

THINGS
SEEN
AND
UNSEEN

*Reflecting on Michael Heiser's work on
the spiritual realm*



This article continues the theme of Spiritual Warfare, as explored in issue 10 of *Primer*.

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Michael Heiser is an Old Testament scholar who has found his niche in making the complex world of academic biblical studies accessible to evangelical laypeople. His success here is evident not only in the growing collection of books he's authored, but also in his recent work as script consultant for the *Bible Project*.

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I have found his work to be both fascinating and deeply flawed: something that is worthwhile for anyone with any interest in Scripture and its key storylines to engage with seriously, but also something that should be approached with eyes wide open. For that reason, let me explain what the value of his work is, and where its weaknesses lie.

What distinguishes Heiser's approach to the Bible is the depth of its commitment to understanding the text's original context. His area of expertise is ancient Israel and the cultures that surrounded her, and he sees the influence of these cultures upon the Old Testament writers' thought-world at every turn. On the face of it, this aligns him with the sort of 'liberal' scholarship that majors on the OT's similarities with other Ancient Near Eastern literature – often to the point of denying that the OT is divine revelation in any meaningful sense. Yet this is not where Heiser ends up; he maintains a conservative doctrine of Scripture, while also engaging the secular academy with integrity and seriousness.

At the heart of this distinctive straddling of academy and church is the way he discerns

The single best introduction to Heiser's work is Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), which combines a very accessible main text and a wealth of footnoted scholarly detail. A lighter version of *The Unseen Realm* is *Supernatural: What the Bible Teaches About the Unseen World – and Why It Matters* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015). Also worth a look are *Angels: What the Bible Really Says About God's Heavenly Host* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), his just-released *Demons: What the Bible Really Says About the Powers of Darkness* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), and especially his extensive online resources, available at www.drmsH.com.

Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 11–20.

His PhD thesis, completed in 2004 under the supervision of eminent Hebrew scholar Michael V. V. Fox, examines ideas about Israel's God and the gods of Israel's neighbours. See Michael S. Heiser, "The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 2004).

See, for instance, his scholarly articles surrounding his PhD research, e.g. Michael S. Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God," *BSac* 158 (2001): 52–74; Michael S. Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible," *BBR* 18 (2008): 1–30; Michael S. Heiser, "Monotheism and the Language of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls," *TynBul* 65 (2014): 85–100.

a more-or-less coherent 'worldview' across the diverse Scriptural authors, revolving around the idea of an unseen, spiritual realm. Heiser argues that the Bible consistently assumes that God is the uncreated creator of both the visible created world (the universe we see and know, and over which humans were placed by God with delegated, subordinate sovereignty), and an invisible (to our eyes) world of spiritual beings – angels, demons, cherubim, seraphim and so on. The unseen realm has a structure and defined hierarchy, such that we can talk about a nonhuman 'family' of God – spiritual beings with great power and authority, who, like humanity, were created in God's image and given dominion over their realm of existence. However, just as humanity rebelled against God and experienced alienation from him, **so did some of this spiritual household.**

For this whole construal of the Bible's storyline, see Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 23-69.

Thus the Bible's story is the story of two battlefields – on earth and in heaven, with God determined to reassert his rule in both – and, crucially, these battlefields are intimately connected with each other. Heiser finds in a number of biblical texts the idea of the ancient world's nations being assigned to particular members of the unseen realm as their heavenly rulers: the hostile-to-God nations under the hostile-to-God spiritual beings, **and Israel alone belonging to God.** The Scriptural narrative is then one of God's plan to reclaim the whole world for his rule – and this He achieves, first, through the death and resurrection of his Son; second, through the declaration of that victory by the Church (the successor to / fulfilment of Israel as God's special possession) throughout the world; and, third, through the final defeat of all God's enemies **at the end of history.**

See Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 110-122.

See Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 267-383, especially the summary on 344-5.

Were it not for his deep knowledge of both the Bible and its Ancient Near Eastern parallels, some of Heiser's claims would feel rather fanciful. Yet because it is all so firmly rooted in close historical study, once you get into the details of his project, it does all start to make sense. Heiser shines especially welcome light upon **the interaction between Scripture and themes found in Jewish intertestamental literature.** Moreover, besides the close exegetical details, I am also convinced that the 'big story' that Heiser is telling is important. His insights align well with missiologist Paul Hiebert's "**flaw of the excluded middle**": the idea that Western Christians emphasise heaven and earth as two separate tiers – God's dwelling place and ours – but don't think about many ways in which they interact. I find Heiser a compelling and persuasive guide to the Bible's take on these matters, and I think he has probably got a lot of things right.

See, for example, his insights into the connection between 1 Peter 3:14-22 and the Book of Enoch, in Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 335-339.

Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology* 10, no. 1 (1982), 35-47.

Yet, for all that I have benefited from Heiser's work, it also seems to me to be fundamentally flawed. While his project is admirable for its commitment to the Bible's original historical context, it is also in this very area that I find it hermeneutically naïve. My criticisms are, therefore, less directed towards what Heiser actually says, than to the basic approach that he takes – the fundamental orientation of the whole enterprise. Because these are ground-level issues, though, I do think he leaves himself open to significant theological errors down the track – and there are a few places where such errors seem already to have caught up with him.

Heiser is concerned about “a pervasive tendency in the believing Church to filter the Bible through creeds, confessions, and denominational preferences.” He contends that reading the Bible through any lens other than those of its original human authors severely distorts its meaning. This argument is problematic on two counts. First, Heiser’s rhetoric suggests that Bible readers need to stop reading from the perspective of who they are today – particularly if they are modern evangelical Christians – and start reading like ancient Jews. This, though, is impossible. All of us are unavoidably *situated* readers: we can’t just escape our current contexts and read ‘as if’ we belonged to another. So just as Heiser is surely right to point out the danger of assuming that our current ways of reading the Bible – say, as evangelical churchgoers – are infallible, so it is equally dangerous to think we can jettison those ways and simply read Scripture “as it was meant to be read.” Heiser thinks that he has learned to do just that. But why should we believe him? Why hasn’t the particular way he has learned to read Scripture given him warped lenses, too?

Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 16.

The second problem with Heiser’s call to read the Bible ‘as it was meant to be read’ concerns its handling of the issue of Scripture’s dual authorship. Divine authorship features almost nowhere in Heiser’s work: it seems, at most, to be a background conviction that guarantees that whatever the Bible’s human authors were saying is the truth. While this might align Heiser with the way some conservative evangelicals have begun speaking about the task of biblical theology – as “understanding and embracing the worldview of the biblical authors” – I am not persuaded that such a construal takes God seriously enough as the One who speaks in and authors Scripture. In fact, I worry that Heiser is in the process of reducing the God of the Bible to the deity of early Enlightenment thought: still big and powerful, but no longer the absolute, uncreated, Wholly Other being of classical Christian thinking.

Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 15.

James M. Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 15.

A good example of this is Heiser’s discussion of providence and the question of whether God’s sovereignty implies there is no risk in his plans for the universe. Heiser establishes the battle lines early on: “an ancient Israelite,” we are told, “would have thought differently about these questions than most believers do today” – because “we have layers of tradition that filter the Bible in our thinking.” But Heiser’s attempt to “peel those layers away” reveals an understanding of God as basically time-bound: an all-knowing chess player, who can get the result he wants

See Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 61–67.

This series of quotes are all from Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 61.

in the end, but without controlling all the pieces on the board in the meantime. It is regrettable that Heiser does not seem to have engaged with the (admittedly) deep and difficult questions that divine providence raises. And it is especially unfortunate that, not having engaged with them, he nevertheless castigates “several modern theological systems” that his plain reading supposedly undermines. In fact, the whole discussion leaves me doubly unconvinced. I don’t think he offers a better, more biblical understanding of providence than is found in the Reformed tradition. Yet the confidence with which he both presents his view as the clear teaching of Scripture, and then dismisses other readings as ‘impositions’ on the text, is highly problematic as an overall approach.

This approach is echoed in a number of other places in Heiser’s work: confidence that post-biblical traditions have imposed things on Scripture, but lacking in substantive engagement with what those traditions are claiming – and so misrepresenting them. At times this leads him close to some worrying theological positions. His discussion of the relationship between Jesus, the Spirit, and the God of the Old Testament, for example, tacks between placing Jesus in a subordinate position to the Father, and wholly identifying the persons of the Trinity with one another. There are also a number of places where it seems that, behind the slightly dazzling appearance of scholarly credibility, his exegetical claims don’t stack up. Yet there is so much that is (for my money, at least) refreshingly insightful in his reading – I really do think he’s seeing things in Scripture that modern readers have overlooked! – that I certainly don’t want his project to come to an end. I just wish he’d tone down his ‘plain reading’ rhetoric, reflect more deeply on fundamental hermeneutical issues – and stop taking cheap shots at the big bad monster of ‘theology.’

For a short – though dense – overview of the Reformed understanding of providence, see John Webster, “Providence,” in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. R. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 148–64.

Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 65.

“Jesus is the second Yahweh, the embodied Yahweh of the Old Testament. But Jesus is not the “Father” Yahweh. He therefore is *but isn’t* Yahweh... The Spirit is Yahweh, and so he is Jesus as well, but not incarnate or embodied. The Spirit is *but isn’t* Jesus, just as Jesus is *but isn’t* Yahweh the Father.” Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 294. The distinction between an invisible and an embodied Yahweh is unpacked in Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 134–138. The broader issues in such a reading of the Old Testament are very well explored in Chris Ansberry, “Turning Up the Lights: The Trinity in the Old Testament”, *Primer 09* (2019), 40–57. Heiser’s problem here seems more to be one of confusing, inexact terminology than of outright heterodoxy. Ironically, the very point of the post-biblical theological traditions that he derides was to supply the concepts and vocabulary to articulate the Bible’s teaching here carefully, without contradicting its testimony in other places. By self-consciously cutting himself off from those traditions, I would argue that Heiser has lost the very resources that would help him read the Bible better.

For example, Heiser presents the PhD thesis of Ronn Johnson (“The Old Testament Background for Paul’s Principalities and Powers” (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2004)) as a compelling study that shows that Paul adopted the ‘divine council’ worldview Heiser sees across the Old Testament (see Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 329 n. 22); Johnson’s work in fact rests upon quite slim exegetical evidence. Similarly, Heiser contends that Paul’s desire to travel to Spain was motivated by this same basic orientation (see Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 302–306); this, too, is a much more contested point than Heiser lets on.

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Primer is produced by the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) and Oak Hill College.

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