Seven Day Cycles and Seventh-day Sabbath in Cuneiform Texts

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I. Introduction

The discussion of the seven cycle and seventh-day Sabbath in cuneiform tablets from Warka, near Babylon, stands actually in a bigger frame of the discovery of a “Sabbath text” at Nineveh in 1869 by George Smith,1) which was drawn in full by H. Rawlinson in 18752) and in the same year commented upon by Archibald Henry Sayce,3) and later by Francis Brown (1882),4) W. Guilelmus Lotz (1883),5) Peter Jensen (1892),6) and Morris

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1) “In the year 1869, I discovered among other things a curious religious calendar of the Assyrians, in which every month is divided into four weeks, and the seventh days, or “Sabbaths,” are marked out as days on which no work should be undertaken.” (George Smith, Assyrian Discoveries: An Account of Explorations and Discoveries on the site of Nineveh, during 1873 and 1874 [New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1875], Chapter II: 12).


6) Peter Christian Albrecht Jensen, The Supposed Babylonian Origin of the Week and the Sabbath,” Sunday School Times (1892), nr. 3.
Jastrow (1894). The text was also treated by Friedrich Delitzsch in 1900. A text edition was also prepared by R. W. Rogers (1912). A number of scholars commented on the text: Jeremias, Lagrange, Pinches, Clay. On seven cycles in Babylonia, the article of Peter Jensen (1901) should be mentioned.

The discussion of the Warka texts stands further under an even greater umbrella of the symbolic meaning or otherwise, of seven in the Ancient Near Eastern cultures in general. We have found numerous examples in


12) The text discovered from the library of Ashurbanipal (650 BCE) in Nineveh by G. Smith in 1869 is very special. It was a copy made by order of Ashurbanipal of an older text. The 7th, 14th, 21st and 28 days are called umu limnu “evil days.” The king could not eat certain kinds of food, attending to decisions affecting the state, going out on his chariot. The priest could not utter oracles, the doctor could not lay his hand on a sick person. People were not forbidden from attending to private affairs like buying and selling.

13) Seven was important in presargonic texts of A. de la Fuye 1909; in the cylinders of Gudea