

Ancient cosmology and the timescale of Genesis 1

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Long-age interpreters often argue that the supposed 'ancient cosmology' of Genesis 1 implies that its seven-day timespan is incidental to the main point of the passage. This overreads the cosmological statements of Genesis 1, but it also does not follow; just because one 'challenging' element of a narrative passage may be incidental does not imply that all its 'challenging' elements are. Nor is there enough evidence to show that Genesis 1 derives its seven-day schema from any previously existing biblical or Ancient Near Eastern pattern. The Ancient Near Eastern context does not justify a rejection of the traditional 'historical week' reading of Genesis 1.

Long-agers often respond to the traditional 'historical week' reading of Genesis 1:1–2:3 with a discussion of 'ancient cosmology'.¹ The Ancient Near East (ANE) apparently had a common 'flat earth, solid sky' cosmology (figure 1). This is also said to be embedded in Genesis 1:

"Rather, they believed the earth was flat, with heavens above and waters under the earth. Often they referred to the sky as a solid dome, with an ocean of water above it; the dome could open its floodgates, resulting in rain.

"This picture helps us see Genesis 1 more clearly. On day 2 (Gen 1: 6–8), we read of God creating a 'vault' (NIV) or 'firmament' (KJV) to separate the waters above from the waters below. This is the same structure found in Egyptian and Babylonian thought."²

According to this thinking, this shows that God 'accommodated' to the ancient audience by letting the writers tell the story in terms understandable to them. Thus, the 'ancient cosmology' is incidental to the author's real point. Therefore, the reasoning goes, we shouldn't read Genesis 1 as an accurate cosmogony, including its timescale of six 24-hour days (plus one day of rest afterwards). As Haarsma explains:

"Did you notice the line of reasoning here? We started by considering Genesis 1 within its ancient context, not considering science at all. Yet we learned something relevant for our modern debates: Genesis 1 deliberately uses concepts the first readers would understand rather than the modern scientific picture. This shows that the intent of Genesis 1 was not to address the 'how' and 'when' questions we ask in modern science; these were not a major concern in a pre-scientific era."³

Creationists have rightly pointed out that this assumes such falsified scientific ideas are clearly asserted in the Bible.⁴ However, there is another problem with this reasoning. Even if, for argument's sake, we were to grant that Genesis

1 testifies to this 'ancient cosmology', it wouldn't preclude the cosmos's being created in six sequential 24-hour days. Why? The '6 + 1 day' pattern of work and rest in Genesis 1:1–2:3 is *not* a part of this supposed ancient cosmological picture. It's an element of the narrative distinct from the setting. Thus, even if we grant the presence of this 'ancient cosmology' in Genesis 1, calling the timescale of Genesis 1 'incidental' because we're supposed to treat the ancient cosmology as incidental does not follow. Just because one 'challenging' element of the narrative is incidental to its main point doesn't mean other 'challenging' elements of the same narrative are. Weeks concurs:

"Sometimes it seems that those who claim that the Bible used the symbols of its day are merely trying to say that it used a naive as opposed to a scientific cosmology If we assume for the sake of the argument that this is the case, then it should be clearly recognized that all we have established is that scientific dogma should not be made out of Biblical cosmology. The argument has no relevance to other parts of the account like the creation of animals, man, etc. Unfortunately this argument is generally used without this careful delimitation. Generally it is argued that the fact that one element shows the use of nonscientific concepts proves that the whole uses naive ideas whose details may not be pressed."⁵

Poetry, cosmology, and chronology

Interestingly, there are scriptural instances of narrational poetry where the setting is suffused with cosmic imagery, but the timescale and sequencing are literal and even historical. For instance, Judges 5, a poetic recounting of Deborah and Barak's victory over Jabin and Sisera, specifies when these events occurred: "In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael,"

It also sets out a basic sequence of events that corresponds with the narrative depiction of the same events in Judges 4. Deborah and Barak arose (v. 12), Israel came out for war in response (vv. 13–18; only some responded), they routed Sisera in war (vv. 19–21), then Jael killed Sisera (vv. 24–27).

Still, there are also fictive and symbolic elements in Judges 5 with no parallel in Judges 4. For instance, the Lord arising from Seir (i.e. from the direction of Sinai) with the creation itself responding with earthquakes and rain (vv. 4–6); the heavens fighting against Sisera (v. 20); and the mocking of Sisera’s mother (vv. 28–30). Note also how some of this is *cosmic* imagery: stars fighting (v. 20) and earth and sky trembling at God’s mighty presence (vv. 4–6).

The cosmic imagery in Judges 5 is essentially ‘special effects’, not cosmology. But that doesn’t imply the timeframe and sequencing of Judges 5 is similarly non-literal or ahistorical. This is true despite Judges 5 being a song, not narrative prose (as Genesis 1 is⁶), and despite the timeframe not being emphasized (as it is in Genesis 1). As such, cosmic imagery in a passage doesn’t guarantee that the timespan spoken of in the same passage is similarly non-literal or ahistorical.

Is the timescale of Genesis 1 incidental?

So, are the numbered days of Genesis 1 incidental to its main point? One indicative means of emphasis in Hebrew

narrative is repetition.⁷ There are several key phrases repeated in Genesis 1: “and God said”, “and it was so”, “God saw that it was good”, and “there was evening and morning the nth day”. The author clearly wants us to understand that these points are crucial to the story he’s telling. But notice that *the numbered days, as ordinary 24-hour days*, are one feature of Genesis 1 emphasized through repetition. This would be true even if the narrative was not historical (e.g. a parable). Therefore, the numbered ‘days’ of Genesis 1 are not incidental; they are an important part of the author’s point.

So, what significance might the numbered days of Genesis 1 have? Other repeated elements in Genesis 1 emphasize the goodness of God’s creation, or God’s sovereign power over His handiwork. For the numbered days, Exodus 20:8–11 suggests the answer:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. ... For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

In Genesis 1, Moses likely emphasized God’s creative activities as a *work week* to remind the original (ancient Israelite) readership that it was the paradigm from which Israel derived her own work week. This was important because the Sabbath was the primary sign of the Sinai covenant: “You are

to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you’” (Exodus 31:13).

Are the seven days of Genesis 1 derivative?

If ‘ancient cosmology’ isn’t enough to escape the young-earth implications of Genesis 1, could another aspect of the ‘ANE background’ provide an escape route? For instance, ‘seven’ is a common number of significance in both the Bible⁸ and the broader ANE literature.⁹ Could this mean that the seven-day schema of Genesis 1 is derived from this common usage? If so, the Genesis 1 days are less than historical¹⁰ and not relevant to the earth’s age.

The immediate problem for this is that Genesis 1 fronts a narrative that has a clear historical impulse.¹¹ This

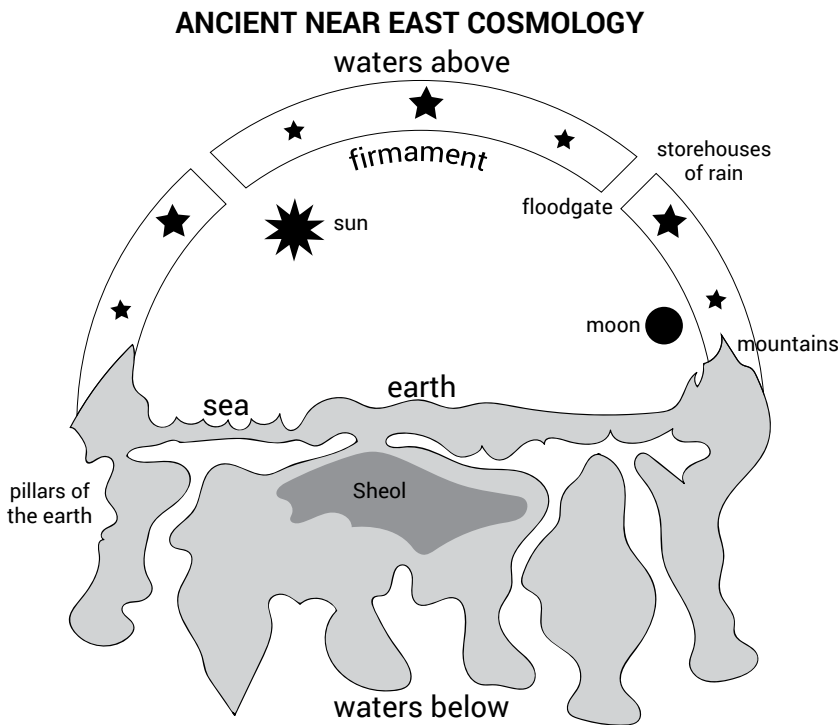


Figure 1. Haarsma’s depiction of the ‘flat earth, solid sky’ cosmology supposedly common to the ancient world (after Haarsma)

implies the *emphasized* timeframe of Genesis 1 also bears a historical impulse. But is there even enough evidence to establish that Genesis 1 *depends* on this biblical/ANE background for its use of ‘seven’?

Sevens in the Bible

Sevens are everywhere in Scripture.⁸ But what evidence suggests that the seven-day schema of Genesis 1 was *derived* from this common usage of ‘seven’? There is none. In fact, Creation Week was the paradigm for the most significant seven-day schema in the Bible: the Israelite work week:

“Israel is to keep the Sabbath day holy because (Heb. *ki*) ‘in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day’

In other words, the Hebrew work week and Sabbath were patterned after the Creation Week, not the other way around.”¹²

Nor did the biblical authors have to symbolize God’s creative work as a work week to *retroactively* justify the Sabbath. No rationale is ever given for why the Sabbath is day seven in the first recorded command of the Sabbath to Israel in Exodus 16:23. When Moses repeats the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5, he gives a different rationale for the Sabbath unrelated to any 6/7 pattern (Deuteronomy 5:12–15). If obedience to the Sabbath could be justified without reference to any sort of ‘seven’ in Deuteronomy 5, then God’s creative activities need not have been symbolized in Genesis 1 and Exodus 20 with the ‘seven’ trope in Scripture to retroactively justify obedience to the Sabbath.

Indeed, might not a seven-day Creation Week be the reason for seven’s significance in Scripture? If so for the Israelite work week and the Sabbath, why not so for other uses of ‘seven’? Any claimed origin for seven’s significance in Scripture is bound to be speculative, but at least this suggestion has *some* justification. However, there’s no justification for the reverse, that Creation Week was *derived* from the Bible’s use of seven.

Sevens in the ANE

Might the seven-day schema of Genesis 1 have been derived from commonality of ‘seven’ in the broader ANE? The prospects are not good. Even as he attempts to make the ANE context formative for the Genesis 1 use of ‘seven’, Richard Averbeck still admits of Genesis 1: “There is, however, no other seven-day creation story in the Bible or the ancient Near

East.”¹³ Without direct parallels, the links of Genesis 1 to the broader ANE usage of ‘seven’ threaten to be too vague to demonstrate dependence or priority.

What does the best evidence we actually have tell us? Two texts regarded as most relevant to Genesis 1 are a seven-day celebration after the god Ningirsu takes up residence in his temple in Lagash in Gudea cylinder 2 (figure 2)¹⁴ and Baal’s miraculous construction of a temple through fire in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle.^{15,16} They are temple texts, not creation texts, so their relevance depends crucially on the link between temple and cosmos.¹⁷ Weeks has argued that even that link is tenuous.¹⁸ But, even granting a link between temple building and cosmic creation, the specifics of Gudea cylinder 2 and the Baal Cycle still fail to justify the claim that the seven-day schema of Genesis 1 *depends* on this ANE context.

First, the seven-day celebration in Gudea cylinder 2 seems to occur *after* the gods have taken up residence in the temple:

“Gudea had built the E-ninnu [the temple of Ningirsu], made its powers perfect. . . . When his master [the god Ningirsu] entered the house, for seven days the slave woman was allowed to become [sic] equal to her mistress and the slave was allowed to walk side by side with his master.”¹⁴

But if so, the seven-day celebration does not relate to the creation or dedication of the temple, and thus it doesn’t relate to *cosmic* creation.¹⁹

The Ugaritic Baal Cycle actually has a temple miraculously *made* in seven days:

“Then on the seven[th] d[ay],
The fire went out in the house,
the f[la]me, in the palace.
The silver had turned to plates;
The gold had turned to bricks.



Figure 2. The Gudea Cylinders, which detail the construction of the temple of the Babylonian god Ningirsu (Ninurta) at Lagash (in modern day southern Iraq), dated to around 2100 BC

Mightiest Baal rejoices:
 ‘My house I have built of silver,
 My palace of gold.’”²⁰

Yet, the Ugaritic material doesn’t have any sort of cosmic *origins* narrative.²¹ So, why link cosmic *creation* to temple *building* in Ugarit? Weeks is rightly skeptical that this undercuts any historical impulse in the Genesis 1 days:

“... is this one instance in a Ugaritic text sufficient evidence of the universal ANE mind? There are many cases of the use of seven as a significant number throughout the ANE. The connection of those uses of seven to the biblical usages is a difficult question. The seven days in the Baal text may belong to this general tendency for seven days to appear as a significant period in ANE texts, rather than to a specific connection to temple building.”⁹

It’s rather pathetic that one must look to accounts like this rather than ANE cosmogonies to establish any links between Genesis 1’s use of ‘seven’ and the ANE context. They have the number seven, but have only a tenuous link to cosmos, let alone cosmic *creation*. But other ANE cosmogonies themselves lack any specific detailed sequential temporal order containing real objects in the natural and biological world like Genesis 1.²² That seriously undermines any relevance these commonalities have for explaining why Genesis 1 uses a seven-day schema.

And as with the biblical material, we can ask: might not the 6/7 pattern of God’s *historical* creation ‘work week’ ground the commonality of seven’s significance in the ANE?²³ However we might answer that question, though, commonalities with the ANE literature don’t suffice to establish Genesis 1’s dependence on them.

Conclusion

The idea that any supposed ‘ancient cosmology’ in Genesis 1 is incidental, implying that its timespan is also incidental, does not follow. Just because one ‘challenging’ element of the narrative is incidental to its main point doesn’t mean other ‘challenging’ elements are. In fact, Genesis 1 emphasizes its timescale. Thus, the ‘6 + 1’-day schema of Genesis 1 is not an incidental feature of the text, even if the cosmology is. Nor is there enough warrant from the Bible or the wider ANE context to justify claiming that the ‘seven days’ framework of Genesis 1 depends on this context for its origin. The ANE background is not a ‘get out of a young earth free’ card.

References

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 8. Averbeck, R., Chapter One: A Literary Day, Inter-Textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1–2; in: Charles, J.D. (Ed.), *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Kindle Edition), Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts, Kindle location 925–935, 2013.
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 10. Averbeck, ref. 8, Kindle Locations 726–728, 925–962. Walton, J.H., *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN, 2011 argues not that the week is less than historical, but less than *cosmogonic*. This, however, rests entirely on an absurd reading of the ‘create’ language of Genesis 1 as referring to *proclaiming the functions* of the cosmos rather than *producing* the cosmos. It is a view widely rejected by old-earthers as well as young-earthers. See, for example, the responses of OT scholars Richard Averbeck (old-earthier), Todd Beall (young-earthier), and C. John Collins (old-earthier) to Walton’s ‘functional origins’ view in Charles, J.D. (Ed.), *Reading Genesis 1–2: An evangelical conversation* (Kindle Edition), Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, Kindle locations 4906–5157, 2013.
 11. Cosner, L., Genesis as ancient historical narrative, *J. Creation* 29(3):121–127, 2015.
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 13. Averbeck, ref. 8, Kindle locations 938–939.
 14. The building of Ningirsu’s temple (Gudea, cylinders A and B), etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.1.7#, lines 1211–1223, accessed 9 May 2018.
 15. Smith, M.S. and Pitard, W.T., *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, Brill, Lieden, The Netherlands, p. 83 (CAT 1.4 VI 16–38), 2009.
 16. I’m not saying here that, for example, Averbeck and Walton think that the author of Genesis 1 directly borrowed the seven-day pattern from these *texts*. Rather, I’m arguing against the idea that these texts reflect a broader pattern from which the author of Genesis 1 borrowed to come up with its seven-day schema.
 17. See e.g. Walton, ref. 10, pp. 100–119.
 18. Weeks, ref. 9, p. 12–17.
 19. Weeks, ref. 9, p. 18.
 20. Smith and Pitard, ref. 15, p. 83: CAT 1.4 VI 31–38.
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 22. Weeks, ref. 9, pp. 8–9. See also Adamthwaite, M., Is Genesis 1 just reworked Babylonian myth? *J. Creation* 27(2):99–104, 2013.
 23. Beall, ref. 12, Kindle locations 1188–1203.

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