placed on the quality of particular days.

With regards to possible extended meanings of יום, he noted,

Although *yôm* in all its combinations retains its reference to this elemental unit of time (*baḡyôm haḥû* ‘never means merely, “then”), it is what fills a day with meaning and gives it its uniqueness, rather than its chronological dimensions, that makes it important. It is for this reason that very occasionally (I Sam. 25:10, Jer. 34:15), *haḡyôm* comes to refer to the present time as a period or situation; the day on which the speaker speaks is typical and representative of other days characterized by a special situation. (DeVries 1975, 337)

A decade after the publication of DeVries's book P. Zerafa (1986, 532) wrote a journal article entitled, “The Old Testament Day.” He began by observing,

For all practical purposes, civil and religious, the modern Jewish day is reckoned on a 24-hour basis, and runs from sunset to sunset. The 24-hour day was a standard unit of time in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia: the Egyptians started their day at sunrise; the Mesopotamians began theirs at sunset.

However, Zerafa (1986, 533) asserts, contrary to the opinion of most biblical scholars, “Actually, the 24-hour reckoning did not serve as a basis for the daily life in the Old Testament.” He proceeds to discuss this in light of various cultic and social practices throughout the Old Testament period, ending with the following conclusion:

The Old Testament day covered the hours of daylight (sunrise to sunset). Towards the end of the Old

Testament, the eves were introduced as pre-festive celebrations. The observation of the eves paved the way to a 24-hour festive repose starting at sunset.

Later on, the 24-hour reckoning was extended to cover every aspect of the Jewish life. This innovation was possibly brought about by the loss of national autonomy: the continued adaptation to a foreign culture that reckoned the day on a 24-hour basis, led the Jews to accept the sunset to sunset reckoning of the festive repose as a base rule of daily life. (Zerafa 1986, 544)

Thus, according to Zerafa, during the majority of the OT period, יום was understood primarily in its narrowest sense, viz., the daylight portion of the daytime-nighttime cycle.

The following decade Walton touched upon the semantic range of יום in his contribution to the “Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis,” which, along with ten other articles, comprises the substantial introductory material in *NIDOTTE*. In “Principles for Productive Word Study,” Walton (1996, 1:167) observed,

The claim is often made that the word יום, day (H3427), can mean a period of undetermined length. However, most, if not all, of the occurrences where such flexibility can be demonstrated are related to idiomatic phrases. The aspects of the semantic range connected to idiomatic phrases cannot be extended to nonidiomatic occurrences.

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Abbreviations

BDB	<i>The New Brown—Driver—Briggs—Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon</i> (1907; repr., 1979)
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> (2nd ed., 1997)
DCH	<i>The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> (1993–2011)
ESV	<i>English Standard Version</i> (2016)
ESV*	<i>English Standard Version</i> (2016; but substituting "YHWH" for "the LORD," and capitalizing the first letter of divine pronouns)
HALOT	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Study Edition</i> (2001)
KB	Koehler and Baumgartner's <i>Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros</i> (1958)
LB	<i>Living Bible</i> (1971)

lit.	literal(ly)
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> (1996)
NIV	<i>New International Version</i> (2011)
OT	Old Testament
REB	<i>Revised English Bible</i> (1989)
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> (Latin for "under the word")
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> (1977–2006)
THAT	<i>Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum AT</i> (1971–78)
TLOT	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (1997)
TWOT	<i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i> (1980)

- WOTWS* *Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies* (1870 2nd ed.; repr., 1990)
- WTM* *Groves-Wheeler Westminster Morphology and Lemma Database* (v. 4.14, 2010)