

Chapter Ten: The Six Creation Days: Progress Toward God's Rest

What was a “day”?

The word “day” (Hebrew *yom*, as in Yom Kippur, “Day of Atonement”) occurs 13 times in the first Biblical narrative of divine Creation (Gen. 1:1-2:4a). The theological interest of *yom* is further enhanced by its prominence in current discussions of the nature and length of the whole process of Creation. So we have to ask how our imaginary figure Moshe He’eb understood *yom*. Like “day” as used in English, *yom* has a broad semantic range in Hebrew; indeed, it is the commonest Hebrew expression of time. It can mean the period of daylight, when work is usually done (as in “a good day’s work”). It can refer to an indefinite time period (as in “in George Washington’s day,” or “in this day and age”). Or it can simply mean “when” (“in the day YAHWEH made the earth and the heavens,” Gen. 2:4b).



So what did Moshe visualize when he heard *yom* in the Genesis narrative? Did he picture a period of daylight, of thousands or millions of years, or was it simply an alternative to “when”? The author of Genesis—Moshe’s teacher—provides a simple, clear answer (which, unfortunately, most readers seem to overlook): “God separated the light from the darkness, and named the light ‘day’ and the darkness ‘night.’ There was evening, then dawning—one [Creation] day” (Gen. 1:4b-5 OHV). Clearly *yom* (“day”) was the *daylight* that eliminated and replaced the darkness that was “night.” The same language is repeated five more times (1:8, 13, 19, 23, 31): periods of darkness initiated by dusk and terminated by dawn (“nights”), sit between periods of daylight, (“days”). This meaning of “day” as *daylight* is further reinforced: “God made two great lights—the larger light to *dominate* the day; the smaller light to *dominate* the night—as well as the stars. God set them in the vault of the sky to light up the land . . . to separate the light from the darkness” (1:16-18 OHV).

There is not a hint here of a 24-hour *yom* defined by a revolution of the Earth on its axis (of which neither the author of Genesis nor Moshe had ever heard). The periods of darkness came *between* the “days”; they were not constituent parts of the “days.” They simply distinguished each day from the one that followed. There was no need for a concluding, “There was dusk, then dawn” because the Creation narrative *ends* with its climax in the Sabbath “day.”

When did Moshe’s day begin?

For Moshe the day—the productive time of daylight—began with the dawning and ended with the evening—dawn to dusk. That the ancient Hebrews understood this to be the meaning of “day” is confirmed elsewhere in the Old Testament. Take the sordid story of the incestuous relationship of Lot’s daughters with their father (Gen. 19:33-34), and the equally distressing account of a Levite and his concubine (Jgs. 19:9), as well as the first Scriptural occurrence of the word “Sabbath” (in the account of the nonappearance of “manna” on the morning of the seventh day, Ex. 16:22-26). Several centuries later, David’s wife Michal, a daughter of King Saul, warned her soon-to-be-king husband that Saul had sent messengers to David’s house to kill him the following morning (1 Sam. 19:11).

“But” the reader may well protest, “doesn’t it say somewhere that Sabbath is to be observed from even until even?” This, of course, is a reference to an instruction regarding the Day of

Atonement: “It shall be a to you a sabbath of complete rest, and you shall deny yourselves [mgn., “Or *shall fast*”]; on the ninth day of the month at evening, from evening to evening you shall keep your sabbath” (Lev. 23:32). This, however, is clearly an exception to the general pattern, which is likely why Moshe needed to be reminded of the importance and the unusual length of this *yearly* Sabbath. Not until the Second Temple Period (from 530 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.) is there evidence that Jews observed the *weekly* Sabbath from sundown to sundown. That this was the practice by the time of Jesus is obvious in the account of the crucifixion of Jesus, when his body was removed from the cross: “It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning” (Luke 23:54).

Modern misunderstanding

The meaning of *yom* in Genesis 1 was perfectly clear to Moshe; it is not at all clear to our other imaginary figure, Ian Michael O’Dern (although, more-than-likely, he is blissfully unaware that he is confused). Because he lives in the modern world and has at least an elementary understanding of the planet Earth and the fact that its daily rotation creates “day” and “night,” he often thinks of a “day” as a period of 24 equal hours beginning at midnight in the modern world but beginning at sunset in ancient times. Forgetting that the Biblical accounts come from a very different world and were not addressed to him, he tends to think *they* used *their* words in the same way *he* uses *his* words, and consequently often misunderstands. This difference in the use of words reflects Moshe’s concern with questions of *theology* (What is the *ultimate* meaning and purpose of existence? Why is there anything at all?) in contrast to I. M. O’Dern’s concern with questions of *cosmology* (How and when did the universe come to be?).



The Sabbath and the Creation days

The Creative process reached its goal in the celebratory rest of the Sabbath, after God “observed everything he had made and saw that indeed it functioned very well” (1:31 OHV). Moshe recognized the Sabbath as the paradigmatic Biblical instance of *imitatio Dei*—acting in the way God acts. The preceding six days were also to be characterized by *imitatio Dei*: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (Ex. 20:9 NRSV, NIV), Moshe’s vocation—“calling”—was to be actively creative, bringing order out of chaos, so that on every Sabbath he could join with his Creator in celebrating worthwhile tasks accomplished.

What was meaningful for Moshe He’eb remains meaningful for I. M. O’Dern. Ian Michael too is called to work at taking what is disordered, chaotic, formless, dark, and unproductive, and make it ordered, meaningful, coherent, luminous, and functional. Whatever he does—whether as a farmer, a teacher, a scientist, a construction worker, or a stay-at-home parent—is to be done in a partnership with the Creator. He is to participate in the ongoing work of Creation. The Sabbath is an opportunity, in the recognized presence of the Creator, to celebrate worthwhile tasks well done.

As he deepens his understanding of the *meaning* of the six “days” of Creation, Ian Michael at the same time enhances his experience and appreciation of the Sabbath. Indeed, if he were to ask Moshe to explain the Fourth Commandment, Moshe (having learned enough English to respond) might well point out that after “Six days you shall labor and do all your work,” the next word begins with the Hebrew conjunction *w^e*, which need not have the *adversative* connotation of the English “but”. It can just as well be—and, in fact, usually is—translated by the English *coordinating* conjunction “and” (as in “and do all your work”). So the Commandment could (and we think should) properly read, “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, *and* the seventh day is a Sabbath to YAHWEH your God.”