

# Is Solomon's Molten Sea the Periodic Structure of the Elements?

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## Abstract

The biblical description of Solomon's Molten Sea (*1 Kings* 7:23–26; *2 Chronicles* 4:2–5) presents a bronze basin of vast proportions resting on twelve oxen and adorned with rows of knops and lilies. In ancient Israel, the Sea was traditionally regarded as a ritual laver for priestly purification, with unmistakable cosmological significances embedded within. This study proposes that the Molten Sea functioned as far more than a utilitarian vessel: it was an **elemental vessel**, symbolically encoding the periodic structure of matter itself. Drawing on scriptural accounts, rabbinic geometry, archaeological studies, ancient metrology, and modern chemistry, this paper argues that the Sea's features correspond to the electron orbitals of the periodic table. Its oxen represent the s-orbitals, its rings of knops the p- and d-orbitals, its bowl the f-orbitals, and its fluted lip the completion of the periodic table's seventh period. The proposed orbital models are discussed in detail and defended against the apparent conflicting measurements, i.e. the so-called “ $\pi$  problem” and “2,000 versus 3,000 bath” discrepancies. Symbolically, the Sea integrates this mapping of elemental periodicity with multiple traditions: Beyerle's cosmic waters ordered by Yahweh, Shapira's covenantal originality over mythic chaos, and Garfinkel's fertility imagery. In this synthesis, the basin once seen as a **ritual laver of primordial waters** becomes an **archetype of ordered creation**: a vessel containing both the waters of life and the elements of matter. It thus bridges Scripture and science, covenant and cosmos, ritual and rule—testifying that creation is structured, purposeful, and intelligible.

## 1. Introduction

Among the most enigmatic features of Solomon's Temple was the “Molten Sea” or “Bronze Sea,” described in *1 Kings* 7:23–26 and *2 Chronicles* 4:2–5. This immense bronze basin, supported by twelve oxen and adorned with rows of ornamental knops and lilies, served as both a ritual object and a symbolic centerpiece of the Temple court. For centuries, interpreters have puzzled over its unusual dimensions, apparent mathematical irregularities, and layered symbolism.

Modern scholarship has often treated the Sea as a liturgical laver, but its scale and complexity suggest a deeper purpose. Wright (1941) emphasized the Temple's function as a microcosm of the cosmos, with its furnishings embodying cosmic order. Garfinkel (2012) noted that monumental basins in Iron Age temples were not only functional but also deeply symbolic, representing fertility, abundance, and divine presence. Within this framework, the Molten Sea was more than a water tank: it was a theological statement about creation and covenant.

This study advances a new perspective. Marshall (2022), argues that the Molten Sea encodes the periodic structure of the elements. His proposal rests on mathematical harmonies, biblical symbolism, and orbital mapping, positioning the Sea as a **three-dimensional periodic structure**. In this view, the basin is best understood as an **elemental vessel**—a container not only of ritual water but also of creation’s order, symbolically holding the building blocks of matter itself. By situating Marshall’s interpretation within biblical, archaeological, and scientific contexts, this paper explores how the Molten Sea may serve as a bridge between Scripture and science, between covenantal symbolism and elemental periodicity.

## 2. Biblical and Historical Background

### Scriptural Descriptions

The biblical texts provide the essential description of the Molten Sea. According to *1 Kings* 7:23–26, the Sea measured “ten cubits from brim to brim, round in compass, and five cubits in height; and a line of thirty cubits did compass it round about.” It was supported by twelve bronze oxen, three facing each cardinal direction, with “knops” (ornamental bulbs) beneath the brim. *2 Chronicles* 4:2–5 repeats these details but records a capacity of 3,000 baths rather than 2,000. The tension between these accounts has prompted centuries of commentary and speculation.

### Later Jewish Traditions

Later Jewish sources elaborated on the Sea’s function and symbolism. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906) emphasizes its role as a laver for ritual purification, while the *Encyclopedia of the Bible* (via BibleGateway) emphasizes both its functional and symbolic significance within the Temple court. These interpretations align with the broader role of water in ritual purification across the ancient Near East. The destruction of the Sea by the Babylonians in 587 BCE confirmed its prominence in Israelite worship and architecture.

### Archaeological Parallels

Archaeological perspectives situate the Sea within broader Iron Age temple traditions. Wright (1941) interprets the Sea as part of a deliberate architectural cosmology, linking it to Near Eastern motifs of cosmic waters and temple-as-microcosm, with its furnishings embodying cosmic order. Within this scheme, the Molten Sea represented not just water storage but an image of the primordial deep. Garfinkel (2012) situates Solomon’s Temple in the context of Iron Age construction practices, showing how monumental vessels and cultic basins functioned as symbols of divine presence, fertility, and abundance.

### Cosmological Symbolism

Studious interpretation also underscores its cosmological dimension. Scholars of symbolism highlight the Sea’s originality within Israelite religion. Beyerle (2005) notes that ancient Judaism frequently employed imagery of cosmic waters to express creation, covenant, and divine sovereignty. Shapira (2001), in his reevaluation of the Molten Sea, emphasizes how while

Mesopotamian apsu basins symbolized mythic primordial waters and Babylonian mythology portraying water as chaotic and threatening, Israel's Molten Sea integrated the theme into covenant history, rooting cosmology in divine law, worship, and history rather than in myth.

## **Synthesis**

Thus, both the textual and archaeological evidence situates the Molten Sea as more than a functional laver. It was a symbolic body of water representing both the primordial chaos subdued by God and the ordered cosmos upheld by covenant. It was a richly layered object: a ritual laver, a cosmic symbol, and a theological statement about Yahweh's order in both creation and covenant, bridging cult, cosmos, and theology. This multifaceted role laid the foundation for later interpretations that seek in its dimensions and design not only ritual function but deeper cosmological and even scientific meaning.

## **3. Symbolism and Cosmic Meaning**

Beyond its practical function as a reservoir for ritual washing, the Molten Sea carried profound metaphysical significance. Its symbolic and cosmological significance was equally central to its role in the Temple. In ancient Israelite religion, material objects were not mere implements but theological statements; the Sea, in particular, embodied the cosmic waters and their subjugation under divine order. Ancient interpreters and modern scholars alike have noted how its imagery reflects both universal and uniquely Israelite conceptions of creation.

### **Cosmic Waters, Order and Divine Sovereignty**

Beyerle (2005) highlights how biblical references to heaven and sea often employ cosmic imagery to assert Yahweh's sovereignty over chaos. Within this framework, the Molten Sea symbolized the primordial waters of creation, transformed from disorder into a contained and ordered basin. Its placement on twelve oxen, facing the four cardinal directions, visually communicated stability and dominion: the world upheld and ordered by covenant. And its placement in the Temple court was a visible affirmation that the God of Israel ruled over the cosmos itself.

### **Covenant Originality vs. Myth**

Shapira (2001) argues that Israel's Molten Sea displayed theological originality compared to Babylonian apsu basins. While Mesopotamian structures represented mythic chaos-waters beneath the earth, Israel's Sea integrated cosmology into covenant history. Its presence in Solomon's Temple testified not to myth but to Yahweh's triumph over chaos and His covenantal relationship with Israel. This originality reframed ancient cosmology in a unique theological register. In this sense, the Sea was an act of theological originality, turning a common ancient symbol into a unique Israelite confession.

## Fertility, Ornament, and Temple Context

Archaeological insights reinforce this cosmic reading. Garfinkel (2012) notes that large cultic basins in Iron Age temples served symbolic as well as practical roles, often connected with fertility and abundance. The lilies worked into the Sea's brim may echo this theme: flowers that symbolize life springing from water. This aesthetic carried clear symbolic meaning to the Jewish people, representing renewal, and divine blessing. The Jewish Encyclopedia also emphasizes the Sea's liturgical use in purification, while BibleGateway's *Encyclopedia of the Bible* stresses its functional importance alongside its symbolic dimensions.

## Ritual and Liturgical Role

The *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906) and BibleGateway's *Encyclopedia of the Bible* both stress the Sea's functional purpose as a laver for priestly purification. Its ritual use did not diminish but rather enhanced its symbolism: washing in its waters connected priestly service to the act of creation itself, enacting purity as an extension of God's cosmic ordering of the primordial deep.

## Integrated Meaning

The Sea thus served as a **cosmic vessel**, uniting practical, symbolic, and covenantal functions. Its waters symbolized both the primordial chaos subdued by God and the living waters of covenantal life. The oxen base represented cosmic order anchored to the four directions. Its lilies celebrated fertility and abundance. In every detail, the Sea pointed beyond itself: to a cosmos ordered by Yahweh, to a covenant people sustained by divine provision, and—as Marshall (2022) later argues—to the elemental order of creation itself. Taken together, the Molten Sea emerges as a richly layered symbol. It was simultaneously a functional vessel of ritual purification, a cosmological representation of the contained primordial waters, a covenantal reinterpretation of ancient Near Eastern myth, and a fertility symbol rooted in agricultural and cultic imagery.

## 4. Measurement and Mathematical Issues

The Sea's dimensions and volume present two of the most debated aspects of its description. (1 Kings 7:23) records a diameter of ten cubits and a circumference of thirty cubits, implying  $\pi = 3$  rather than the more accurate  $\sim 3.14159$ . Volumetrically, the Sea is described as holding **2,000 baths** (1 Kings 7:26) versus **3,000 baths** (2 Chronicles 4:5). While some commentators dismissed these as approximations, others have argued for intentional symbolic meaning embedded within the numbers. In this section, these two central issues will be set out, with fuller consideration of their implications reserved for later sections.

### The $\pi$ Controversy: Various Interpretations

As to the 1 Kings 7:23 dimensional description of the cast bronze basin, Rabbi Nehemiah (2nd century AD), in the early Hebrew geometry text *Mishnat ha-Middot*, offered a layered interpretation of the Sea's circumference. He posited that the 10-cubit diameter was measured

from the outside edge of the brim, whereas the circumference of 30 cubits was measured along the inner brim. It is interesting to note that this early interpretation is the simplest, dissolving the controversy altogether.

George M. Hollenback (1998) advances a similar dual-reading, noting that the Masoretic Text (MT) specifies thirty cubits, while the Septuagint (LXX) gives thirty-three cubits. He interprets this as reflecting different values for  $\pi$  in ancient contexts: a Babylonian  $\pi = 3$  versus a Hellenistic  $\pi \approx 22/7$ . Though not addressing lip vs. knops explicitly, Hollenback's approach similarly implies layered intent: symbolic versus mathematical length.

Elishakoff and Pines (2007) proposed that the Hebrew text encodes a more accurate value through gematria, yielding  $\pi \approx 3.141509$ , nearly identical to the actual constant—suggesting hidden mathematical precision.

Marshall (2022) provides a fresh interpretation: the ten-cubit diameter, when multiplied by  $\pi$ , yields approximately 31.4 cubits—appropriate for the fluted lip circumference of the Sea—while the thirty cubits in the biblical text correspond to the ornamental bands of knops beneath the lip, an explanation remarkably aligned with Rabbi Nehemiah's reading.

These competing views will be analyzed in greater depth later when we begin to discuss their implications for science and scripture.

## A Volumetric Discrepancy: The 1000 Missing Baths

A second textual discrepancy involves the Sea's reported capacity—**2,000 baths** (1 Kings 7:26) versus **3,000 baths** (2 Chronicles 4:5). Byl (1998) and Hognesius (1994) explored geometric models to reconcile this, while Lipschits (2006) emphasized broader measurement challenges in First-Temple units, noting that liquid measurement systems in the First Temple period were themselves unstable, reflecting cultural differences in volume standards. Zapassky (2012) further demonstrated that ancient units and spherical geometry often aligned intentionally, suggesting that the Sea's dimensions reflect a deliberate mathematical system.

When it comes to competing geometries, Marshall (2022) brings a compelling contribution: if the vessel were shaped hemispherically, it yields ~2,000 baths; if fashioned with a flat bottom beneath hemispherical walls, capacity rises to ~3,000 baths. Thus, both biblical figures correspond to two plausible designs:

- A **hemispherical basin** approximates 2,000 baths.
- A **flat-bottomed basin** yields closer to 3,000 baths.

Others have also calculated feasible volumes based upon traditional geometries found in Scripture and ancient near-eastern literature. These will be unpacked later when we begin to discuss their implications for science and scripture.

## A Harmonized Reading

Taken together, these interpretations transform apparent inconsistencies into evidence of **layered intentional design**: symbolic measure (knops band), mathematical precision (lip), and alternative vessel shapes producing different bath volumes. The Molten Sea emerges not merely as a ritual basin, but as a meticulously crafted **vessel of creation**—rich in symbolic and scientific meaning, and embodying both geometry and cosmology.

## 5. *The Chemistry of God* and the Periodic Table

Marshall's *The Chemistry of God* (2022) presents the most comprehensive attempt to interpret the Molten Sea as a three-dimensional periodic structure. At the core of his thesis lies the **Creation Function**, a mathematical expression that generates the repeating structure of natural phenomena. Marshall applies this function to the periodic table of the elements, showing how atomic properties fall into predictable cycles.

### Periodicity in Scripture

Marshall observes that Scripture frequently names metals—gold, silver, iron, brass, lead—in contexts that align with their physical properties and cultural roles. These references suggest that biblical authors were attuned to the elemental order of creation, even if without modern chemical vocabulary. By situating the Molten Sea within this tradition, Marshall proposes that it stands as a divinely inspired diagram of elemental periodicity.

### Orbital Mapping

Marshall's boldest move is to map the features of the Sea directly onto the orbital groups of modern chemistry:

- **Twelve oxen** supporting the basin correspond to the **s-orbitals**, the simplest and most foundational.
- The **upper ring of thirty knops** maps to the **p-orbitals**, reflecting expansion and order.
- The **lower ring of thirty knops** corresponds to the **d-orbitals**, associated with transition and stability.
- The **bowl's lower hemisphere length of fourteen cubits** corresponds to the **f-orbitals**, the lanthanides and actinides.
- The **fluted lip measuring ~31.4 cubits** represents the **seventh period**, the completion of elemental creation.

This mapping reframes the Sea as not only a ritual basin or cosmological symbol but also an **elemental vessel** containing the building blocks of matter itself.

## Dialogue with Symbolic Tradition

Placed in dialogue with earlier cosmological interpretations, Marshall's argument does not displace them but deepens them. Where Beyerle saw the Sea as the contained primordial waters, Marshall interprets those waters as elemental. Where Shapira stressed Israel's covenantal originality, Marshall suggests this originality extended to encoding elemental periodicity. In this sense, his reading continues the theological tradition of the Sea as a symbol of creation, but translates it into the language of modern science.

## 6. Mapping the Molten Sea Structure to the Periodic Table

Marshall's 2023 ICC research poster developed his thesis into a full technical model of the Sea as a three-dimensional periodic structure. Unlike earlier interpreters who emphasized either symbolism or measurement, Marshall presented the Sea as a structural representation of **orbital periodicity**, with each feature of the vessel corresponding to a specific group of electron orbitals.

### Orbital Correspondences

- **Twelve oxen:** Represent the **s-orbitals**, foundational and simple, upon which all higher orbitals rest.
- **Upper ring of thirty knops:** Correspond to the **p-orbitals**, reflecting directional expansion and ordered symmetry.
- **Lower ring of thirty knops:** Linked to the **d-orbitals**, representing transitional stability and complexity.
- **Bowl lower hemisphere (fourteen cubits):** Correlates to the **f-orbitals**, the lanthanides and actinides, which lie beneath the main body of the periodic table.
- **Fluted lip (~31.4 cubits circumference):** Marks the **seventh period**, completing the cycles of elemental order.

This orbital mapping aligns not only with modern chemistry but also with the symbolic logic of the Sea's design: concentric layers, structural symmetry, and ordered progression.

### Three-Dimensional Modeling

Marshall emphasized that the Sea's true innovation lies in its **three-dimensionality**. Where the standard periodic table is depicted in two dimensions, the Molten Sea embodies the same relationships in a spherical, layered form. This 3D structure anticipates later scientific representations of electron shells, with orbitals radiating outward in concentric spheres.

### Integration with Symbolism

Placed alongside traditional interpretations, this model amplifies their meaning. Beyerle's cosmic waters become **elemental waters**—not chaotic but structured. Shapira's covenantal originality is

reinforced by the idea that Israel's basin encoded truths about matter itself, far beyond Babylonian myth. Garfinkel's monumental basins are reframed as cosmological diagrams, not just cultic reservoirs. Zapassky's work on metrology confirms that the Sea's dimensions were not arbitrary but mathematically intentional.

## A Triple Reading

The result is a **triple interpretation** of the Molten Sea:

1. **Ritual laver**, used for priestly purification.
2. **Cosmic symbol**, representing the primordial waters ordered by Yahweh.
3. **Elemental vessel**, encoding the periodic structure of creation.

In this synthesis, the Sea bridges ritual, cosmology, and chemistry—its bronze surface reflecting both the heavens above and the elemental foundations below.

## 7. Implications for Science and Scripture

The reinterpretation of Solomon's Molten Sea as an **elemental vessel** has significant implications for how we understand both the biblical text and the relationship between faith and science.

### Resolving the $\pi$ Problem

The apparent mathematical error of  $\pi = 3$ , long cited by skeptics, dissolves when we recognize that the text encodes **two distinct circumferences**: one symbolic and one precise. Elishakoff and Pines (2007) showed mathematically that the Hebrew text conceals a near-perfect value for  $\pi$  through gematria, encoding  $\pi \approx 3.141509$ . Marshall (2022) argued that the 31.4 cubit circumference of the lip represents the mathematically precise measure, while the thirty cubits describe the ornamental knop band. Hollenback (1998) added that textual witnesses (30 cubits in the Masoretic Text vs. 33 cubits in the Septuagint) reflect different approximations of  $\pi$ , suggesting layered intentionality. Most strikingly, Rabbi Nehemiah, writing in the *Mishnat ha-Middot*, (ca. 150 CE) had already proposed that diameter and circumference were measured at different points on the vessel. This framing shows that Marshall's interpretation is not an innovation in isolation, but a continuation of interpretive tradition already anticipated by rabbinic geometry. The biblical text thus preserves both symbolic and mathematically precise circumferences, revealing intentional design rather than error.

### Reconciling the Bath Discrepancy

The apparent contradiction between *1 Kings 7:26* (2,000 baths) and *2 Chronicles 4:5* (3,000 baths) also finds resolution in vessel design. Marshall's modeling demonstrates that a **hemispherical Sea** approximates 2,000 baths, while a **flat-bottomed variant** approaches 3,000. Hollenback similarly calculated alternative vessel shapes that yield plausible volumes. Byl (1998) and Hognesius (1994) contributed geometric reconstructions, while Lipschits (2006)



emphasized the broader instability of liquid measurement systems in the First Temple period. Zapassky et al. (2012) argued that ancient units of length were often derived in relation to spherical geometry, suggesting that biblical measurements should be read in the context of a broader metrological tradition. What appears contradictory becomes complementary: the biblical texts preserve two valid interpretations of the Sea's capacity. These reported capacities therefore reflect **deliberate polyvalence**, not inconsistency.

## **Bridging Symbolism and Periodicity, Faith and Science**

When these mathematical insights are read alongside symbolic interpretations, the Sea emerges as a multi-layered vessel. For Beyerle, it was the containment of chaos; for Shapira, the originality of Israelite covenantal cosmology; for Garfinkel, a monument of fertility and abundance. Marshall extends these readings by showing that the same vessel also encodes the **periodicity of the elements**. The symbolic waters are revealed as elemental waters, ordered in cycles that modern science confirms. The implications extend beyond technical debates. If the Molten Sea encodes both **symbolic cosmology** and **elemental periodicity**, it provides a bridge between Scripture and the natural sciences. The basin once seen as a ritual laver becomes an archetype of ordered creation: a vessel containing the waters of life and the elements of matter. In this way, the Sea affirms what both theologians and chemists recognize—that creation is not chaotic, but structured, purposeful, and intelligible.

## **8. Conclusion**

The Molten Sea of Solomon's Temple, described in *1 Kings 7* and *2 Chronicles 4*, long treated as a ritual curiosity, emerges on closer examination as a vessel of profound depth—mathematical, symbolic, and elemental. Its dimensions, once thought inconsistent, reconcile under careful analysis: the circumference encodes both symbolic and precise values of  $\pi$ , and the capacity discrepancy corresponds to alternative vessel shapes. Far from reflecting error, these features display intentional polyvalence, harmonizing symbolism with mathematical sophistication.

### **Reframing the Symbolism**

From a theological perspective, the Sea carried cosmological meaning. Beyerle (2005) emphasized its role as a symbol of the primordial waters ordered by Yahweh; Shapira (2001) highlighted its originality compared to Babylonian apsu basins, rooting Israelite cosmology in covenantal history rather than myth; Garfinkel (2012) situated it within the broader Iron Age tradition of monumental basins that fused ritual with cosmic symbolism—a cultic monument of fertility and abundance. Lilies around the brim evoked fertility and life, while the twelve oxen grounding the Sea in four directions embodied cosmic order. These interpretations reveal the Sea as a cosmic vessel, bridging heaven and earth, chaos and harmony.

### **Resolving the Mathematical Puzzles**

Apparent problems of measurement— $\pi$  reduced to 3, and conflicting bath capacities of 2,000 versus 3,000—dissolve under closer scrutiny. Marshall (2022), Elishakoff & Pines (2007),

Hollenback (1998), and Rabbi Nehemiah (*Mishnat ha-Middot*) all recognized in different ways that the text preserves **two circumferences**: one symbolic, one mathematically precise. Likewise, Byl (1998), Hognesius (1994), Lipschits (2006), and Marshall demonstrated that alternative vessel shapes (hemispherical vs. flat-bottomed) resolve the bath discrepancy. Far from contradiction, these layered accounts reinforce the Sea's precision and intentionality.

## Extending into Elemental Order

Building on this rich symbolic foundation, Derek Marshall (*The Chemistry of God*, 2022; ICC Poster, 2023) interprets the Sea as a **three-dimensional periodic structure**. Its oxen, knop rings, bowl, and lip correspond to s-, p-, d-, and f-orbitals, culminating in the seventh period of elemental completion. In this reading, the Molten Sea becomes an **elemental vessel**, not merely holding water but symbolically containing the building blocks of matter itself.

## A Vessel of Creation

The basin once seen as a ritual laver of primordial waters becomes an **archetype of ordered creation**: a vessel containing the waters of life and the elements of matter. Its presence in the Temple signified not only covenantal purification, but also the ordered structure of creation. Taken together, these insights reveal the Molten Sea as more than a ritual basin. It was at once:

1. **A liturgical laver**, for priestly purification.
2. **A cosmic symbol**, containing the primordial waters of creation.
3. **An elemental vessel**, encoding the periodic order of matter.

As such, the Sea functioned as a bridge between covenant and cosmos, ritual and creation, Scripture and science. It proclaims that the God of Israel is not only the Lord of covenant and history but also of order and elemental design, binding together the waters of life and the architecture of matter in a single bronze vessel.

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