

כָּל-הַיּוֹם *kōl-hayyôm*: “all day long” or “all the time”?

A note on an ambiguous phrase. Peter Schmidt. 2022. Revised.

Introduction¹

It might be surprising, but it is uncertain how this frequent phrase should be understood and translated.

It occurs 50 times altogether, with half of the cases found in the Psalms.

A survey will quickly reveal that the versions represent two different meanings.

For instance, in Prov. 21:26, almost all versions say “all day long”, e.g.:

NASB All day long he is craving.

ESVUS16 All day long he craves and craves.

NJPS All day long he is seized with craving

NLT07 uses “always”:

NLT07 Some people are always greedy for more.

In contrast, in Prov. 23:17, most versions assume the meaning “all the days / all the time”, e.g.:

REB89 Emulate only those who fear the Lord all their days.

NET08 Be zealous in fearing the LORD all the time.

NJPS ... But only God-fearing men, at all times.

NLT07 uses “always” again (and some others do too):

NLT07 Always continue to fear the LORD.

Only KJV54 and ESVUS16 say “all the day (long)”.

Some mother-tongue speakers of English would say that “all day long” does not necessarily mean “a full day from sunrise to sunset”, or “24 hours”, but can also be used idiomatically in the sense “a long time / all of the time / over and over”. There is hardly a difference to “always” then. Granting that this is true, but “all day long” *can* mean “a full day”, and this is probably its primary meaning.² So our question is still valid. It is also reflected in versions in other languages:³

Does *kōl-hayyôm* mean “the whole day”, or “all days”, or is both possible, and “context is king”?

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the feedback I have received from several sides on the previous version of this paper, especially regarding the use of “all day long” in English.

² Cf. theidioms.com, which gives the meaning “the whole day, throughout the entire day”.

³ In Prov. 21:26, six out of nine **German** versions say “den ganzen Tag” (= the whole day), and while one can *conclude* this stands for “always”, that is not the most natural way of expressing “always”. In Jer. 20:7 not quite as many versions do this. Such fluctuation itself shows it is worthwhile thinking about the question.

For Prov. 21:26 in **French**, compare *tout le jour* (COL), *toute la journée* (TOB), and *tout le long du jour* (BDS), which sound like stressing the duration of a given day. In Jer. 20:7, *tous les jours* (FC) seems to point into a different direction than *a longueur de journée* (BDS).

Discussion

There are cases where ‘all day’ is clearly intended. E.g., Exod. 10:13 reads (NRSV):

So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night; when morning came, the east wind had brought the locusts.

In combination with “all that night”, and with the result visible in the morning, the meaning can only be “all the/that day (long)” – as all versions have it. Num. 11:32 is similar.⁴

In other cases, the above meaning is not impossible, but much less likely.

Consider Jer. 20:7. NASB – and several others – have “all day long” again:

O Lord, You have deceived me and I was deceived; / You have overcome me and prevailed. / I have become a laughingstock all day long; / Everyone mocks me.

One must ask whether the renderings below are not more fitting:

KJV54 I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me.

NLT07 Now I am mocked every day; / everyone laughs at me.

Note that in the next verses Jeremiah recounts his experience, saying (NIV11R):

⁸ Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. ⁹ But if I say, “I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

The underlined clauses show that both Jeremiah’s public proclamation and his inner conflict have been going on for a while. Most likely then, he has suffered mocking ongoingly as well, not just for “one day long”.

Hos. 12:2 is a similar case. It reads (NRSV):

Ephraim herds the wind, / and pursues the east wind all day long; / they multiply falsehood and violence; / they make a treaty with Assyria, / and oil is carried to Egypt.

Again, surprisingly many versions stick to “all day (long)”. But what Hosea denounces is hardly a matter of one day. He describes what has been going on for an extended period, note “they *multiply* falsehood”, and the “carrying of oil to Egypt”. Therefore, renderings like these are appropriate:

NASB And pursues the east wind continually.

NJPS He is forever adding / Illusion to calamity.

Unless one interprets the phrase ‘all day’ as GNTD does:

Everything that the people of Israel do from morning to night is useless and destructive.

Pointing at what people do on one typical day can be a way of describing their habits, and so this translation can be justified. The same would be true in many other places. **It is questionable, however, whether in all those places the writers**

⁴ Judg. 9:45 shows that this meaning does not depend on the pairing with “all the night”. NIV11R:

All that day Abimelek pressed his attack against the city until he had captured it and killed its people. Then he destroyed the city and scattered salt over it.

However, we do have the dem. pron. הָהוּא *hahû*’ again.

use the literary device of singling out one day in order to talk about ongoing behavior. One other example would be Deut. 28:32 (here NASB):

Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look on and yearn for them continually; but there will be nothing you can do.

The translation “all day long” would not be wrong, but certainly the yearning would last beyond a day.

Grammar

The case from Exod. 10:13 (“the Lord brought an east wind all that day”) corresponds to the rule that *kōl* with a singular determined noun means ‘the whole’,⁵ here ‘the whole day’. For the meaning ‘all’, here ‘all days’, one would expect a plural in Hebrew as well. This form, כָּל־הַיָּמִים *kōl-hayyāmîm*, does indeed occur (46 times). JM (§ 139f, p. 485) mentions Gen. 43:9 as an example and translates “all the days (= always)”. This is undebated.⁶

However, JM (§ 139g, pp. 485f.) recognizes that **the singular form כָּל־הַיָּוֶם *kōl-hayyôm*, too, often means “all the days (= always, all the time)”**, and offers Gen. 6:5 and the above-mentioned Deut. 28:32 as examples. In fact, he takes this as the regular meaning of this phrase, and treats “all the day”, as in Num. 11:32, as exceptional.⁷

BDB (s.v. יוֹם, § 7f., p. 400) lists the plural phrase *kōl-hayyāmîm* and translates it always, continually,

and then says:

also (only in proph. writers and in poetry) כָּל־הַיָּוֶם

i.e. it applies the same meaning to the singular phrase *kōl-hayyôm*. For this, it lists almost all occurrences, beginning with Gen. 6:5.

BDB (s.v. כָּל, § 1b, p. 481), takes *kōl-hayyôm* as a collective singular and renders “all the days”, with cross-reference to the above entry.

Gesenius¹⁸ (s.v. כָּל, § 2, p. 544) and HALOT (s.v. כָּל, § 2, p. 474) both list the singular phrase, translating “ganz” / “whole”, and giving Isa. 28:24 as an example, but disappointingly without further comment.

HALOT (s.v. יוֹם, § 2, p. 400) briefly states the two possibilities:

all the day Is 62:6, always 28:24.

Gesenius¹⁸ (s.v. יוֹם, § 14i, p. 452) is a bit more elaborate. After listing the singular phrase, translating it “den ganzen Tag” (= “the whole day”) and giving Isa. 62:6 and Ps. 32:3 as examples, it continues with the gloss:

“allezeit, immerzu” (= “all the time, always”),

mentioning Gen. 6:5, Isa. 28:24 etc. as examples. In the 17. edition, Ps. 35:28 and some more places were listed under “den ganzen Tag” (= “the whole day”), now they are listed under “allezeit” (= “all the time”). This exemplifies the problem we are dealing with.

Thus, although the dictionaries do not provide much discussion, they agree in acknowledging the meaning ‘always / continually / all the time’ for the singular phrase *kōl-hayyôm*.⁸

⁵ See, for instance, BHRG pp. 309f.; Lettinga and von Siebenthal pp. 249f.

⁶ Cf. BDB s.v. כָּל, § 1a, p. 481 “continually”; Gesenius¹⁸ s.v. יוֹם, § III.2. “allezeit, stets” (= “all the time, constantly”); HALOT s.v. יוֹם § 5b., p. 400 “for all time”.

⁷ JM rejects the meaning “every day” as acknowledged in Gesenius 1829-58: 584g. – Myself do here not address the difference between “all days” and “every day”.

⁸ To get the whole picture, several other “day phrases” would need to be considered.

‘The whole day / all day long’ is the meaning that emerges from the normal rules concerning *kōl* and is one valid meaning. Then, either this was expanded to mean ‘always / continually / all the time’, without reference to a given day, but with *one* possible translation being “all days”. Or, *yôm* in *kōl-hayyôm* is a collective singular (see BDB above), resulting in “all the days / every day”, which, in turn might as well be rendered “always”.

Further support for deviating from “all day long”, and considering “always” (or perhaps “every day”) comes from expressions that occur in parallel with *kōl-hayyôm*:

- לעולם “forever” in Ps. 44:9 [English 8]
- תמיד “continually” in Ps. 72:15
- לַבֹּקְרִים “every morning” in Ps. 73:14
- לֹנְצָה “not forever” in Isa 28:28, related to Isa 28:24.

Translation

- The singular phrase כָּל־הַיּוֹם *kōl-hayyôm* means ‘the whole day’.
- The plural phrase כָּל־הַיָּמִים *kōl-hayyāmîm* means ‘all the days’.
- *Both* phrases can mean ‘always’. They often do so, although for the singular phrase this is not easy to account for grammatically. Whether ‘always’ should be taken as the normal meaning of the singular phrase in prophetic and poetic texts (as the entry in BDB seems to suggest) cannot be investigated here and now. In some of these verses, ‘the whole day’ might also make sense.⁹

For *kōl-hayyôm*, in many places, “the whole day” is not the most suitable rendering. If lexicographers and grammarians acknowledge the meaning ‘always’, translators need not be hesitant to use it. Using “all day long” in the sense of ‘always’ will work for some readers, but it is ambiguous and thus not ideal. Some options in English are “always / continually / at all times / all the time”, or “all days”.

The difference is illustrated with two verses from the Psalms, by contrasting two translations for each of them:

Ps. 25:5:

NET08 Guide me into your truth and teach me. / For you are the God who delivers me; / on you I rely all day long.

NJPS guide me in Your true way and teach me, / for You are God, my deliverer; / it is You I look to at all times.

Ps. 56:2:

NRSV Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me; / all day long foes oppress me.

GNTD Be merciful to me, O God, / because I am under attack; / my enemies persecute me all the time.

⁹ We should also note the case of Isa. 65:2, which contains the phrase *kōl-hayyôm* and is quoted in Rom. 10:21 with Ὀλην τὴν ἡμέραν “All (the) day long” (as the LXX has it).