

Light in Dark Places

<https://www.keithmathison.org/post/the-unseen-realm-my-two-cents>

The Unseen Realm: My Two Cents

Several weeks ago, Tim Challies mentioned a review of a book by Michael Heiser titled *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Lexham Press, 2015). I had not heard of the book, so I looked it up online. When I first saw the description, my knee-jerk reaction was to think this was just another self-published sensationalistic Bible-Code type of book. Then I noticed that the book had endorsements from scholars such as Tremper Longman, Darrel Bock, Richard Averbeck, John Goldingay, and Daniel Block. These are well-respected evangelical biblical scholars. They are not lightweights, so I decided to see what the book was all about.

Having completed it, I can say that it is about a lot of things. As the subtitle of the book indicates, the big idea that frames the entire text is that modern Western readers of the Bible have lost the supernatural worldview of the biblical authors and now read the Bible through a largely anti-supernatural post-Enlightenment lens. This post-Enlightenment lens causes us to miss or dismiss many important features of the biblical text. Heiser argues that we need to “recover” the supernatural worldview if we are to read the Bible rightly.

The most significant aspect of this supernatural worldview that has been lost, according to Heiser, is a biblical understanding of the idea of the “divine council” or “sons of God.” He himself was awakened to this aspect of the text by Psalm 82:1. Later, Deuteronomy 32:8–9 would have a major influence on his understanding. Most of his book is an attempt to show how a correct understanding of the “divine council” clears up a lot of puzzling passages and provides the necessary context for understanding the history of God’s work of redemption.

Heiser begins by stating that the Old Testament word *elohim* is a generic word referring to beings who inhabit the spiritual world (p. 29). Those who inhabit the spiritual world include Yahweh, the divine council, the gods of other nations, demons, angels, and the souls of deceased human beings like Samuel (p. 30). Heiser interprets the “us” language of Genesis 1:26–28 and elsewhere as a reference to the “divine council.” Heiser appeals to Job 38:7 as evidence that the “divine council” observed God’s work of creation (p. 39–40). This does not mean that the spiritual beings who comprise the “divine council” are uncreated. Yahweh created these inhabitants of the spiritual world (p. 43). They were created to be Yahweh’s high-level administrators in the spiritual realm, and man was created to be His administrators in the earthly realm.

Heiser goes on through the book to develop this idea, arguing that it impacts every part of the storyline of Scripture and attempting to show how. Given that this is the nature of this 400-page book, it would be a little bit tedious to attempt a summary of the remainder of the book. Several available reviews online including those by Andrew Moody, Benjamin Noonan, David Instone-Brewer, Mark Hassler, Thomas Howe, and Louis Markos provide such a summary for those who are interested. Some of these

reviews are mostly positive, some mostly negative, some a combination of both. Rather than add to the list of existing full-length reviews, I would simply like to make a few observations.

A Few Observations

Generally speaking, I think Heiser is correct to be concerned that Western Christians have allowed an anti-supernatural worldview to distort their view of the Bible. To the degree that books like his can get Christians to think about the fact that the biblical writers had anything but a naturalistic or materialistic worldview, they are helpful. Regarding the theme of the “divine council,” I think it is also laudable that Heiser is attempting to synthesize and make available information on the “divine council” texts. This is information that has been around for a while (pp. 385–6) but is usually accessible only to advanced graduate and post-graduate students and scholars with expertise in biblical Hebrew and other Ancient Near Eastern languages. If you’ve heard of Eisenbrauns, you might have seen some of it. If not, the content of Heiser’s book will be new. Bringing attention to neglected aspects of Scripture is a good thing.

[FIRST PROBLEM]

There are also some aspects of the book, however, that I think are problematic, and readers should be aware of them going in. First, even though this book is an academic work that engages critically with current scholarship, there is an element of sensationalism in the opening pages (e.g., “*You’ll never be able to look at your Bible the same way again.*” p. 13) that will hopefully be removed if this book has a second edition. The preface and first two chapters also come across as very self-congratulatory. I don’t believe that was the author’s intent, especially since elsewhere he acknowledges that he is bringing information that already exists in the scholarly literature down to a popular level. Perhaps I am misreading these first pages.

[SECOND PROBLEM]

A second problem is that the author explicitly and enthusiastically endorses a biblicist hermeneutic that pits Scripture against creeds and confessions (p. 16 ff.) and against the Christian tradition (p. 12). Biblicism has been a popular approach throughout church history, but it has almost always been connected with heresy in one form or another. The Arians were biblicists. The Socinians were biblicists. In America, anti-Trinitarians of all types shouted “No creed but the Bible!” Biblicism has deep roots in America, so it’s never surprising to run across it. The problem is that proponents of this view don’t realize that being biblicist is not the same as being biblical. The Arians were biblicists. The framers of the Nicene Creed, however, were biblical. This biblicist view is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of both Scripture and creeds and confessions.

What is more surprising is that Heiser sees the need to push this false dilemma (Scripture vs. confessions) given the subject matter of his book. He seems to be confusing traditional interpretations of certain passages with the orthodox Christian tradition. The creeds and confessions of the church are not biblical commentaries. They don’t offer an interpretation of every passage of Scripture. The creeds deal primarily with the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of Christ in response to various heresies that arose in history. The confessions are summaries of the main doctrines of Scripture. They don’t directly address how to interpret Psalm 82. They do *indirectly* address it if someone proposes an interpretation that

denies the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, but they do not offer a commentary on every text of Scripture. There simply is no need, outside of sensationalistic marketing, to pit good biblical theology against the Christian tradition. Good biblical theology is being done by scholars who are thoroughly confessional (e.g. Gregory Beale, L. Michael Morales, etc.). It's a false dilemma.

[THIRD PROBLEM]

That brings me to a third problem. Although Heiser is certainly correct to note the many different ways the Hebrew word *elohim* is used in Scripture, I think more care needs to be taken when bringing this material to a popular level audience. Heiser is striving so hard to look at the Ancient Near Eastern context of the Old Testament that he seems to forget that the context of modern readers affects what they will hear him saying. Let me explain what I mean. On page 24, in a discussion of Job 38, Heiser writes: "In the ancient Semitic world, *sons of God* (Hebrew: *beney Elohim*) is a phrase used to identify divine beings with higher-level responsibilities or jurisdictions." A few paragraphs later, on the same page, we read: "Right from the start, then, God has company—other divine beings, the sons of God." On the next page, he continues to refer to "divine" entities. Thankfully, he also mentions on page 25 that these "divine" entities are "created by Yahweh," but the problem remains.

The problem is that the word "divine" carries certain connotations in the minds of modern speakers of English. More specifically, it carries ontological connotations of deity. What do I mean? If you look at almost any systematic theology textbook, you will find a section on the "divine attributes." The divine attributes are attributes that belong to God – to Yahweh. When modern English speakers hear the word "divine" in the context of a discussion of Scripture, they will be thinking "God" with a capital "G." When an author starts talking about created "divine" beings, many readers are going to hear him presenting something similar to ancient polytheistic pantheons. Now, I need to say that Heiser spends the bulk of a chapter (ch. 4) explaining that what he is arguing for is not polytheism. Those who are following him carefully will realize that he is simply trying to find the best language to speak of the *elohim* of Psalm 82 and the *sons of God* of Job 38. My point is that I don't think "divine" beings or "gods" is the best language to explain the Old Testament concept to modern readers because it is *inevitably* going to cause confusion in the minds of many of them. As I mentioned above, Heiser defines *elohim* as inhabitants of the spiritual world. "Spiritual" beings would be a preferable term.

[FOURTH PROBLEM]

A fourth problem that occurs in this book is "the man with a hammer" problem. We've all heard variations on the saying: "To a man with a hammer, every problem looks like a nail." Something similar occurs in this book. The "divine council" concept morphs from being "a neglected topic of study that legitimately needs to be examined more carefully" into "the key to everything." Several of the reviews I linked above give examples of this phenomenon, so I don't need to rehash all of it. This, however, does tie into the somewhat sensationalistic element I noted above. The reader is given the distinct impression that the "divine council" is the secret key to unlock all of the hidden mysteries of the Bible. The reader starts to pick up a subtle undertone: All of the theologians of the past 2000 years have misread the Bible. All of the creeds and confessions have mis-read it. But now! The key has been found! Like the author, you too are going to have to choose between the Bible and the Christian tradition (p. 12).

Historically, this kind of message has almost *always* led to one heresy or another. That is inevitably going to happen when the creeds are reduced to little more than “helpful” advice and pitted unnecessarily against Scripture. The creeds are not inspired. Only Scripture is God-breathed. In Scripture, God says: “Thus saith the Lord.” In the creeds, the Church says: “We believe you.” It is the corporate faith of the Church. Tossing it aside is not a trivial matter, and the danger to which I refer is not an imagined one. Heiser has a website called “More Unseen Realm” that supplements his book. On the page titled *What’s Next?* he writes the following about Adam’s sin and Romans 5.

"I do not take the traditional view of this verse. It never mentions guilt, only that all humans sin. No human can be saved apart from the work of Christ (in any degree) because of our own sin, not because of someone else’s. Since Rom 1:3 has Jesus being a descendant of Adam “according to the flesh,” and he is a direct descendant of Adam, the traditional view of Romans 5:12, that all are guilty because of Adam (as opposed to their own sin) creates a significant theological problem for Jesus as a direct lineal descendant of Adam “according to the flesh.” The virgin birth doesn’t solve this, because Mary is fully human and descended from Adam like everyone else, and because if Jesus is a son of David “according to the flesh” he wasn’t just inserted into Mary’s womb with the effect that he was biologically unrelated to either Joseph or Mary. This quandary was why Roman Catholicism invented the doctrine of Mary’s sinlessness. I reject that idea as unbiblical. I believe Jesus is insulated from this problem by a better (text-driven) view of Romans 5:12. There is a better way to interpret Rom. 5:12 for what it specifically says — not for what tradition has read into it — a way that is also consistent with ANE backgrounding to paradise stories."

"Note that my view isn’t unique to me in Christian tradition. But this is an item for a future book."

Romans 5:12 is the classical text for the doctrine of original sin. When Heiser writes, “the traditional view of Romans 5:12, that all are guilty because of Adam (as opposed to their own sin) creates a significant theological problem,” is he denying the doctrine of original sin as it appears? If so, he is correct that his view isn’t unique to him in Christian tradition because its most famous historical exponent was the heretic Pelagius.

Reformed readers of this blog might also want to know that Heiser proposes a view of the relationship between predestination and the will that is decidedly not Reformed (pp. 63–67). On the other hand, he interprets Armageddon in a way that students of Meredith Kline will appreciate (p. 371).

[IN CONCLUSION]

In conclusion, *The Unseen Realm* has as its primary topic a subject that should be more carefully explored. Many of Heiser’s observations are interesting and deserving of further study. There is no legitimate reason, however, to frame all of this in a sensationalistic way that pits Scripture against the orthodox Christian tradition and strongly implies that readers have to choose between the two.

Those are my two cents.