

A look into *The Unseen Realm*

The Unseen Realm: Recovering the supernatural worldview of the Bible

Michael S. Heiser

Lexham Press, Bellingham, WA, 2015

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Many people see the Old Testament as a strange book that's hard to interpret. Many Christians neglect its study for that reason. Heiser argues that the key to understanding many of the 'difficult passages' in the Old Testament is recognizing the supernatural worldview of its authors. He makes sweeping claims about the potential effects of his research:

"What you'll read in this book will change you. *You'll never be able to look at your Bible the same way again* [emphasis in original]" (p. 13).

Central to that worldview, he argues, is the idea that Yahweh created spiritual or 'divine' beings with a variety of different roles. The 'sons of God' are his heavenly council, and human beings were originally intended to be His council on earth. That plan was temporarily derailed when the serpent, a disgruntled member of Yahweh's council, tempted Eve and caused the Fall. The rest of the Old Testament is the account of heavenly and earthly rebellion against Yahweh and His continuing plan to restore the earth and have mankind as His family on earth.

Countering practical materialism

Today, many people in Western society no longer believe in God, angels, or other spiritual powers, while the existence of these entities would

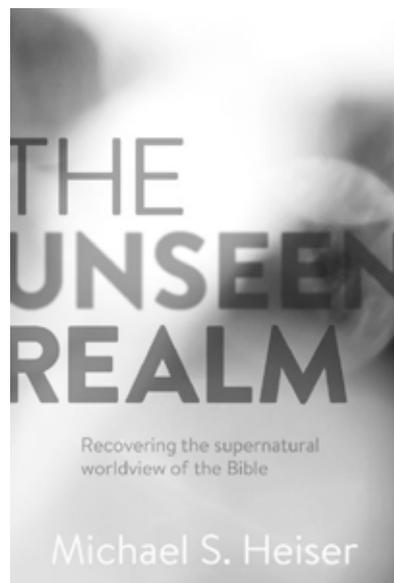
have been simply assumed in ancient times, and used to explain all sorts of phenomena. Even many Christians live as practical materialists, acknowledging God and the spiritual realm, but not believing that it has much of an impact on our daily life.

Heiser argues that if we are going to understand the Old Testament, we need to adjust our worldview. The Israelites lived in a world where the spiritual battle lines were clearly drawn between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and the lesser, corrupt gods who were given control of the other nations descended from Noah and his sons.

However, it is unclear how historically Heiser views the first chapters of Genesis. He believes that Genesis only reached its final form during the Babylonian exile (a common view among liberal Old Testament scholars). Therefore he regards some key passages, such as the Nephilim account in Genesis 6, were written as polemics against Babylonian religious practices. However, this is problematic because Jesus assumed Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, which was the unanimous view of Judaism and Christianity until modern times.¹

God's two households

One of Heiser's main arguments is that God has a council of created heavenly beings with a hierarchy. The highest ones in the hierarchy are called 'sons of God', and are his 'family in heaven' by virtue of their being created by Him. He does not need a council, but He chooses to use them (just as He does not need human beings, but chooses to use us). Some of these council members became corrupt, which is the reason why God sentences them to die as men in Psalm 82.



Heiser claims that seeing the divine council in Genesis helps to shed light on what happened in the Garden of Eden, which Heiser argues was the seat of Yahweh's divine council on earth. Heiser argues that the serpent was a member of the divine council who was unhappy with God's decision to make humanity in His image, and so orchestrated their rebellion against God. When he promised Eve that she would gain insight as a result of eating the fruit, he did *not* promise that she would become like Yahweh. Rather, he claimed that she would become like one of the *elohim*—one of the members of the divine council.

After the Flood, God covenanted with Noah and his sons, and commanded them to fill the earth. But after the rebellion at Babel, Heiser argues that Yahweh in essence disinherited the nations, assigning them to the authority of the lesser council members who became corrupt. Instead, He chose for His own people a nation that did not yet exist—Israel, through whom God would retake the nations.

One place Heiser missteps is when he argues that the Satan in Job is not the devil, but a member of the divine

council performing the task assigned to him.

“The *satan* described in these passages is not the devil. Rather, he’s an anonymous prosecutor, as it were, fulfilling a role in Yahweh’s council—bringing an accusatory report.” (p. 56)

It is true that Satan does not become the proper name of the devil/serpent until the New Testament, but one could argue that it is partially *because of Job* that it became his name. And Revelation seems to clearly identify Satan, the serpent, and the devil as the same entity. The figure in Job opposes God and wishes harm on someone who loves God, which is very consistent with Satan.

God's mountain paradise

Combining Genesis 2 with Ezekiel 28, Heiser makes the case that Eden was a mountain garden, which makes sense of ancient Near Eastern conceptions of mountains as the dwelling of the gods. Seen this way, Babel becomes a human attempt to build another mountain paradise and thereby ascend to Heaven. It was not simply disobeying the commandment to spread out over the earth; it was overt rebellion.

The seed of the serpent

Heiser believes that there were descendants of the Nephilim, called Anakim and Rephaim, in Canaan when the spies came back. Rather than concluding that the spies were lying about their presence, Heiser argues that they really were there and were only wiped out in David’s day.

However, the only time when the word ‘Nephilim’ is connected with the Anakim is in the spies’ lying report in Numbers 13:33. While Scripture continues to reference people of unusual stature up through David’s day, the Anakim are never explicitly

affirmed to be descendants of the Nephilim. And if the Nephilim were all killed in the Flood (and Genesis affirms that only Noah and his family survived) and the angels who fathered them were imprisoned until the day of judgment (2 Peter 2:4–8 and Jude 6–7), one wonders how the Nephilim could have reappeared. It seems much more likely that the spies genuinely encountered some large people, but to ensure that Israel refused to take the land they exaggerated their report even more and said that these people were actually descended from the Nephilim.

A covert mission of salvation

Heiser also argues that there was a very good reason no one expected Jesus to be the sort of Messiah He was: the messianic prophecies were fragmentary and scattered throughout the Old Testament in such a way that we can only see their fulfilment in Christ in hindsight. Heiser argued that God did it this way to keep Satan in the dark. One might suppose that’s also the reason that Revelation is similarly difficult to interpret (as evidenced by the many interpretations of the book).

Heiser complains that Christians read the New Testament into the Old and this colours our perception of how the Old Testament authors would have viewed the text.

“These Old Testament passages and others have been made by modern commentators to speak about the messiah and his work in ways the New Testament authors *don’t* claim” (p. 243).

But if the New Testament authors were interpreting the Old Testament typologically, then believers today should also be able to look at the Old Testament in the same way and see connections, since the NT doesn’t claim to *exhaustively* catalog OT typology. Of course, our typological readings need to be responsible, and they’re

never authoritative as the NT typology is; however, there is no reason to limit the typology to that explicitly stated in the NT.

Jesus, the unique Son

Heiser shows how the Old Testament seems to include two Yahweh figures—one invisible and one visible who appears to people in various times and places and is called the Angel of Yahweh or the Word of Yahweh. They are sometimes distinguished, and sometimes their identities are blurred together. Heiser argues that the Angel of Yahweh is the pre-incarnate Son of God. This is consistent with John’s revelation of the Logos (Word) who was both with God and God Himself (John 1:1–3).

Similarly, he argues that the identities of Jesus and the Holy Spirit are blurred in the same way in the New Testament (citing Acts 16:7, Romans 8:9, Galatians 4:6, 1 Peter 10:11). However, I think he is wrong in this assertion. Calling the Holy Spirit ‘the Spirit of Christ’ or ‘the Spirit of Jesus’ simply recalls Jesus’ promise that:

“... the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 15:26).

Heiser is outright mistaken with claims using language that would delight modalist heretics, “The Spirit is Yahweh, and so he is Jesus as well.” However, Heiser redeems himself somewhat by stating the correct doctrine: “It is clear that Jesus and the Spirit are different persons” (p. 294). It is correct that the Old Testament does not teach the full Trinitarian doctrine. Rather, at that stage of God’s progressive revelation, the doctrine had not been revealed, but it was in no way contradicted. But the New Testament is fully Trinitarian, i.e. reveals that in

the one true God, there are precisely three Persons.

Troubling inconsistencies

If Heiser had come to the text as a convinced inerrantist and a young-earth creationist, his book would have been much stronger and better. When it comes to the existence of spiritual beings, Heiser's concern is to get back to the original view of the biblical authors. Yet that same view would have included creation in six ordinary-length days and a global flood. And in places, one is unsure how *historical* Heiser views the events in Genesis 1–11 to be.

Heiser has a pleasant to read, accessible writing style. He breaks down complex ideas to make them understandable to people who can't read Hebrew and the other relevant ancient languages. This ability to communicate is sadly rare among Bible specialists. One only wishes he was a little more consistent in his goal to communicate the original worldview of the Bible.

References

1. See Sarfati, J., *The Genesis Account*, Creation Book Publishers, Atlanta, GA, pp. 9–11, 2015.