Articles

The Myth of the Solid Dome (Part 2)

Andrew Perry

Introduction

ANE mythology is interesting for how it differs from Genesis and for what it has in common. This is obviously a vast topic and we are only going to select one point of interest: **the firmament**. This element of the Genesis narrative is held to be a clear example of 'myth' in the account, it being a term of reference for a 'solid dome'. Some conservative evangelicals of more liberal persuasion say that, unless we are going to reject Genesis altogether, we should accept that there are such mythical elements in Genesis and just regard them as the language of the day which God used to teach the truth for all time that he is a creator.

Our counter-argument in this paper is against the ANE comparative analysis offered by scholars who take this approach; their analysis is methodologically flawed.

Firmament

P. H. Seely, one such scholar, states of the firmament (Gen 1:6, *rāqîaʿ*),

> The historical evidence, however, which we will set forth in concrete detail, shows that the *raqiaʿ* was originally conceived of as being solid and not a merely atmospheric expanse.
>
> The basic historical fact that defines the meaning of *raqiaʿ* in Genesis 1 is simply this: all peoples in the ancient world thought of the sky as solid.[1]

Our first point would be that the argument here depends on texts other than Hebrew ones to determine Hebrew linguistics. Comparative Philology[2] is a discipline which notes correspondences between related languages. On the basis of these, a philologist may assert loan relationships or use a related language to suggest

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[1] P. H. Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I: The Meaning of *raqiaʿ* in Gen 1:6-8" *WTJ* 53 (1991): 227-240 (238, 239). [Available online.]

[2] See J. Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), for an introduction.

a meaning for a rare word in Hebrew. However, Seely's argument is not one based in the sort of things comparative philologists say, but in the detail of mythopoeic texts.

A second (more serious) point to note about the argument is that it is about what the *peoples* of the world believe as illustrated in their texts. Is the Genesis text just an expression of what is believed by one of the peoples of the world at the time of its conception? The alternative and competing hypothesis is that it is not such an expression, but rather it **teaches** some people through the revelation of a prophet (i.e. it teaches the Israelites).

Seely summarizes the sort of things ancient peoples around the world expressed in their texts,

> It is within the context of geography, astronomy, and natural science that they really believe that if they would travel far enough they could "touch the sky with one's fingers," that migrating birds live "on the other side of the celestial vault," that an arrow or lance could "fasten in the sky," that the sky can have "a hole in it," that at the horizon "the dome of the sky is too close to earth to permit navigation," that where the sky touches the earth you can "lean a pestle against it" or "climb up it," that the sky is "smooth and hard…of solid rock,…as thick as a house," that the sky can "fall down" and someday "will fall down crushing the earth.[1]

What is interesting to note by way of contrast is that the biblical text has *hardly any information* compared to the wealth of ideas in the mythopoeic texts from which Seely draws and combines his data. This raises the question as to whether the biblical text is the same genre or anything like these other texts. We might well think that the biblical text is minimalistic *precisely to avoid* reflecting the beliefs of the people of its day and thereby function as **correcting revelation** by God. More importantly, as R. J. Clifford affirms,

> Myths from outside the ancient Near East are not part of the world of ideas of Genesis; they did not contribute to Genesis as did *Atrahasis* nor do they illustrate Near Eastern ideas as do *Enuma Elish* and Philo of Byblos.[2]

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[1] Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I", 230-231.
[2] R. J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (CBQMS 26; Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association, 1994), 5.

Clifford's point is not a contrast between myth and fact, as if ANE people believed their ideas represented the facts and other people believed myths. Rather, it is the obvious point that there is no *influence* bearing upon Genesis from outside the ANE. Accordingly, we need only consider the ANE texts. So, we can ask with J. H. Walton: Is it the case that, "We have no reason to suppose that the Israelites thought about the composition of the sky any differently than those around them"?[1]

Sumer

If we hold to the traditional Mosaic authorship of Genesis, the premise for looking at Sumerian texts in relation to Genesis is the possibility that the writing of the traditions underlying both creation 'accounts' lies in Abraham's Mesopotamia.[2] Equally, as Sumerian myths are developed by the later Babylonians, we can also surmise that they have contextual relevance for a (more conventional) late-dated Genesis account.[3]

There is no single Sumerian text that gives a comprehensive and canonical view of 'how the world began'. Scholars construct an overall 'Sumerian view' from different texts. S. N. Kramer, a leading Sumeriologist of the 20c., summarizes Sumerian cosmology as follows:

> 1. First was the primeval *sea*;[4] it is not unlikely that it was conceived by the Sumerian as *eternal* and *uncreated*.
> 2. The primeval sea engendered a *united heaven and earth*.
> 3. Heaven and earth were conceived as *solid* elements. Between them, however, and *from them*, came the gaseous element *air*, whose main characteristic is that of expansion. Heaven and earth were thus separated by the expanding element *air*.

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[1] J. H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 169.

[2] For an outline of how Mosaic authorship might be consistent with the use of existing Mesopotamian traditions, see P. J. Wiseman, *New Discoveries in Babylonia about Genesis* (4th ed.; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1946).

[3] M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 322-326, notes that "The reuse and reinterpretation of creation accounts or cosmogonies is not uncommon in other ancient Near Eastern civilizations."

[4] W. G. Lambert, "The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon" in *Ancient Cosmologies* (eds. C. Blacker and M. Loewe; London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1971), 42-65 (50), notes that Earth and Time are competing first principles.

> 4. Air, being lighter and far less dense than either heaven or earth, succeeded in producing the *moon*, which may have been conceived by the Sumerians as made of the same stuff as air. The *sun* was conceived as born of the *moon*; that is, it emanated and developed from the moon just as the latter emanated and developed from air.
> 5. After heaven and earth had been separated, *plant*, *animal*, and *human* life became possible on earth; all life seems to have been conceived as resulting from a union of air, earth, and water; the sun, too, was probably involved. Unfortunately in this matter of production and reproduction of plant and animal life on earth, our extant material is very difficult to penetrate.[1]

For our topic, this summary presents a two-element conception: heaven and 'air'. If we compare this to Genesis 1, what we have there is a **one-element conception**—the *rāqîaʿ*. Kramer thinks that 'air' is what separates and is a gaseous expansion; heaven is solid. This is a rather 'scientific' reading of Sumerian mythology. It is more faithful to Sumerian thinking to see the relevant god, Enlil, as personifying 'storm and wind' and think of these as what separates heaven and earth.[2] In the light of this, Kramer's later work, *The Sumerians*, comments of the Sumerian notion that "its most significant characteristics seem to be movement and expansion".[3]

The Hebrew linguistics of *rāqîaʿ* ('expanse') have no obvious correlation to 'air', 'wind' or 'storm', but the Sumerian story of separation can be correlated to the function of the *rāqîaʿ*. However, given that the Genesis schema comprises one element—the *rāqîaʿ* is 'the heavens', this may be a notion that allows for (and modifies) what Sumerians associated with **both** their concepts. The point here is that there is no simple correlation to be made, let alone assumed, and nothing by way of comparative philology to help. Seely's handling of the data is therefore flawed. He says,

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[1] S. N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Rev ed.; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), 73-74. For qualification and correction of Kramer's original edition, see T. Jacobsen, "Sumerian Mythology: A Review Article" *JNES* 5/2 (1946): 128-152 (138f).

[2] Jacobsen, "Sumerian Mythology: A Review Article", 151,—"There is, as far as we know, no term for 'air at rest' in either Sumerian or Akkadian: all those we have denote 'air in motion,' i.e., they symbolize concepts limited approximately as are those suggested by our words 'wind' and 'storm,' and only thus may they be rendered."

[3] S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 113.

> Sumerian literature, like the Rig Veda, distinguished between the firmament and the atmosphere. The Sumerians made this distinction by attributing to their air god, Enlil, the original act of separating heaven from earth. Hence Kramer noted the Sumerians believed that between heaven and earth was a substance called *lil* or wind which "corresponds roughly to our 'atmosphere,'" while they thought of **the firmament** as solid, possibly composed of tin since the Sumerian word for tin is literally "metal of heaven."[1] (My emphasis)

Seely's description of the Sumerian data follows Kramer,[2] but the assumption he makes is clear: there is no *evidential reasoning* offered by Seely **to equate** the English term 'firmament' with the Sumerian 'heaven', let alone the Hebrew *rāqîaʿ*.

There are similarities and differences to note between Genesis and Sumerian mythology. A point of comparison is that the waters are presupposed, but a difference is that the mother-god (Nammu), who personifies the waters, gives birth to a *united* heaven and earth (*COS*[3], p. 516; *ANET*[4], p. 58). Heaven and earth united, conceived as a mountain,[5] and personified as the gods, An and Ki, gives birth to the air-god, Enlil, who separates them. Enlil unites with his 'mother', Ki ('earth') which then leads to the creation of flora and fauna, mankind, and civilization.

This information is enough to point up a similarity and a difference with Genesis. Enlil separates just as the *rāqîaʿ* separates; but Enlil separates heaven and earth and not the waters below and above—and this is a critical difference.

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[1] Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I", 232-233. He is citing S. N. Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 77. Seely has been followed by others such as Walton, see *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 169.

[2] Clifford comments that Kramer "does not, however, present much evidence for his thesis" of "a primeval sea begot the cosmic mountain of heaven and earth united, from which the air god Enlil was begotten."— *Creation Accounts*, 22.

[3] W. W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (3 vols; Leiden: E J Brill, 1997-2000); volume 1 is cited as *COS*.

[4] J. B., Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (3rd ed.; New Jersey: Princeton, 1969); cited as *ANET*.

[5] Kramer saw this as a cosmic 'mountain' but Jacobsen shows that the conception is more locally based, having "reference to the range of mountains bordering the Mesopotamian plain on the east"— "Sumerian Mythology: A Review Article", 141 and Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 20.

The Sumerian myths have a **local and parochial character**; they are not about the universe or the planet as we might think of creation today. For example, the *Song of the Hoe*[1] opens in this way:

> Not only did the lord who never changes his promises for the future make the world appear in its correct form, — Enlil who will make the seed of mankind rise from the earth — not only did he hasten to separate heaven from the earth, (…) and earth from heaven, but, in order to make it possible for humans to grow "here the flesh sprouts," he first affixed the axis of the world in Duranki [Enlil's temple complex in Nippur]. (*COS*, 511)

Creation notices are about the temples and cities of Sumer, like Nippur;[2] they are about the animals of the local region ('The Eridu Genesis' *COS*, 513); they are about sheep and grain ('The Disputation between Ewe and Wheat', *COS*, 575); they are about the beginning of time when cities were given to the gods in the land of Dilman (*ANET*, 38);[3] and they are about fields and farming tools (*Song of the Hoe*). Hence, in discussing creation myths centred on the god, Enki, Clifford states, "The three myths just discussed imply rather than state in detail that Enki created human society in the course of making the earth fertile".[4]

Egypt

A conservative rationale for looking at Egyptian creation myths is the tradition of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and Moses' Egyptian up-bringing. Scholars also offer other rationales depending on their view of the dating of Genesis, for example, that there has been Egyptian influence through Phoenician channels.[5] The myths vary according to their regional location of origin and we will select features relevant to our contextualization of Genesis and which are common to all the cosmogonies.[6] J. P. Allen summarises their picture as follows:

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[1] The song is called 'Praise of the Pickaxe'—see the discussion in Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 31.

[2] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 25, cites a text about the 'first day' that recounts a storm over the shrine at Nippur.

[3] Jacobsen, "Sumerian Mythology: A Review Article", 131.

[4] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 39.

[5] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 114. See also J. K. Hoffmeier, "Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 & 2 and Egyptian Cosmology" *JANES* 15 (1982): 39-49 (40), who notes research that casts doubt on traditional exilic or post-exilic dates for Genesis 1:1-2:4[a] in order to habilitate Egyptian comparisons.

[6] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 101f.

> To the Egyptians, the world of experience was a finite 'box' of light, space, and order within an infinite expanse of dark, formless waters. The limits of this space were defined by the earth below and the surface of the outer waters above, held off the earth by the atmosphere. Earth is the domain of the mortal: man, animals, plants, 'fish and the crawling things.'[1]

J. A. Wilson observes a link between Egyptian cosmology and geography when he notes,

> Throughout the Near East there is a contrast between the desert and the sown land.[2]

The remark is pertinent to appreciating the concerns of the Genesis account which are agricultural and set in opposition to the initial uninhabitable and wilderness state of the land. We might expect the creation account to reflect this context of understanding since we have found it also in Sumerian myths. Thus Wilson characterizes Egyptian cosmology as follows:

> The Egyptian conceived of the earth as a flat platter with a corrugated rim. The inside bottom of this platter was the flat alluvial plain of Egypt, and the corrugated rim was the rim of mountain countries which were the foreign lands. The platter floated in water.[3]

The point for our study here is not that the Egyptians believed in a flat earth, but rather that they had a **parochial** view of creation.

City Localisation
S. G. F. Brandon notes that,

> Our studies of Egyptian and Mesopotamian cosmogonies have shown us that such accounts of the origin of the world were not generally motivated by a

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[1] J. P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (Yale Egyptological Studies 2; New haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 56.
[2] J. A. Wilson, "Egypt" in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (ed. H. Frankfort; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 31-124 (31).
[3] Wilson, "Egypt", 45.

> desire to speculate about the beginning of things: instead they were designed to promote the interests of some sanctuary or city.[1]

Thus, Wilson says,

> Every important cult-center of Egypt asserted its primacy by the dogma that it was the site of creation.[2]

What is interesting about this comment is that, a) it claims **localism** was a feature of Egyptian creation myths; and b) the mythology serves the city and the temple interests.

In the Thebes Creation Myth (c. 1300), the beginning reads,

> Thebes is normal beyond every (other) city. The water and land were in her from first times. (Then) sand came to delimit the fields and to create her ground on the hillock; (thus) earth came into being. Then men came into being in her, to found every city with her real name, for their name is called "city" (only) under the oversight of Thebes, the Eye of Re. (*ANET*, p. 8)

It's easy to see the local concerns of a river flood plain society here and it is interesting to note the elements of water and land and the concern to delimit fields. The city has an interest in its agricultural hinterland. The city itself is on the primeval hillock (not a mountain).

The point of contrast with Genesis 1 and 2 is that the biblical account is **not city or temple centred**[3] (it is just agricultural), but the agreement is that Genesis has a local focus *on Eden*.

In the Pyramid Text 600, 'The Creation by Atum' (c. 2400), the city of Heliopolis is named,

> O Atum-Kheprer, thou wast on high on the (primeval) hill; thou didst arise as the *ben*-bird of the *ben*-stone in the *Ben*-House in Heliopolis; thou didst spit

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[1] S. G. F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 120-121; see also Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 100, 107.
[2] In his commentary on Egyptian texts in *ANET*, 8.
[3] The qualification here is that the temple theme is **typological** rather than overt, *contra* Walton, *The Lost World*, 71f.

> out what was Shu, thou didst sputter out what was Tefnut. Thou didst put thy arms about them as the arms a *ka*, for thy *ka* was in them. (*ANET*, 3)

Shu was the god of the air and Tefnut was the god of the atmosphere, so that what we have here is the creation of the lesser gods who personify these two elements of nature. The association with the temple in Heliopolis is clear, and this is because this was the location from which creation spread abroad. The Pyramid text Spell 527 makes this latter point:

> Atum evolved growing ithyphallic, in Heliopolis…and the two siblings were born—Shu and Tefnut. (*COS*, 7)

While the theogony here is alien to Genesis, the idea that creation has a 'centre' from which it cascades is clear. The location implicit in Gen 1:2 is identified as Eden in Genesis 2. We misread Genesis if we strip out this aspect of localisation.

Another city for the centre of creation was Hermopolis,

> I am Atum when I was alone in Nun; I am Re in his (first) appearances, when he began to rule that which he had made.
> Who is he? This "Re, when he began to rule that which he had made" means that Re began to appear as a king, as one who was before the liftings of Shu had taken place, when he was on the hill which is in Hermopolis… (*ANET*, 3-4)

What adds to the local setting is the repeated mention of the 'hill' from which creation took place, this time not Thebes but Hermopolis. The artistry in the story is not descriptive of the planet; the narrator is not looking down upon the earth. Rather, the experience informing the theology is that of seeing emergence of hills after the inundation of the Nile.[1]

Cosmology

There are cosmological features to note in the Egyptian texts that compare and contrast with Genesis; we are interested in those that **compare or have a correlate** with the firmament.

[1] Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 20.

(1) The 'waters' (Nun) have prior existence and are not the subject of creation (*COS* Coffin Texts Spell 714 (p. 6)), 'I am the Waters, unique, without second');[1] this bears comparison with Sumerian ideas and the Genesis account. The difference is that the Sumerian conception is "primarily the body of sweet water which the Mesopotamians believed lay below the earth" (Jacobsen, ibid.) whereas the Egyptian conception is of a surrounding sea.[2] However, with Genesis, the waters are *just there* on the horizon ('the face of the deep').

Scholars correlate the elements of Gen 1:2 with ANE myths. For example, J. K. Hoffmeier states "four cosmic phenomena are mentioned that are apparently present when creation formally begins".[3] The question for us is whether 'the deep' is meant to be thought of as a 'primeval sea' or whether it is just *the deep*. One point is that the description in Genesis is not focused on the deep but on the *darkness* that is upon the **face** of the deep. The problem for any correlation with the Egyptian conception of a primeval sea is the lack of information in Genesis other than the expression 'the deep'. The immediate use of this expression elsewhere is of 'fountains' of the deep (Gen 7:11; 8:2; cf. Ps 104:6), and these are associated with **subterranean waters**.

The conception of 'the waters' (as Nun) in Egyptian texts includes a parochial aspect of 'floodwaters covering the land'. For example, Atum says to Osiris,

> I shall destroy all that I have made, and <u>this land</u> will return unto Nun, into the floodwaters, as (in) its first state. (*ANET*, 9)[4]

The interesting point here is that the waters have a local and geographical aspect and that the 'first state' was likewise a flood over a land. The text envisages a return to

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[1] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 102.

[2] Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 17; Wilson, "Egypt", 45—"There were the abysmal waters below, on which the platter rested, called by the Egyptian, "Nūn." Nūn was the waters of the underworld, and according to one continuing concept, Nun was the primordial waters out of which life first issued…In addition to being the underworld waters, Nun was the waters encircling the world, the Okeanos which formed the outmost boundary...".

[3] Hoffmeier, "Some Thoughts", 42; J. H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Culture in its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1989), 33, calls the connection "highly speculative".

[4] Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 16.

the primeval state but this begs the question as to how we envisage the extent of 'the waters' of Genesis 1.

Localisation of creation myths is further seen in the *Shabaka Stone* (*ANET*, 4) and the theology that elevates Ptah, the god of Memphis, as personified in the united land of Egypt, a land that arose of the primeval waters.[1]

This point can obviously be generalised. For example, for the element of darkness, is this a cosmic darkness or just a narrative observation about what can be seen in the distance? One text describing the cosmic darkness is the 'Book of Nut' (c. 2055-1650 BCE):

> The uniform darkness, ocean of the gods, the place from which the birds come: this is from her northwestern side up to her northeastern side, open to the Duat that is on her northern side, with her rear in the east and her head in the west…The upper side of this sky exists in uniform darkness, the southern, northern, western and eastern limits of which are unknown, these having been fixed in the waters, in inertness. (*COS* 'Book of Nut' (p. 5))

This cosmic darkness is different to the Genesis conception because it is on the upper side of the sky whereas in Genesis it is upon the *face* of the waters.

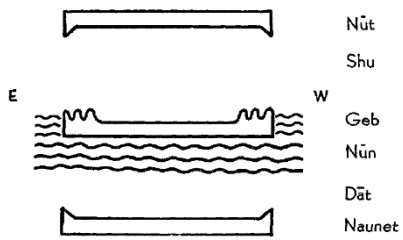
(2) Nut the sky goddess is supported by Shu the god of the air, who is her father and whose name means 'emptiness/void'. He separates Shu from her twin, Geb, who personifies the earth. Nut has waters ('ocean') under her, open to the darkness (Pyramid Texts 802b; 1720c); she also has support in the waters below; she is also supported by Shu, the God of Air, who is 'exhale-like of form' and who 'touches for him [Atum] the height of the sky' (*COS*, Coffin Texts Spell 75 (p.9), Spell 76 (p.10), Spell 80. (p. 12)). Shu says, 'I lifted my daughter Nut atop me that I might give her to my father Atum in his utmost extent' (*COS* Coffin Texts Spell 76 (p.10)).

In relation to Genesis, what we have here is a **two-element conception** of Nut and Shu, which is similar to the Sumerian view, whereas in Genesis we have a **one-element conception** of 'the firmament' which is called 'the heavens'. Another difference is that the heavenly waters are *under* Nut and not above her, which is different to the role of the firmament in Genesis.

This is partly illustrated below,

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[1] Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 31.



The Egyptian Coffin Texts have a lot of detail about Shu, identifying him with atmospheric phenomena:

> My clothing is the air of life, which emerged for it around me, from the mouth of Atum and opens for it the winds on my path. I am the one who made possible the sky's brilliance after darkness. My skin is the pressure of the wind, which emerged behind me from the mouth of Atum. My efflux is the storm cloud of the sky, my fumes are the storm of half-light. The length of the sky is for my strides, and the breadth of the earth is for my foundations. (*COS* Coffin Texts Spell 80 (p.12))

Nut is here seen arching over the earth. Shu has the functions of 'being between' and 'separating' the sky and earth:

> I am the soul of Shu, from whom Nut was placed above and Geb under his feet, and I am between them.[1]

The function of 'being between' compares to that of the firmament, but in the case of Shu, it is the function of being between *earth* and sky and not being between earthly and heavenly waters. In other drawings of Shu, he is seen holding up the sky.[2]

In view of this data, it is surprising that Seely offers no *evidential reasoning* **to correlate** the firmament with Shu and/or Nut. In his unexceptionable review of the Egyptian evidence, his use of the word 'firmament' comes in twice,

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[1] Coffin Text Spell 77; cited from Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 109.
[2] Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 28.

> …the Egyptians apparently believed the firmament was made specifically of iron.
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> Also clearly showing that the Egyptians thought of the sky as solid is the fact that they like the Sumerians and Indians in the Rig Veda distinguished between the sky (firmament) and the atmosphere.[1]

It isn't enough to just drop the word 'firmament' into a sentence to make a connection with the sky when the only functional detail we have about the firmament in Genesis is that it is 'between' waters. Shu is not given this function and neither is Nut. Instead, Nut

> …is defacto the regulator of the passage of days and nights, the movement of the sun and stars, therefore of time, a function normally established in the ancient world by male deities…[2]

Two comparisons can be made to support a correlation between *rāqîaʿ* and the sky. First, there is the comparison that the sky is made of metal in Egyptian conception. Hoffmeier avers that in PT 305, the resurrected king takes possession of the sky and splits or separates the metal. Seely is more cautious, citing S. A. B. Mercer, who thought that PT 305 was more figurative than literal, and states,

> Whatever the case may be as to exactly what material the ancient Egyptians thought the sky was made of, they certainly believed it was solid.[3]

If we follow Hoffmeier, the question becomes whether *rāqîaʿ* has a metallic connotation. His argument is that the Hebrew noun comes from the root *rqʿ* which means to beat, stamp, or spread out "and frequently applies to metal".[4] This is a weak argument because the verb applies to spreading out the earth (Ps 136:6; Isa 42:5; 44:24), stamping one's feet (Ezek 6:11; 25:6); treading down people (2 Sam 22:43); as well as metalworking (Exod 39:3; Num 17:4; Isa 40:19; Jer 10:9). This is the database of usage except for Job 37:18, which is a *comparative* figure of speech,

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[1] Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I", 233.
[2] S. T. Hollis, "Women of Ancient Egypt and the Sky Goddess Nut" *The Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1987): 496-503 (498-499).
[3] Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I", 233. The relevant phrase in Mercer's translation is "he cleaves its firmness".
[4] Hoffmeier, "Some Thoughts", 45;

> Hast thou with him spread out the sky, which is strong, and as a molten looking glass? Job 37:18 (KJV)

This is an insufficient basis upon which to match up *rāqîaʿ* with the Egyptian conception of a metallic sky. It is also worth noting that the Babylonians had two traditions concerning the composition of the heavens: that they were made of water or stone.[1]

The second comparison to consider is whether the association of the sun, moon and stars with the sky (Nut[2]) means that we should correlate *rāqîaʿ* with the Egyptian conception of the sky. The problem here is that such a correlation founders on the different **structure** of the Genesis conception: a) *rāqîaʿ* is a relational concept ('between'), unlike the Egyptian concept of the sky; b) its relational objects are two bodies of waters and not just a heavenly ocean; c) the nearest Egyptian relational concept is Shu, the atmosphere; and d) Genesis has a one-concept picture ('firmament') whereas Egyptian myths have a two-concept picture (Shu, Nut). In addition, we should observe that Genesis does not use the words for 'sun' and 'moon' in relation to the firmament but 'the lamp-lights'. Our counter-proposal therefore is that **Genesis is offering a competing cosmic geography** of the heavens to any Egyptian view.

Mesopotamia

The main ANE context to which Genesis has been compared by scholars is that of Mesopotamia. This is noted by Hoffmeier, who offers critical remarks on this bias in order to habilitate instead his comparison with Egyptian cosmology. He says,

> In all the debate over the possible connections between Babylonian mythology and Genesis, there has been very little consideration given to literary influence from Egypt.[3]

The main creation myth to which Genesis has been compared is *Enūma Elish* (late second millennium BCE[4]). The premise upon which the comparison has proceeded

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[1] W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 262.

[2] The goddess is regularly depicted with stars on her body— Hollis, "Women of Ancient Egypt and the Sky Goddess Nut", 498.

[3] Hoffmeier, "Some Thoughts", 40.

[4] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 83.

is an exilic or post-exilic date for Genesis. Seely quotes[1] this text to establish the Babylonian conception of the sky as a solid roof and the relevant text is,

> He [Marduk] split her [Ti'âmat] open like a mussel (?) into two (parts); Half of her he set in place and formed the sky (therewith) as a roof. He fixed the crossbar (and) posted guards. He commanded them not to let her waters escape.[2]

W. G. Lambert's translation is,

> He split her into two like a dried fish; one half of her he set up and stretched out as the heavens. He stretched a skin and appointed a watch, with the instruction not to let her waters escape.[3]

The description here is in terms of a conflict between the gods that personified the elements with Marduk constructing the sky from the body of Ti'âmat. In A. Heidel's translation it is a 'roof', in *COS* it is a 'cover', in *ANET* we have 'ceiled it as sky', and for Lambert is a 'skin'. However, whether this is relevant to Genesis is doubtful.

Waters

Heidel reflects the common suggestion that in the *Enūma Elish*, two kinds of water are noted in the beginning: Apsû representing the primeval sweet water ocean and Ti'âmat the salt water ocean.[4]

> When on high no name was given to heaven, nor below was the netherworld called by name, primeval Apsu was their progenitor, and matrix-Tiamat[5] was

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[1] Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I", 234.

[2] A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Phoenix Edition; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 42.

[3] Lambert, "The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon", 55; see also Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, 112.

[4] Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 88.

[5] The *COS* text has 'matrix'; *ANET*, 61, suggests that the epithet has the sense of 'mother'. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 18, sees a reference to Mummu, the vizier-god, and that therefore there is a third type of 'waters' in the text. In an article, "The Meaning of Mummu in Akkadian Literature" *JNES* 7/2 (1948): 98-105 (104), he says, "I would say rather that Mummu was the personified fog or mist rising from the waters of Apsû and Ti'âmat and hovering over them." If this is correct, it has obvious resonance with Genesis.

> she who bore them all, they were mingling their waters together… (*COS*, 391)

Clifford, relying on research by S. Godfless, affirms that Ti'âmat is a "personified doublet of Apsu, created for the sake of creating rival kingships";[1] accordingly, there is no saltwater-freshwater duality. Whatever the correct interpretation is, Ti'âmat is made a correlate of 'the deep' in Genesis.[2] The obvious difference is that Genesis does not have the battle story of *Enūma Elish* or the deities inherent in the natural elements.

Enūma Elish may not be typical for Babylonian cosmology. Lambert thinks that "It is a sectarian and aberrant combination of mythological threads woven into an unparalleled compositum."[3] He affirms that the 'earth' is more commonly considered as the source of all things and this is the older idea in Babylonian thought. More significantly, he notes that the division of waters, rather than the more common idea of the separation of heaven and earth, is a motif **only shared in this text**[4] with Genesis and this is significant. Another feature not in *Enūma Elish* is that of a 'darkness' connected with the primeval waters. However, according to Berossus, this was a feature of Babylonian cosmology.[5]

Lambert considers whether Genesis could have directly borrowed from *Enūma Elish* and his conclusion is expressed in this way:

> To sum up discussion of the second day, there is one close parallel between Genesis and *Enuma Eliš,* but no evidence of Hebrew borrowing from Babylon.[6]

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[1] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 86.
[2] W. G. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis" *JTS* NS 16/2 (1965): 287-300 (287).
[3] Lambert, "A New Look", 291.
[4] Lambert says, "No other tradition of a watery beginning involves a separation"—"A New Look", 295.
[5] Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 77.
[6] Lambert, "A New Look", 296; Westermann agrees, *Genesis 1-11*, 89, "we cannot accept a direct dependence"; see D. W. Thomas, ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 14.

The close parallel is the splitting of Marduk, which Walton calls the only "substantial similarity".[1] The name Ti'âmat also has some shared Semitic ancestry with the Hebrew word for the deep (*tʰhōm*).[2]

Accordingly, Lambert says,

> All water known to man either comes down from the sky or up from the ground. Hence, the sky must be water. The first chapter of Genesis provides the closest parallel to the division of cosmic waters. On the second day of the week of creation, God put a 'firmament' between the upper and lower waters, which corresponds to the 'skin' in *Enūma Eliš* IV 139.[3]

As Lambert notes, this is different to Egyptian cosmology in which "no dividing of the cosmic waters is known."[4] It is also different to other Babylonian texts in which a joined heaven and earth is separated and conceived as a solid mass and not a body of water.[5]

What is the nature of this parallel? Does it give us grounds for saying that the firmament is the same conception and/or is solid?

Firmament

The making of the sky in *Enūma Elish* is brief and amounts to the clause 'and formed the sky as a roof'. The function of the sky-roof, supported by a crossbar, is not clear; guards are posted with the command to not let the waters escape. Heidel suggests that Ti'âmat's body is used to form the sky-roof and the guards are to ensure that the waters that were contained in her half-body are kept locked away.[6]

The differences with the Genesis conception of 'the firmament' are plain. First, Ti'âmat is a conception to do with waters, whereas the 'firmament' is not—it is a conception to do with separation ('what is between'). Secondly, the concept of the

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[1] Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context*, 26.
[2] Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 100; see also G. F. Hasel, "The Significance of the Cosmology in Genesis 1 in relation to Ancient Near Eastern Parallels" *AUSS* 10 (1972): 1-20 (5); D. T. Tsumuru, *Creation and Destruction* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 36-38; and Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context*, 35.
[3] W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 171.
[4] Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 171.
[5] Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 171.
[6] Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 42.

'firmament' is a two-way relation—it pertains to waters below as well as above; in *Enūma Elish* the sky-roof relates only to the waters, the location of which is unclear. Thirdly, there is a *material body* in the figure of Ti'âmat with which to form the solid sky-roof. The Genesis account has no corresponding detail and uses the common verb for 'to do/make'—'God made the firmament'. Lastly, there are the mythopoeic details of the crossbar and the guards for which there is nothing in Genesis.

Our argument is therefore that *Enūma Elish* does have a solid sky, but that the significance of this text for Genesis has not been established. Structurally, the Genesis conception is not a good fit with the half body of Ti'âmat; the firmament is introduced in contradistinction to the waters, whereas the sky in *Enūma Elish* is constructed out of Ti'âmat. In the end, our data in Genesis is too slight upon which to draw a comparison and it is not elaborated in a mythopoeic way.

Lambert has a more complex understanding of the structure of Babylonian cosmology:

> The idea of a vault of heaven is not based on any piece of evidence[1]…Thus to the Babylonians the universe consisted of superimposed layers of the same size and shape separated by space.[2]

The Assyriologist, W. Horowitz is in substantial agreement that Mesopotamians believed in a series of heavens set out in flat planes.[3] He comments,

> Although the clear sky seems to us to be shaped like a dome, rather than a flat circle, there is no direct evidence that ancient Mesopotamians thought the visible heavens to be a dome.[4]

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[1] He attributes the idea of a vault to mistranslation of *Enūma Elish* Tablet IV line 145 by the German scholar P. Jensen in his *Die Kosmologie der Babylonier*. See R. W. Younker and R. M. Davidson, "The Myth of the Solid Heavenly Dome: Another Look at the Hebrew רָקִיעַ (*rāqîa*ʿ)" *AUSS* 1 (2011): 125-147 (127).

[2] Lambert, "The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon", 61-62.

[3] Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, xii-xiv; Younker and Davidson, "The Myth of the Solid Heavenly Dome", 127, note that Assyriologists have to construct a unified Babylonian cosmology from different texts. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 172, 180 makes the same point and this is acknowledged by Seely, "The Geographical Meaning of 'Earth' and 'Seas' in Genesis 1:10" *WTJ* 59 (1997): 231-255 (234).

[4] Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, 264.

Walton is correct when he avers that "In summary, then, it is difficult to discuss comparisons between Israelite and Mesopotamian literature concerning creation of the cosmos because the disparity is so marked."[1]

Canaanite and Other Texts

On the contribution of Canaanite literature to our understanding of biblical cosmogony, Clifford comments that it is "disappointing" because of its paucity and randomness.[2] Clifford's review of texts offers nothing to our topic of the firmament and the waters above the firmament. Texts have cosmic elements, like that of 'waters' and 'darkness', but there are no undisputed cosmogonies.

Seely comments in relation to Hittite views,

> We have no description of the Hittite cosmology, but we do know they thought of the sky as solid, for a recovered text speaks of a time when they 'severed the heaven from the earth with a cleaver.'[3]

The problem however is that this is not enough information to determine whether the Hittites had the same conception as Genesis.

The first century historian, Philo of Byblos (c. 64-141 CE) wrote about Phoenician history, quoting the Phoenician historian, Sakkunyton, and included an account of their cosmogony. Clifford, however, notes that the accuracy of Philo is questioned by scholars.[4] The cosmogony we have through this source is eclectic, according to Clifford, but it offers nothing in the way of a conception of a solid sky; it does speak of waters, darkness, air, wind, and cloud.[5]

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[1] Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context*, 26.
[2] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 117, 132.
[3] Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I", 233; this is the *Kumarbi Myth*: "When heaven and earth were built upon me [Upelluri, an Atlas figure] I knew nothing of it, and when they came and cut heaven and earth asunder with a copper tool, that also I knew not." O. R. Gurney, *The Hittites* (2nd ed.; London: Penguin, 1964), 193.
[4] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 128.
[5] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 128.

Interpretation

Down the ages, the interpretation of Genesis 1 has followed prevailing world-views. Second Temple texts, later rabbinical comments, and early church theologians ('the fathers') refer to the sky as solid.[1] Whether they thought of the sky as a hemi-spherical dome is less certain. Greek thought was of heavenly spheres surrounding the earth from as early as the 6th century BCE.[2] Second Temple works are more likely to have been influenced by Greek ideas of spherical heavens than by Babylonian flat planes or the Egyptian idea of a dome/vault.[3]

Similarly, the early church fathers sought to marry Greek ideas to the Bible "but they could not identify which sphere was the biblical firmament so they tended to add a few spheres to accommodate the Bible to Greek thinking."[4] Jerome's use of the Latin term *firmamentum* in the Vulgate reflects the Greek idea of hard celestial spheres and not a solid dome.[5] On early medieval interpretation, R. W. Younker and R. M. Davidson comment,

> …unwillingness to commit to a hard-sphere theory is reflected in the common tendency by most Christian scholastics to translate the Hebrew *rāqîaʿ* as *expansium*, *expansion*, or *extension*, rather than *firmamentum*—the former expressions all convey the meaning of expanse and do not commit one to an understanding of something hard.[6]

Younker and Davidson identify the origin of the Accommodationism advocated by theistic evolutionists in the 'Introduction' to Galileo's work, *Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems*, by the Benedictine scholar, Antoine Augustin Calmet. However, they observe that this did not become "a widespread view and did not gain a consensus among critical biblical scholars until the nineteenth century."[7] Their conclusion on the modern origins of the 'solid dome' interpretation is therefore as follows:

> Thus it appears that the biblical critics of the 1850s built their ideas about ancient Hebrew cosmology upon the incorrect flat-earth concept of twenty

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[1] Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I", 236.
[2] Younker and Davidson, "The Myth of the Solid Heavenly Dome", 128, and see the scholarship they cite.
[3] Ibid, 129.
[4] Ibid, 130.
[5] Ibid, 130.
[6] Ibid, 130.
[7] Ibid, 135.

years earlier. Further, they seem to have confused ancient and medieval discussions of hard celestial spheres with the hemispherical solid-dome/-vault and flat-earth myths, which were two quite unrelated concepts![1]

The 'accommodationist' interpretation is popular today, but it is as much a cultural product as the hard or soft sphere interpretations of the Medieval Scholastics.

Conclusion

Our conclusion from the ANE evidence is that **the structure of ANE conceptions of the sky is different to that in Genesis 1**. There is no one-to-one correlation to be had in any analysis of the different traditions. The differences with Genesis are too great. This raises the question as to why Genesis is not *more like* ANE mythology. The straightforward theological answer to this question is that, as God chose the nation of Israel above all other nations, so too he **taught them** in a singular way.

The historical point here though is that the evidence from Sumerian and Egyptian texts has both concepts of the sky *and* the atmosphere. If we judge that the concept of a solid sky is "scientifically naïve",[2] the lack of a corresponding concept in Genesis shows that the text is more *phenomenal* in its description. Exactly what the people believed at any one time might have varied; the *text* of Genesis is not itself scientifically naïve. Seely's method of interpretation makes 'the people' the determining factor for settling questions of meaning, but this does not give sufficient respect to the integrity of the text. We might also add that the text has a teaching function which might very well be countering the ideas of the people of its day.

The triumvirate of 'author-text-audience' determines meaning. If we only emphasize the audience and its needs, we neglect the intentions of the author (including God) and fail to respect the integrity of the public language in which the text is written.[3] If we control meaning through the device of the original audience, we fail to give primacy to the text as our only data. The data for constructing the background knowledge of the original audience, supposing it to be an Iron Age one (1200-500 BCE?), is presumably the OT texts, but these are through a prophet, which puts authorial meaning and the text centre-stage. We don't have independent data on the

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[1] Ibid, 136.

[2] Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I", 234.

[3] S. Groom, *Linguistic Analysis of Biblical Hebrew* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), xxii.

original audience and their linguistic usage. We need such data for assertions about the original audience. We cannot just presume their linguistic habits from the usage we have in the OT for the prophets.

For example, we can infer that the prophet used *rāqîaʿ* in relation to the 'sky' but the texts carry no information on the audience as to their linguistic writing and speaking practice. Any comment about linguistic practice (a 'used by' the audience claim) of what is a fairly rare and narrowly used word is just presumption. We do not have any evidence whatsoever about the original audience and it is methodologically unsound to project such usage data from the prophet onto an audience. The soundest method is to follow the prophet's pattern of use rather than invent imaginary audience usage on the basis of no data. Necessarily, we have no independent evidence of audience understanding about Genesis, only data that is the linguistic usage of the prophets.

Seely makes the mistake of giving the putative background knowledge of the audience too much weight when he says,[1]

> Considering that the Hebrews were a scientifically naive people who would accordingly believe the *raqiaʿ* was solid, that both their Babylonian and their Egyptian background would influence them to believe the *raqiaʿ* was solid, and that they naturally accepted the concepts of the peoples around them so long as they were not theologically offensive, I believe we have every reason to think that both the writer and original readers of Genesis 1 believed the *raqiaʿ* was solid.

What generalisations like this fail to take on board are such factors as—how you determine influence when the date of all the texts and their traditions is so indeterminate;[2] how you decide influence in the different social groups of society; how the competing religious groups in a society viewed indigenous traditions over against those of other cultures; the effect of different education levels in modulating influence; and the level of respect accorded to sacred writings, i.e. who was true to God and who was syncretistic in their beliefs. We don't have the kind of data about the people/peoples of the time in which Genesis 1 was written that we need for such a generalisation; all we have are the texts.

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[1] Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I", 235.

[2] For a brief discussion see Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context*, 35-38.

Seely's conclusion from his historical review of ANE texts is,

> In the ancient world the sky was not just phenomenal. The ancients did not just refer to the appearance of the sky as being solid. They concluded from the appearance that the sky really was solid, and they then employed this conclusion in their thinking about astronomy, geography, and natural science. The *raqia*ʿ was for them a literal physical part of the universe, just as solid as the earth itself. Solidity is an integral part of its historical meaning.[1]

However, it is because ANE cosmologies have multiple elements of a solid sky, air, an atmosphere, clouds, and wind that it is not historically out of place to read the reference to a *rāqîa*ʿ in Genesis in terms of what was apparent from the ground and **in phenomenal terms**. The historical meaning of *rāqîa*ʿ should and can be established from the Hebrew texts alone without referring to 'the ancients' of other ANE cultures. When we give proper priority to the Hebrew text and the literature of which it is a part, it is clear that the balance of argument favours 'expanse'. We should do this against the prevailing world-view of both today and former ages.

[1] Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I", 236.

[2] The standard history of Merodach-Baladan is J. A. Brinkman, "Merodach-Baladan II" in *Studies Presented to A. O. Oppenheim* (eds., R. D. Briggs and J. A. Brinkman; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964), 6-53

[3] J. H. Walton, "New Observations on the Date of Isaiah" *JETS* (1985): 129-132 (129).