A Double-Plated Cosmos? Gen 1’s Cosmology, the Baal Stele, and the Logic of a Firmament of the Earth

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Abstract

The cosmology as described in the creation account in Gen 1:1–2:4a has occasioned endless commentary. One of the more perceptive studies of this text was published by Baruch Halpern in 2003. In this article, I review Halpern’s argument and add evidence from iconography at Ugarit. The Baal Stele (Louvre catalog number AO 15775), in which the deity holds lightning and stands with the king, also displays a cosmology that has intriguing connections with Halpern’s thesis about an “expanse of the earth.” After connecting Halpern’s thesis to this visual representation of cosmology from Ugarit, I explore the ways in which both text and image are mutually illuminating and help to interpret one another, extending the analysis to so-called Deutero-Isaiah and Ps 136 as well.

Keywords

cosmology – Gen 1 – Baal Stele

1 Introduction

Cosmologies in the biblical texts have attracted the attention of scholars since the beginning of the Bible’s comparative study. Such comparative analysis regarding cosmologies in the Bible was already a focus in antiquity. See, for example, Porphyry’s admittedly fragmentary critiques of the Christian belief
that the world would end, critiques built on a Platonic assumption of creation in distinction to ancient Christian understandings of the cosmology.\(^1\) The study of biblical cosmologies in their historical contexts has been especially prominent in modern scholarship. The decipherment of Egyptian in 1822, Akkadian in 1857, and Ugaritic within two years of its discovery in 1929 revealed the cultural environments of the Bible, not least of which as it relates to the creation and function of the cosmos.\(^2\) Note George Smith, who, in 1876, repaired lacunae in the Babylonian creation myth, or Enûma Eliš, based on parallels in Gen 1. He stated that “the three next tablets in the Creation series are absent, there being only two doubtful fragments of this part of the story. Judging from the analogy of the Book of Genesis, we may conjecture that this part of the narrative contained the description of the creation of light, the atmosphere or firmament, of the dry land, and of plants.”\(^3\)

In this article, I will present a comparative analysis of the cosmology in Gen 1, particularly Gen 1:15, 17, and 20, and an image from Late Bronze Age Ugarit.\(^4\) The comparison is in no way an attempt to date the chapter or the traditions therein to this period. Rather, in line with recent approaches to iconographic exegesis, I hope to show how an interpretive and textual puzzle, which Baruch Halpern articulated best, in Gen 1:15, 17, and 20 can be clarified or contextualized by comparison with iconographic data.\(^5\)


\(^4\) Genesis 1 has traditionally been assigned to the so-called Priestly source. I use the phrasing “priestly writing(s)” below on occasion, when referring to this hypothesis.

\(^5\) Much of the research in iconographic exegesis draws its inspiration from Othmar Keel’s work. For this legacy and recent studies, see Izaak J. de Hulster, \textit{Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah} (FAT 36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Izaak J. de Hulster and Joel M. LeMon (eds.), \textit{Image, Text, Exegesis: Iconographic Interpretation and the Hebrew Bible} (LHBOTS 588; New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014); Izaak J. de Hulster, Brant A. Strawn, and Ryan P. Bonfiglio (eds.), \textit{Iconographic Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: An Introduction to its Method
I explore the exegetical crux in Gen 1:15, 17, and 20 as presented in Halpern’s proposal. In the second section, I analyze the Baal Stele, examine its cosmology, and explore the different interpretations of the iconography. I argue, following others, that the cosmos represented on the stele shows three tiers (the heavens, earth, and cosmic sea), though I offer an additional observation that each tier is separated by a solid feature (resulting in two solid divisions, or firmaments, in the cosmological picture). Third, I put the examination of the iconography in conversation with both Halpern’s thesis on Gen 1:15, 17, and 20 as well as other texts, particularly from so-called Deutero-Isaiah and Ps 136. It is hoped that this comparison then creates renewed possibilities for examining reflexes of similar (though by no means identical) descriptions of the cosmos in Deutero-Isaiah and Ps 136 as well for understanding Gen 1 in its intellectual milieu. Finally, I offer concluding thoughts on the juxtaposition of image and text for understanding Gen 1’s cosmology.

2 Gen 1:15, 17, and 20 and Halpern’s Argument

In 2003, Baruch Halpern authored an article in which he explored not simply the cosmology of Gen 1, but rather the astronomy of the chapter as reflective of the evolution of religious thought in the ancient world. In this section, I offer a brief precis of Halpern’s thesis, focusing on his understanding of the firmament in Gen 1. In doing so, I set the stage for the comparison between the text of Gen 1 and its rhetoric on the one hand and the cosmology as set forth in the Baal Stele from Ugarit on the other.
Halpern begins his exploration of Gen 1 with a developmental observation: in certain earlier biblical texts, the stars are ascribed an agency and an ability to act of their own accord. These texts, such as Judg 5:20, Isa 13:4–5 (and 10), Gen 22:17, 26:4, Exod 32:13, Deut 1:10, 10:22, 28:62, and Gen 37:9, among others, contain literary representations of the constellations as active agents. A change in thought, however, occurred in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE: in Assyria, as in ancient Israel, the stars ceased to become completely autonomous entities. While ancient cosmologies had long portrayed the world in ways that would lend themselves toward this evolution (Enûma Eliš, for example, describes the sky as a tent – the skin of Tiamat – stretched over the world; tablet 4, lines 138–140), the ability of Assyrian scholars to predict, with varying degrees of accuracy, eclipses in the eighth century BCE transformed their conception of the heavenly bodies. As Halpern claims, this transformation

("Antibabylonische Polemik im priesterlichen Schöpfungsbericht," ZTK 106 [2009]: 152–3). Similarly, as Christoph Uehlinger and Susanne Müller Trufaut have argued, depictions such as the cosmos represented in KAR 307 can have a long lineage in intellectual thought such that a scholarly text from the Assyrian period can, ultimately, leave its imprint on Ezekiel in exile in Babylon well over a century later ("Ezekiel 1, Babylonian Cosmological Scholarship and Iconography: Attempts at Further Refinement," TZ 57 [2001]: 140–71). For an edition and analyses of KAR 307 (VAT 8917), see A. Livingstone, Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea (SAA 3; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1989), 99–102; Wayne Horowitz, Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography (MC 8; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 3–19. As such, even if Gen 1 dates to the Persian period, one can still posit that it participates in a larger intellectual koine in which earlier traditions take part. On methodological issues of comparison as they involve typology and direct contact, see generally Meir Malul, The Comparative Method in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Legal Studies (AOAT 227; Kevelaer: Butzon and Bercker, 1990).

9 See, for example, Wayne Horowitz’s comments on KAR 307, in which “the stars are said to be inscribed upon the lower jasper heavens ... stars inscribed onto the stone floor of heaven would not have been able to move independently" (Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography, 258). The description of “inscribing,” then, brings to mind very concrete elements of creation, such as writing on a surface with a stylus.
10 For Enûma Eliš IV 137–46 (especially lines 138–40) in relation to the ←Israel in Gen 1, as well as the conceptual cosmic geography in Pss 104:3 and 148:4, see Horowitz, Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography, 262. For these lines and the Akkadian commentary tradition in which the word “heavens,” šamé, was interpreted as consisting of the two lexemes ša mê, “of water” (partly due to the skin of Tiamat holding back the cosmic water), see W.G. Lambert, Babylonian Creation Myths (MC 16; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 171. I would like to thank Avi Winitzer for also pointing out that this interpretation is hermeneutically connected to how Babylonians understood the connection between writing and the natural world, which itself supported the “mythologem” of Enûma Eliš. Though not a double-plated cosmology (as explored below in the Baal Stele and biblical texts), Ludlul bēl nēmeqi IV line 77 contains the phrase e-ma šak-na-at ki-tim rīt-pa-šu an-e, “wherever
was accompanied by a change in metaphor to describe the cosmology, as the sun, moon, and stars could be referred to as “inscriptions in the heavens.” For Halpern, Gen 1 reflects this change, which entails the same process of “depersonalization” seen elsewhere in the ancient world. The point, at least for the purposes of this study, is not whether Gen 1 inherited this view directly from Assyrian thought, but rather the manner in which Gen 1 participated in the general intellectual currents of the ancient world (regardless of when the chapter was composed).

In developing this argument about Gen 1, Halpern teases out details of the chapter’s cosmology that bring into relief other assumptions of the text. Most relevant for this article is his observation about the plating of the heavenly and, by implication, the earthly realms. The firmament, or יָ闺ּ, appears first in Gen 1:6, and it seems that God calls the firmament “heaven,” as in Gen 1:8. As Halpern argues, however, this phrasing is not one of equivalence or identity, such that the heavens and the firmament would be the same things. In the same way, “light and dark define day and night by distinguishing them; likewise, the plate gives definition to the sky above, rather than being identical with it.” Yet the phrasing of the creation narrative and the appearance of the

the earth is established, the heavens stretched out” (Amar Annus and Alan Lenzi, *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi: The Standard Babylonian Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* [SAA 7; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2010], 29, 44). Shalom M. Paul draws a comparison between this passage and the texts in Isaiah examined more below (*Isaiah 40–66: Translation and Commentary* [ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 188).


12 Ancient interpreters of Genesis also reflected on the distinction in Gen 1:15, 17, and 20, with the יָ闺ּ and heavenly bodies placed “in” (ב) it and other ancient Near Eastern thought in which these spheres were believed to be gods. See, for example, Didymus the Blind:

“This teaches us that they are not gods, as the Egyptians thought in their deception. Now, he did well to say in the firmament and not ‘above the firmament’; this is something visibly true. Their role, it says, is lighting up the earth and separating day from night; dawn brings on day, and sunset night. Another role of theirs is to act as signs; the stars signal many things, as does the sun itself—signal, not by causing them but by making them obvious. The fortune-tellers, on the other hand, claim that they are actively involved, the movement of one to another having a certain effect. This is not what they are for, however; their purpose is to signal hours, months, and years, signaling not being causative” (*Commentary on Genesis* [trans. Robert C. Hill; FC 132; Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016], 46).

13 Halpern, “Assyrian Astronomy of Genesis 1,” 80 n. 11. One might also note that the syntax of יָィרּ plus ב in Gen 1:5 serves to define oppositions, in day and night. Similarly, in Gen 1:10 the same syntax defines the oppositions of earth and sea. The only other example of this construction in Gen 1:1–2:4a appears in 1:8, where the heavens are defined by the יָерь. Given the pattern elsewhere in Gen 1’s creation account, one might expect an
firmament entail a more expansive sense of cosmology than explicitly stated. Indeed, after the description of the creation of the firmament in Gen 1:6–8, every mention of the firmament in Gen 1 is one of qualification. It is not simply a self-evident, unmodified firmament, but rather in each instance the firmament is a “firmament of the heavens,” or רָקיעַ השׁמים. For example, in Gen 1:14–20 this qualification evidences a larger cosmological scheme that reappears later in Deutero-Isaiah but also has resonances against the backdrop of the Baal Stele from Ugarit, both of which are explored more fully below.¹⁴

The significance of the firmament for Halpern lies in the understanding that the luminaries are set in the expanse, placed in a solid surface without authority or autonomy of their own. Even more, the layout of the cosmos, with light above the firmament, indicates that the luminaries are “merely holes,” entirely removing from them any sense of agency or existence beyond passive mediation of the cosmic light and darkness.¹⁵ In this fashion, Gen 1 participates in the intellectual developments of this era, even if its composition and compilation stem from a later time.

For the following, the importance of Gen 1’s qualification of the expanse as “of the heavens” in Halpern’s thesis beyond its initial creation is that it implies, in this very qualification, the existence of another firmament.¹⁶ Halpern argues that Deutero-Isaiah shares this perception of the cosmology as being “double-plated.”¹⁷ Before returning to Deutero-Isaiah for further examination of this issue, however, I offer a comparison in the next section with a visual depiction of the cosmos from Ugarit. I do so not as a means for identifying Canaanite versus Mesopotamian influences in Gen 1’s cosmology (see more in section 5 below), but rather to show the manner in which this view of the world as entailing a double-plated architecture likely existed at Ugarit as well.

¹⁴ That there might be a typological connection between Gen 1 and the Baal Stele could also be reflective of the development of Yahweh as a storm god to whom aspects of royalty were added. For more, see Reinhard Müller, *Jahwe als Wettergott: Studien zur altägyptischen Kultlyrik anhand ausgewählter Psalmen* (BZAW 387; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008).

¹⁵ Halpern, “Assyrian Astronomy of Genesis 1,” 76.

¹⁶ The flood account also evokes somewhat similar imagery along these lines, though certainly not explicitly. While the רָקיעַ השׁמים has a correspondence in Gen 7:11 in the cosmic waters of the deluge, which appear with the drawing back of the ארבעת השמים (“windows of the heavens”), one might argue that the implicit רָקיעַ השׁמים has a correspondence, in some fashion, to the מעין תהום בה (“foundations of the great deep”).

¹⁷ Halpern, “Assyrian Astronomy of Genesis 1,” 76.
at least as depicted in the Baal Stele.\footnote{I know of no other depictions of a double-plated cosmos elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern iconography, though certainly the multiple-tiered cosmos appears in many other reliefs. See Shamash’s seat above the cosmic sea on the Shamash Tablet mentioned below in the Hartenstein citation. The tablet has received extensive scholarly treatments (see, for an excellent review, C. Woods, “The Sun-God Tablet of Nabû-apla-iddina,” \textit{JCS} 56 [2004]: 23–103). See Susanne Paulus for a new edition of the Sun-God Tablet and all other \textit{kudurru} inscriptions from the Kassite to the Neo-Babylonian period (\textit{Die babylonischen Kudurrü-Inscribien von der kassitischen bis zur frühneubabylonischen Zeit: Untersucht unter besonderer Berücksichtigung gesellschafts- und rechtshistorischer Fragestellungen} [AOAT 51; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014]). For an analysis of the Shamash Tablet in relation to Gen 1, and for an interpretation of the tablet as containing all three cosmic realms as part of the same scene (the heavens, earth, and the netherworld), see de Hulster, “Picturing Ancient Israel’s Cosmic Geography: An Iconographic Perspective on Genesis 1:1–2:4a,” in \textit{Iconographic Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: An Introduction to Its Method and Practice} (ed. Izaak J. de Hulster, Brent Strawn, and Ryan P. Bonfiglio; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 49–50. A depiction of a firmament with multiple tiers appears in 15th century BCE New Kingdom Egypt, but the layout differs from the Baal Stele above. See José Lull and Juan Antonio Belmonte, “A Firmament Above Thebes: Uncovering the Constellations of Ancient Egyptians,” \textit{Journal for the History of Astronomy} 37 (2006): 375. That the Baal Stele likely indicates two plates (an upper and lower) as part of the cosmos, even if as a singular example, makes it all the more significant as an observation to compare with Gen 1’s cosmology.} I then return to the biblical texts in order to explore more fully the shared and divergent conceptions of the cosmos as indicated in Gen 1, the Baal Stele, and Deutero-Isaiah (as well as Ps 136:5–6).
Canaanite Cosmology

While Halpern connects his thesis to the cosmology apparent in *Enûma Eliš*, the concept of a two-plated creation (one upper, one lower) also finds a possible visual representation in the so-called “Baal with Lightning,” or “Baal Stele” from Ugarit (Louvre catalogue number AO 15775).19

The stele itself is fascinating for a variety of reasons. It depicts Baal in large size together with a smaller figure widely interpreted as the king of Ugarit. Baal stands in the typical smiting position, with a mace in his right hand. The object in the left has been interpreted variously. Some scholars have understood the object as a vegetal staff, signifying that Baal, as the storm god, provides fertility and agriculture on the earth.20 The weather deity often appears with symbols of provisions that the earth enjoys because of the deity’s function, as seen in the Ahmar/Qubbah stele (figure 2).

In this representation, the storm god stands on a bull, symbolizing that he is “a dispenser of fertility” to the earth.21

A more likely interpretation is that the object in the Baal Stele represents a kind of “stylized lightning” or a vertical emblem of rolling thunder.22 The idea of rolling thunder associated pictorially with the storm god appears in “Syrian glyptic art.”23 In this glyptic art, however, the thunder appears horizontally with respect to the deity’s mouth, whereas in the Baal Stele (in the rolling thunder interpretation) the thunder would appear vertically. As Daniel

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19 The firmament in Ugaritic texts may have been associated with the goddess Anat. See KTU 1.108, line 8, in which Anat is called *b’l t kpt*, “lady of the firmament,” a title in parallel to *šmm rmm*.


21 While the storm god stands on a bull as a symbol of dispensing fertility to the earth, the weapon in the storm god’s hands, shaped like a trident, clearly was intended to be lightning, much as the description of the Baal Stele offered above. See Guy Bunnens, *A New Luwian Stele and the Cult of the Storm-God at Til Barsib-Masuwar* (Publications de la Mission archéologique de l’Université de Liège en Syrie; Dudley: Peeters, 2006), 67. Note that the backend of the feature in Baal’s hand branches and fans out, perhaps also like fire, which is reminiscent of Ps 78:48–49.


23 Ibid.
Schwemer argues, however, the understanding of the object in the left hand as lightning finds a correlation in the broken text KTU 1.101 line 4. In this passage, Baal’s lightning is described in terms that resemble the art in the relief, namely lightning like a tree with branches (ʿṣ brq).24

The position of both arms in some manner exceeds the boundaries of the frame of the stele. A similar transgression of the boundaries of a stele by the relief art occurs in other examples where the stele clearly had important ritual function, such as in the Kattumuwa inscription. Kattumuwa’s hat crosses the border marking the stone framing of the relief and inscription itself. Eudora Struble and Virginia Herrmann argue that these sorts of examples create a sense of ritual space, as though the objects in the relief occupy the realm of the

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24 Ibid. See additionally the use of the verb “to fling” (šrh) with reference to lightning in KTU 1.4 v:8–9. The same verb appears in Job 37:2–3: “Listen indeed to the rumbling of his voice and the thunder that issues from his mouth! Under all the heavens he flings it down (ישׁרהו), and [he flings] his lightning to the ends of the earth." See also the nominal form of this verb in Job 41:18, denoting a javelin or spear, such that the underlying conceptual world can be applied to lightning and a spear, as in the Baal Stele. On general issues of relating text and image, see Cory Crawford, “Relating Image and Word in Ancient Mesopotamia,” and Karen Sonik, “Pictorial Mythology and Narrative in the Ancient Near East,” in Critical Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Art (ed. Brian A. Brown and Marian Feldman; Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 241–64, 265–94, respectively. See citations for same volume, abbreviated CAANEA, below.
ritual participants. While the ritual feasting of the Kattumuwa text invites such an interpretation of the relief, the case for the Baal Stele as having ritual function is much less certain, though the royal audience with the divine might lend credence that some form of ritual access to Baal is envisioned.

More relevant for this article, spatial alignment vertically indicates that Baal and his royal audience stand on successive layers of what seem to be the parts of the cosmos. Aligning these features with the Baal cycle, earlier interpreters such as Schaefer understood the wavy lines directly beneath Baal as the sea, or as the body profile of a writhing serpent such as Lotan. In these interpreta-

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25 Eudora J. Struble and Virginia Rimmer Herrmann, “An Eternal Feast at Sam’al: The New Iron Age Mortuary Stele from Zincirli in Context,” *BASOR* 356 (2009): 20. Struble and Herrmann, however, make this argument in the context of mortuary steles, which could distinguish their observation and qualify any connection to the Baal Stele. Although found in the western part of Ugarit on the slope below the temple, Yon argues that the Baal Stele certainly originally was located in the temple itself, giving it a prime location for ritual observances (*The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006], 106, 110).

26 Yon identifies the king in the Baal Stele as wearing ritual, priestly garments. Other artifacts discovered at Ugarit testify to the nature of the king as also a priest in certain ritual functions. See, for example, the “cultic stand or libation funnel” in which the king appears as a priest (RS 78.041 + 81.3659, in the Latakia museum, as analyzed in Yon, *City of Ugarit*, 153). See Mark Smith for an analysis of the stele as representing the god as the king’s “patron and protector” (*The Ugaritic Baal Cycle, Volume 1: Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU 1.1–1.2* [VTSup 55; New York: Brill, 1994], 106). See also Smith’s statements about the king participating in the power of the god in “Like Deities, Like Temples (Like People),” in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel* (ed. John Day; *LHBOTS* 422; New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 10. On the Kattumuwa inscription, see e.g. Seth L. Sanders, “The Appetites of the Dead: West Semitic Linguistic and Ritual Aspects of the Kattumuwa Stele from Zincirli,” *BASOR* 369 (2013): 35–55.

27 M. Dijkstra argues that the Baal Stele represents the weather deity astride over mountains. He does not mention seas with respect to the Baal Stele, though he discusses Baal as patron deity of mariners in inscriptive evidence. Rather, his comparison is with the Tell el-Dab’a seal, in which the storm god stands astride two mountains. Dijkstra observes that the Baal Stele indicates “two plaits,” whereas this sort of iconography usually has just one. The comparison, while generally interesting, does not help discern the levels beneath the storm god in the Baal Stele. First, in all the examples that Dijkstra presents the storm god has one foot each on a mountain, whereas the Baal Stele presents the storm god standing on a surface above mountains, which itself is above another identically represented surface which is again above wavy features. Second, as Mark Smith observes, the vertical alignment in two distinct planes of the relief are separated by identically-shaped lines. For Dijkstra’s argument, see “The Weather-God on Two Mountains,” *UF* 23 (1991): 128. For Dijkstra’s iconographic evidence, see “The Weather-God on Two Mountains,” 138–40. For Smith’s analysis, see *Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, 106.

28 See also Williams-Forte (as cited in Smith, *Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, 106). Bernard F. Batto, without offering an explanation, gives a slight preference to the idea that Baal stands directly over the vanquished sea (*In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Motifs in the Ancient Near
tions, Baal stands triumphantly in smiting mode over a vanquished foe in a similar manner as Yahweh enthroned as Yahweh of the flood in Ps 29, especially verses 3 and 10. Yet if Baal stands directly above the sea, it is not evident what the lowest level of lines might indicate. This option, then, leaves crucial aspects of the relief unexplained, and an interpretation that finds more explanations of all the elements of the visual representation as part of a coherent picture would be more persuasive.

The more common interpretation thus seems more likely: Baal stands over mountains, the next level down in the cosmos from the celestial sphere and an important symbol for the god who resides on Mt. Ṣaphon.29 Directly below the initial pattern of wavy lines is another sequence of waves representing the cosmic sea. Baal then stands on a platform (the mountains) that symbolizes some aspect of his being or home, and then over a cosmic sphere (the sea) that he controls. The storm god often stands over some symbolic aspect related to his power, as in the Ahmar/Qubbah and Cekke stelae.30 As De Hulster notes, these latter artistic representations lack mountains, a notable feature of Aramaean representations of storm gods, in which the topography is considerably less mountainous than locales such as Ugarit and parts of the southern Levant. The two-fold scheme of the deity atop a symbolic feature and cosmic terrain, as argued above for the Baal Stele, appears in other reliefs of weather deities, as in the relief from Tell Kazel. In this iconography, the god stands atop a lion, a symbolic association with the storm deity, as well as mountainous terrain.31

For the purposes of illuminating Halpern’s argument concerning Gen 1 and the solidity of two plates, a double-lined solid feature in the Baal Stele clearly distinguishes not only the divine sphere from the earthly terrain, but also, as Halpern argued for Gen 1, it separates the earthly terrain from the cosmic sea underneath. It is notable that the kingly figure also appears atop a single firmament of sorts, isolated from the cosmic strata atop which Baal stands. Baal’s position over two firmaments indicates his power and authority over all the cosmic realm (mountains as well as, of course, the vanquished sea). It is here tentatively suggested that the king’s position over a single firmament perhaps suggests his dominion over the earthly realm, or one layer of the cosmic realm,

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31 Ibid., 236.

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in contrast to Baal's more expansive kingship.\textsuperscript{32} The king's position, and the firmament over which he stands, is isolated from the cosmic strata, perhaps indicating that the king's authority is itself derivative of Baal's authority: the king's size and position are relative to the god's, as are the king's spheres of authority.\textsuperscript{33}

Whatever the meaning of the lines underneath the kingly figure, the fact that he stands aloft from all else and over his own lines clarifies and counter a potential objection to the present thesis. Indeed, one could argue that the two series of lines below Baal and below the earthly sphere are simply dividing lines of distinct registers on the stele.\textsuperscript{34} In this interpretation, the dividing lines are not part of the image itself, but rather are simply an organizing feature of three realms. These realms (heavens, mountains, and water) are part of the art though the lines themselves do not function within the iconographic representation. However, if this objection were valid, it would be difficult to understand the role of the same lines beneath the king, who otherwise seems to be within the same plane as Baal. Other images from Ugarit show ritual ministration to the gods, including El, with human participants as part of the same scene.\textsuperscript{35} In the Baal Stele, the king more likely figures as part of the same visual arena as Baal, despite his separate lined platform. A further confirmation of this interpretation comes from the lightning in Baal's hand, which extends slightly below the upper division (Figure 3).

This extension of the lightning into the upper division indicates that this feature functions as more than a partition between artistic registers that keeps each stratum distinct; rather, the tip of the lightning engages with the double-line divider (perhaps resting in the middle portion) as part of the same artistic scene. This interplay suggests that the lightning and lines work together as part

\textsuperscript{32} So Yon, \textit{City of Ugarit}, 110.

\textsuperscript{33} For an architectural representation of the connection between ritual, divinity, cosmos, and a celebration of kingship, see Sennacherib's statements regarding his expansion of Ashur's E-\textit{sarra} temple (including the construction of a “Gate of the Firmament”) and the analysis of this renovation linking “cosmological and ritual function” in service of the celebration of “Ashur’s royal status as the new Marduk” in Andrew George, “E-sangil and E-temen-anki, the Archetypal Cult-Centre,” in \textit{Babylon: Focus mesopotamischer Geschichte, Wiege früher Gelehrsamkeit, Mythen in der Moderne} (ed. J. Renger; CDOG 2; Saarbrücken: SDV, 2000), 77–9. Though from a different time and place, these comments perhaps reveal aspects of the ritual relationship between cosmos, divinity, and kingship explored above.

\textsuperscript{34} For more on such dividing lines, see the discussion in Ataç, cited below. In Phoenician art, Francesca Onnis has observed that the divisions of registers in visual representations and the artistic depictions themselves are, at times, indistinguishable (“The Influence of the Physical Medium on the Decoration of a Work of Art: A Case Study of the ‘Phoenician’ Bowls,” in \textit{CAANEa}, 159–84).

\textsuperscript{35} See \textit{ANEP}, 168, 337, figure 493.
of the same image; as such, the same double-line divider at the stele's bottom should also be understood as part of the imagery.

If each section, then, represents tiers in the same scene (the heavens, the earth, and the sea), and if the lined divisions are part of the art itself, if follows that they function as more than simple register boundaries; rather, these are part of the cosmos' picture as portrayed in the stele. As such, the double-line features can be understood as firmaments separating each sphere from the other, though permeable in the slight intrusion of lightning across the boundary. Both boundary transgressions on the stele, then, serve to create continuity of space, whether between Baal and the ritual participants (in the case of Baal's arms and the lightning with the boundary of the frame) or between the various elements in the relief itself. As such, the boundary lines unify the iconography. It is thus unlikely that the lines function simply as register divisions. Rather, they are part of the art itself.

Significantly, this analysis accords with what appears on reliefs on stelae from Syria in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. In these, all other depictions of the weather deity portray the storm god standing directly atop other features without any dividing lines to break up distinct registers of imagery.36 In other words, the visual representations on such reliefs are all part of one artistic picture. This context affirms the claim that the elements in the Baal Stele comprise a singular scene. It can be stated with certainty, then, that the dividing lines are not divisions of different artistic representations in distinct registers but rather function as part of the same cosmological image.

36 See ANEP, 167–70 and de Hulster (“A God of the Mountains?,” 236–40) for representative examples.
FIGURE 4
Mari painting, central scene
ART RESOURCE, NY. USED WITH PERMISSION

FIGURE 5
Mari painting, complete view
ART RESOURCE, NY. USED WITH PERMISSION
This interpretation does not solve all the mysteries of the image in the Baal relief. It remains to explain why the dividing lines themselves (understood here as firmaments) are doubled. A similar use of lines to separate planes of the cosmos appears in the famous Old Babylonian Mari investiture scene (figures 4 and 5). In the scene a variety of images present more details for consideration than in the Baal Stele; however, divisions in the relief appear in multi-banded layers that may well refer to cosmic geography and, as in the interpretation above for the Baal Stele, have artistic, and not (merely) functional, significance for the relief’s artistic program. Each register was colored in ways that may well have contributed to the symbolism of each layer of the multi-tiered cosmic realm. Indeed, Ataç compares this “coloristic symbolism” in the Mari painting with KAR 307, in which different gems with different colors represent each layer of the cosmic realm. Also significant is the abundant water imagery in the Mari painting, including the rolling waves below the relief that are separated from the investiture scene. According to Ataç, these waves represent the primordial waters of chaos beneath the earth (representing both destruction and renewal) held in check by a solid lined-surface. The king, in his investiture, appears in the top register, surrounded by the colored bands, with images below him of vases overflowing with water and fish signifying the abundance he brings. In some cases the fish face current and appear to be swimming against the stream, perhaps portraying the “epitome of the reversal of time requisite for renewal leading to immortality.” Outside of this central frame, and separated from it by the colored bands, are three animals on either side. Ataç has speculated that these represent a ternary division of the cosmos (see figure 4). For the purposes of the examination of the Baal Stele, the significance of the Mari painting is in its showing a multi-layered band that signifies separations of the cosmos in a relief depicting royal ideology, cultic ritual, and multiple tiers of the universe. Even if the parallel lines separating the divine and earthly realms and the earthly realm and watery chaos in the Baal Stele defy so neat an analysis, the comparison demonstrates that such multi-banded

38 Ibid., 113.
39 The rectangular nature of the frame at Mari calls to mind the representation of the Apsû and Ea inside it. See Ataç’s analysis of the manner in which the Mari painting innovates on this feature, creating a space with Ishtar and the king of Mari in the upper register, “constituting a celestial intrusion into what in essence is a terrestrial, or subterranean, divine enclosure” (ibid., 65). With respect to the Baal Stele, a similar intrusion occurs, though in this case it is the king in the divine realm.
40 Ibid., 58, 128 (quote at 128).
41 Ibid., 78.
iconography can function as part of the art itself within reliefs and can depict the separate spheres of the cosmos.42

I return to Gen 1 and the Baal stele more specifically, in which I have argued that the lined features function as a sort of firmament.43 The firmament in Gen 1, as Halpern argued and as has long been known, indicates a solid substance.44 For Halpern, in the context of Assyrian thought in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, the celestial bodies described in this chapter were also understood as predictable, thus enabling calculations for eclipses. Such predictability removed agency from these celestial bodies and, in the context of Gen 1, made it possible to see them as fixed mediators – “membranes” through which cosmic light appears but not distinct and autonomous entities themselves.45 For Gen 1, then, the firmament of the heavens keeps on one side the primordial light and waters of the heavens, which are manifest on the earth to the extent that holes in the membrane (the sun, moon, and stars for the light; the windows in the heavens for the water) allow them to be manifest on earth.

In this fashion, a shared conception of the firmament might appear in the Baal Stele and Gen 1. The lightning in Baal’s left hand rests on the firmament of the heavens, protruding slightly into the next level of the cosmos below, but it does not traverse the firmament completely (see also Baal’s posture, which crosses over the boundary of frame of the stele itself).46 This position indicates the solidity of the firmament in this cosmological picture. The lightning rests on a solid surface, extending slightly beyond the double-lined boundary but not entirely projecting through to the earthly terrain. Presumably, it passes through completely to the earth where such a solid surface has a hole (possibly the slight extension into the double-lined firmament gives a sense of motion that the lightning is on its way to earth already). However, the means

42  In this manner, Ataç draws on Steven Holloway’s work about the retention of the watery chaos below the foundation of the temple, seeing a similar dynamic in the Mari painting (ibid., 112–3).


44  Bunnens argues that the lightning appears to hit a surface on the Baal Stele and, therefore, that it rests on a solid ground of sorts represented by the upper lines (New Luwian Stele, 66).

45  Halpern, “Assyrian Astronomy of Genesis 1,” 76.

46  Note that the tip of the spear’s end also encroaches over the framing of the stele.
and processes through which lightning was conceived to have entered the earthly sphere at Ugarit – if there was ever a singular conception – is unknown.

In this section, I examined the features of the relief of the Baal Stele. I drew attention to aspects of the cosmos in the Baal Stele that correspond intriguingly to Halpern’s thesis about the plate below the earth in Gen 1. I explored a shared conceptual background, however much other details might differ, regarding the manner in which the solid firmament of the heavens holds back celestial properties such as lightning in the stele and water in Gen 1. Yet not only does the comparative examination of the cosmology of the Baal Stele support Halpern’s analysis of the cosmology of Gen 1; other biblical traditions provide the same general outlook on a two-plated cosmos, and offer additional support to the present thesis. In the next section, I turn to such traditions as found in Isaiah and Ps 136 to demonstrate the manner in which they, too, portray a two-plated cosmos.

4 Depictions of the Cosmos in Deutero-Isaiah and Ps 136

In similar fashion as Halpern argues for Gen 1 and as argued above in the case of the Baal Stele, other traditions within the Bible also indicate that similar, though by no means identical, understandings of the cosmos existed in ancient Israel. One of these, appearing in writings labeled as Deutero-Isaiah, has been argued on a variety of grounds to know and engage (even if at times polemically) the account of creation in Gen 1, though the extent to which a relationship exists between Deutero-Isaiah and Gen 1 is a complicated, and debated, issue.47 The importance for this study is not whether Deutero-Isaiah alludes to Gen 1 specifically. Instead, in the following I highlight the broadly similar conceptual backgrounds regarding the cosmos that might shed light on variations of the picture that emerged from the analyses of Gen 1 and the Baal Stele above. In this section, I analyze three passages, two from Deutero-Isaiah and one of the Psalms, that provide possible reflections of a two-plated cosmos involving a firmament of the heavens and a yāḇṣur (as spelled in these chapters)

47 See, for example, Benjamin Sommer, A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 124, 142–4, 169. For a different view, see Mark Smith’s review of Sommer’s book. Smith notes that Isa 40, 44, and 45 are chapters that polemicize the manufacture of images (citing Berlejung, M. Dick, and V. Hurowitz). The polemics, as such, are not towards Gen 1, but rather Deutero-Isaiah uses creation language to polemicize idol making (Smith, “Review: A Prophet Reads Scripture,” JQR 90 [2000]: 503–4). For an exploration of the polematic nature of Deutero-Isaiah, see Gertz, “Antibabylonische Polemik im priesterlichen Schöpfungsbericht,” 145–7.
of the earth.\textsuperscript{48} I then examine how these passages are both similar to and distinct from Gen 1 and the relief in the Baal Stele.

For example, in Isa 42:5 Deutero-Isaiah states that

\begin{quote}
Thus says God, Yahweh, who created (ברא) the heavens and stretched (נשטם) them, who spread out (רֹקַע) the earth and that which comes forth from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk on it.
\end{quote}

Parts of the description diverge, at least in language if not in conception, from the creation account in Gen 1, particularly the notion of breath as an enlivening component of creation (a detail that matches more closely to details from the creation account in Gen 2:7).\textsuperscript{49}

More details and language, however, fit Gen 1’s scheme of the cosmos (whether or not there is textual dependence between Deutero-Isaiah and Gen 1). God creates (using ברא) the heavens and the earth, and, notably, the root רֹקַע is part of this creative activity.\textsuperscript{50} The parallel expression indicates that the act of “spreading” from רֹקַע mirrors the act of creating the heavens, as though the heavens appear stretched out like a tent (which finds parallels in Mesopotamian thought) under which is a spread surface, namely a flat, plate-like earth.\textsuperscript{51} A relevant, if obvious, comment is worth making: this lower plate and its creation are described in Deutero-Isaiah as רֹקַע הארץ, similar language and a similar concept as also found in Gen 1. This observation indicates that Halpern’s thesis regarding the modification of the רֹקַע השׁמים in Gen 1 implies,

\textsuperscript{48} For the common political and religious environment in Deutero-Isaiah and Ps 136, see Klaus Koch, \textit{Der Gott Israels und die Götter des Orients: Religionsgeschichtliche Studien II} (FRLANT 216; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 315. That the following verses use the participle of רֹקַע and not the noun רֹקַע is not an obstacle for analysis as part of the same conceptual world as Gen 1. The nominal base of רֹקַע, a \textit{qatil} pattern, simply designates it as something in the state of the underlying verbal action. Whereas Deutero-Isaiah and Ps 136 describe the action, the firmament in Gen 1 indicates a solid division that is the result of that action.

\textsuperscript{49} For this phrasing as a component of the universalistic aspect of Deutero-Isaiah’s message (in which Israel’s history has a particular place), see Koch, \textit{Der Gott Israels und die Götter des Orients}, 349.

\textsuperscript{50} For the unlikely thesis that Deutero-Isaiah applies the root רֹקַע to the creation of the earth as a corrective against Gen 1, see Klaus Baltzer, \textit{Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55} (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 131.


\textsuperscript{48} For the common political and religious environment in Deutero-Isaiah and Ps 136, see Klaus Koch, \textit{Der Gott Israels und die Götter des Orients: Religionsgeschichtliche Studien II} (FRLANT 216; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 315. That the following verses use the participle of רֹקַע and not the noun רֹקַע is not an obstacle for analysis as part of the same conceptual world as Gen 1. The nominal base of רֹקַע, a \textit{qatil} pattern, simply designates it as something in the state of the underlying verbal action. Whereas Deutero-Isaiah and Ps 136 describe the action, the firmament in Gen 1 indicates a solid division that is the result of that action.

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in the conceptual world, a corresponding רֵךְּעַת הָאֱרָצִים, which also is analogous to the cosmological conception of Deutero-Isaiah. Indeed, a similar expression of the parallel creation of heaven and earth occurs in Isa 44:24:52

Thus says the LORD, your redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb: 'I am the LORD who made everything, who alone stretched רָקַע the heavens, who spread out רָקִיע the earth by myself.'53

In Ps 136, the creation of the heavens and earth appears in a fashion that matches closely the cosmology in Gen 1, the Baal Stele, and Deutero-Isaiah.54 It is likely that Ps 136:5–6 dates from the exilic or post-exilic period and would be reflecting on the cosmology at approximately the same time, if not a bit later, than Deutero-Isaiah.55 The psalmist focuses on details in the creation account that underscore the concepts that were important in the cosmology of Gen 1, such as the “great lights” and the sun “ruling” over the day and moon and stars ruling over the night. Other details in the psalm feature elsewhere in biblical narratives, such as the “striking” of the firstborn, a strong and outstretched arm, the splitting Red Sea (or sea of reeds), as well as Og and Sihon. For the analysis of cosmology in this paper, the most relevant verses are Ps 136:5–6.56

53 On the translation of the last part of this verse, see Koole, Isaiah III (HCOT; Kampen: Kok, 2001), 417–8.
54 One more possible evidence from the Psalms might be added. In Ps 19:3, the verse contains a poetic pair of day and night, expressing a merism underscoring the totality of time through opposition: juxtaposing day and its opposite (night) provides an imagery of all-encompassing time. If the previous verse also operates along similar poetic configuration of a merism through opposites, then the שמים in the first colon in Ps 19:2 provides one directional extent (the heaven above) and, by poetic implication, the רקיע might provide the opposite extent (the firmament below). In this understanding, both verses use oppositions (up and down as well as day and night), in which case one might be able to argue for the רקיע in 19:2 to refer to the same cosmological image as Halpern’s argument regarding the רֵךְּעַת in Gen 1, though this suggestion remains tentative.
56 For the similarities between God as creator in this psalm and Gen 1:14–16, see Judith Gärtner, Die Geschichtspsalmen: Eine Studie zu den Psalmen 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136 als hermeneutische Schlüsseltexte im Psalter (FAT 84; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 502. She notes the issue with the firmament in Ps 136:6, but does not relate it to the cosmological picture in Gen 1. She states, “In v. 6 wird, wiederum mit einer Partizipialkonstruktion, die
To the one who made the heavens in understanding, for his steadfast love endures forever; to the one who spread out (**ראק**י) the earth over the waters, for his steadfast love endures forever.

While the making of the heavens “in understanding” in Ps 136:5 does not provide detail as to the cosmology envisioned (at least as regards a firmament in the skies), the following verse in Ps 136:6 offers not only fascinating correspondence to Gen 1 and Deutero-Isaiah, but to the relief in the Baal Stele as well. 57 Psalm 136:6 claims not only that God spread out (**ראק**י) the earth but, in doing so, placed it above/over the waters.

While Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, citing C. Macholz, are open to the possibility that Ps 136:5–6 indicates knowledge of traditions as in Gen 1, Marc Brettler is more cautious. 58 Though he explores the manner in which Ps 136 is an “interpretive text,” especially dependent on material in Deut 10:17–11:5, he claims that the Isaianic material does not have “over the waters” (**על־המים**) nor does Ps 136 have an “obvious connection” in its use of the root **ראק** to Gen 1. 59 Brettler is correct to warn against overstating knowledge of textual material from Deutero-Isaiah and Gen 1’s creation account in Ps 136 (and the point of this section is not to establish textual knowledge and dependence between these texts). Nonetheless, as explored above, the logic of Gen 1 in Halpern’s argument and the iconographic portrayal in the Baal stele provide a conceptual background against which Ps 136 and Gen 1 may be argued to have a notion of the universe entailing a double-plated cosmos. As such, the argument in this article provides not an “obvious connection” between the uses of **ראק** in the two chapters, but at least a conceptual connection. Indeed, the spreading of the earth in some fashion, though not identically (see more...

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59 Ibid., 383. See the note above about the relationship between **ראק** as a participle and the noun **רקיע**.
below), matches the lower plate in Halpern’s reading of Gen 1, and the placing it above the waters corresponds closely to the relief on the Baal Stele.60

5 Connecting the Dots: Gen 1 in Its Intellectual Milieu

The discussion above, relating a conceptual cosmology reflected in the Baal Stele to the possibility that Gen 1 functions as a literary heir to this manner of imagining the world, requires further contextualization. First, this discussion raises issues of how to conceive of Gen 1 as reflecting broader cosmological and scientific ideas. In other words, beyond a general Mediterranean koine, how should the historical relationship between the Baal Stele (in the argument above) and the firmament in Gen 1 be assessed? Second, if the concept of a double-plated cosmos appears already in Late Bronze Age Ugarit, how does this observation influence Halpern’s thesis about the specifically Neo-Assyrian context for Gen 1’s cosmology?

First, the transmission of cultural background common to Ugaritic texts and the Hebrew Bible is, of course, widely known. From poetic conventions61 to shared mythological and religious tropes,62 the points of meaningful similar-

60 Other verses in the prophetic literature and the psalms also provide a parallel construction between the heavens and the earth in a similar fashion as articulated here, though without such construction of the firmaments as part of the language. See the analysis of Amos 9:5–6 and Ps 104:5, as well as an iconographic examination of cosmologies from Mesopotamia (including the depiction of Shamash on his throne over the seas), in Friedhelm Hartenstein, “Wolkendunkel und Himmelsfeste: Zur Genese und Kosmologie der Vorstellung des himmlischen Heiligtums JHWHS,” in Das biblische Weltbild und seine altorientalischen Kontexte (ed. Bernd Janowski and B. Ego; FAT 32; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 125–79 generally (see 152–66 for the section on Amos). So Hartenstein states that “die Betonung der Weltüberlegenheit der himmlischen Residenz, die mit der Erschaffung des Himmels eingerichtet wird und von der die Festigkeit der Erd (ʾṣāḥ in Am 9,6 und Ps 104,5ff) in jeder Beziehung abhängt” (“Wolkendunkel und Himmelsfeste,” 166). For brief, but instructive, comments on this iconography and the רַקיע in Gen 1, see Mattias Albani, Die Eine Gott und die Himmlischen Heerscharen: Zur Begründung des Monotheismus bei Deuterojesaja im Horizont der Astralisierung des Gottesverständnisses im Alten Orient (ABG 1; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2000), 177 n. 734.
62 Among countless other publications in the field, see Nicholas Wyatt, especially his use of general mythological backgrounds to examine Gen 1:2 utilizing the two-fold meaning ofʾārṣu in Ugaritic, “The Darkness of Genesis 1:2,” in The Mythic Mind: Essays on Cosmology and Religion in Ugaritic and Old Testament Literature (Bible World; Oakville: Equinox, 2005), 92–101. For a connection between Gen 1:2 and Phoenician Cosmogonies,
ity make comparative research fruitful. At times, the parallels between Late Bronze Age texts generally (and Ugaritic specifically) and the Hebrew Bible are even more telling, particularly within priestly writings. While deriving from the Akkadian sphere of scribal culture at Ugarit and not Ugaritic texts themselves (thus attesting to a Mesopotamian and perhaps not a specifically Canaanite sphere of contact), Guy Darshan has identified a dating scheme in an Akkadian flood text from Ugarit that matches the priestly system of dating of the flood in Gen 6–9. This system for dating the flood appears in this Late Bronze Age text from Ugarit, priestly writings in Gen 6–9, and Berossos but in no other known source. As this evidence indicates, finding traces of thought expressed at Ugarit in the biblical priestly literature generally and in Gen 1 specifically is plausible even in light of the centuries that separate the Late Bronze Age from the composition of most biblical texts.

The second issue pertains to Halpern's thesis, specifically the degree to which Gen 1's cosmology reflects Neo-Assyrian developments. As argued above, the double-plated cosmos is depicted in the Baal Stele and in other sources from the Hebrew Bible, suggesting that the portion of Gen 1's cosmology which portrays a double-plated cosmos may have Late Bronze Age roots. Yet, as Halpern acknowledges, not all of the features of this cosmological scheme are products

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65 Transmission of generally Canaanite and Egyptian elements into Gen 1 might also occur through biblical precursors. Carr and others argue that the priestly account in Gen 1 reflects a prose rendering of the sort of poetic and mythological content in Ps 104 (note 104:2–9, in which “stretching the heavens” appears as a description of the creation of the cosmology, and waters are held in check by a boundary, or גבול). See Carr (and the bibliography cited therein for the relationship between Gen 1 and Ps 104), The Formation of Genesis 1–11: Biblical and Other Precursors (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 15–7.
of the Neo-Assyrian period. For example, the idea that the sky was a solid sur-
face had a pedigree more ancient than Neo-Assyrian astronomy. Halpern and
many others before him have noted that Enûma Eliš contains a similar notion
of Tiamat’s stretched skin as a “vault” (tablet 4, lines 138–140).66

Still, regarding the immobile luminaries (or, “holes”) set in the expanse
Halpern states that “if the luminaries are merely membranes set into the plate
of the sky, then the plate itself must be in motion relative to the plate of the
earth.”67 The historical context for this perception of the luminaries was
the Neo-Assyrian period, in which time scholars termed the expanse “inscrip-
tions in the heavens” (šīṭir šamê).68 In this fashion, the innovations that would
lead to the belief that the luminaries are “incapable of independent move-
ment” because their paths could be predicted, and thus, as a corollary, that
they must be set in motion relative to another plate seem to derive from the
eighth century and later.69

Yet the location of the astronomical diaries that record this intellectual
advance was in Babylon, which perhaps provides a key to understanding the
transmission of a pre-existing cosmological picture attested at Ugarit in the
Baal Stele and its combination in Gen 1 with advances from Mesopotamian
astronomy in the eighth century. Francesca Rochberg explains that Babylonian
astronomical texts were focused on prediction and a sort of representation of
reality, but “the idea that a physical representation was of any comparative
value among Babylonian astronomical models” was not a feature.70 Further,
she argues that “Babylonian models all shared a common objective to predict
and a disinterest in cosmology or physical explanation.”71 In other words, the

66  Halpern, “Assyrian Astronomy of Genesis 1,” 76.
67  Ibid., 76.
68  See F. Rochberg’s volume of the same title (in English), The Heavenly Writing: Divination,
Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture (New York: Cambridge University
69  Ibid., 76.
70  F. Rochberg, Before Nature: Cuneiform Knowledge and the History of Science (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 2016), 258.
71  Ibid., 259. She states elsewhere that:
‘additional sources for the Babylonians’ interest in the visible cosmos are to be found
in the celestial omens and later, after 500 BC, in observational astronomy…. But none of
these groups of texts, omens, or diaries, contains much of cosmological interest beyond
references to a number of parts of the sky in which, presumably, it was thought phe-
nomena were to be seen” (“Mesopotamian Cosmology,” in Encyclopedia of Cosmology:
Historical, Philosophical, and Scientific Foundations of Modern Cosmology [ed. Norriss
Hetherington; Garland Reference Library of the Humanities; New York: Garland, 1993],
scientific modes of thought from Assyria and Babylonia reflected in Gen 1 came without much concern for cosmology or physical representation even as their predictions may have had implications for how one viewed the cosmos. Conversely, Ugarit had little celestial divination and omens, and, as such, it seems unlikely that the representation of the cosmos on the Baal Stele was meant to convey such information. Gen 1’s innovation, then, may have been the incorporation of a pre-existing cosmology (attested also in the Baal Stele) with the intellectual developments of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, which themselves came without any specific cosmology in view. If the stars were predictable, then it is only sensible that one could draw the inferences that Gen 1 draws, using the template of a double-plated cosmos that might have been already available.

The possibility that Gen 1 fuses a pre-existing cosmology with advances in intellectual culture attested in Mesopotamian astronomy does not rob Halpern’s thesis of its explanatory value. Perhaps Gen 1’s use of a pre-existing cosmology allowed it to engage Mesopotamian astronomy in particularly innovative ways, incorporating a broader intellectual discourse from Assyria and Babylonia with more local traditions, a combination also attested in Ezekiel. The existence of earlier biblical texts that ascribe agency to stars could be indicative of the well-known diversity of thought in ancient Israel, and Gen 1’s innovation then provided the pattern that established the dominant discourse henceforth in biblical texts and post-biblical Judaism. Alternatively, the idea of a double-plated cosmos may not have been a feature of ancient Israelite and Judean thought (though it existed elsewhere) and became a feature of biblical

406; see also this reference for key terms of the parts of the sky in Mesopotamian cosmology).

Rochberg argues that the term “firmament” as used elsewhere (as in mythological texts) does not appear in astronomical terminology (the set of texts upon which Halpern constructs his thesis relating Gen 1 to Mesopotamian astronomy). Instead, those astronomical texts focus on the observable phenomena and use “sky” as well as “path” to describe the movement of heavenly bodies (“Mesopotamian Cosmology,” in A Companion to the Ancient Near East [ed. Daniel C. Snell; Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World; Malden: Blackwell, 2005], 324, 327). See, particularly, her article “A Short History of the Waters above the Firmament,” in id., In the Path of the Moon: Babylonian Celestial Divination and Its Legacy (AMD 6; Boston: Brill, 2010), 339–54. Observation was the focus, and, in this manner, a plate under the earth (or, upon which the earth was stretched) that was not perceptible in relation to the movement of astronomical phenomena was, therefore, not a part of the Mesopotamian system.

discourse only in response to (and as a further implication of) advances in ancient Mesopotamian science. Whatever the case, that mythological, ritual, or calendrical concepts are shared between Late Bronze Age Ugarit and Gen 1 appears certain, despite a number of centuries that separate these bodies of literature, giving plausibility to the analysis offered here. Further, there are ways of contextualizing the thesis of this article with Halpern’s argument regarding Gen 1’s cosmology as reflective of larger intellectual discourse.

6 Conclusion

In this article, I have built on Baruch Halpern’s thesis to argue that the priestly writer in Gen 1, along with the Baal Stele, Deutero-Isaiah, and Ps 136:5–6, depict similar, though by no means identical, conceptions of the universe, and that one can interpret these chapters as describing some form of a two-plated cosmos. I have analyzed the relief on the Baal Stele and various aspects of how the images therein pertain to the cosmology envisioned and how this cosmology relates to Gen 1. Despite the shared conceptual image of the cosmos, differences clearly emerge as well. Genesis 1 imagines that land appears as the result of the withdrawal of water underneath the firmament of the heavens, thereby constituting the firmament of the earth and lower plate in contrast to the רקים השמים. Other texts in the Hebrew Bible, such as Deutero-Isaiah and Ps 136, evoke similar, if also diverging, pictures of the cosmos. These texts can help to provide some context to other ancient Israelite traditions for the comparison between Gen 1 and the Baal Stele through both their similarities and differences. For example, in Ps 136:6, God stretches the earth over the waters, an act that involves placing and forming the earth over the waters and that appears distinct from the retreat of water in Gen 1 that results in the revealing of dry land. While the conception of creation that is reflected in the picture of the cosmos on the Baal Stele is unknown, the firmament of the earth above waters depicted on the relief (at least in the argument in this study) is consistent with Ps 136:6. In all these texts and in the examination of the art on the Baal Stele, a clearer picture emerges of the world of Gen 1 and how relief and rhetoric can make more explicit that which appears implicitly in the cosmos in the famous opening of the biblical text.
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