A look into *The Unseen Realm*  

*The Unseen Realm: Recovering the supernatural worldview of the Bible*  
Michael S. Heiser  
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Lita Cosner

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 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
unusual stature up through David’s
continues to reference people of
in Numbers 13:33. While Scripture
Anakim is in the spies’ lying report
only wiped out in David’s day.
that they really were there and were
about their presence, Heiser argues
concluding that the spies were lying
when the spies came back. Rather than
Anakim and Rephaim, in Canaan
descendants of the Nephilim, called
overt rebellion.

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 Testa-
ment 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 him-
self 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**