

The Unseen Realm is a spiritual game changer. Like Elisha's servant, you'll have your eyes opened to truths you've missed in the Bible that have been there all along. Heiser breathes new life into a biblical concept commonly misunderstood and misapplied in the evangelical world: spiritual warfare. He illumines the meaning of strange things in the Scriptures that Christians shy away from: the divine council, the sons of God, Watchers, Nephilim, giants. But he shows how these oddities are actually crucial to understanding the story line of God's redemptive plan for humanity. I am not exaggerating when I say that this book changed my understanding of God, the Bible, and my spiritual life. This is beautiful theology.

Brian Godawa

Author of the best-selling biblical fiction series *Chronicles of the Nephilim*

There is a world referred to in the Scripture that is quite unseen, but also quite present and active. Michael Heiser's *The Unseen Realm* seeks to unmask this world. Heiser shows how important it is to understand this world and appreciate how its contribution helps to make sense of Scripture. The book is clear and well done, treating many ideas and themes that often go unseen themselves. With this book, such themes will no longer be neglected, so read it and discover a new realm for reflection about what Scripture teaches.

Darrell L. Bock

Executive Director for Cultural Engagement, Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies, Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership and Cultural Engagement

This is a provocative book that is badly needed. Many readers will be surprised by it—both its main theme and certain specific parts of it. This is because the author highlights the unseen realm as the Bible presents it in its ancient context, but this part of what the Bible teaches has not been well incorporated into either Christian theology or the preaching and teaching of the believing church (or at least many segments of it). We tend to ignore or downplay the many passages where the unseen realm is made visible, along with their implications. The author is enthusiastic about how his own eyes have been opened by the text, so he has written this book to open the eyes of his brothers and sisters in Christ to this same unseen (but very real!) realm.

Richard E. Averbeck, PhD

Director, Doctor of Philosophy (Theological Studies) Program,
Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

How was it possible that I had never seen that before?” Dr. Heiser’s survey of the complex reality of the supernatural world as the Scriptures portray it covers a subject that is strangely sidestepped. No one is going to agree with everything in his book, but the subject deserves careful study, and so does this book.

John Goldingay

David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament, School of Theology,
Fuller Theological Seminary

Michael Heiser has written an incredibly accessible and well-researched work on some notoriously thorny biblical passages. Heiser’s work on the divine council has earned him respect in the scholarly community for years, and he has now made this available to all. Without a doubt, *The Unseen Realm* will encourage, correct, and challenge many of our views on the spiritual realms revealed in the Bible—showing us the reality of things unseen!

William “Rusty” Osborne

Assistant Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies,
College of the Ozarks

This is a “big” book in the best sense of the term. It is big in its scope and in its depth of analysis. Michael Heiser is a scholar who knows Scripture intimately in its ancient cultural context. All—scholars, clergy, and laypeople—who read this profound and accessible book will grow in their understanding of both the Old and New Testaments, particularly as their eyes are opened to the Bible’s “unseen world.”

Tremper Longman III

Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies, Westmont College

In this remarkable volume Michael Heiser not only opens our eyes to the unseen realm of the supernatural in the Scriptures, but also alerts us to the reality of supernatural forces in our own experience. Although based on exhaustive research in both primary biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources and secondary scholarly literature relevant to his project, Michael’s book is written in a style that is accessible to scholars and laypeople alike. Even when readers disagree with his interpretation of specific biblical texts, they will be stimulated and inspired by fresh readings that he offers as he constructs a coherent picture of the role of the supernatural in biblical revelation.

Daniel I. Block, D.Phil.

Gunther H. Knoedler Professor of Old Testament, Wheaton College

THE
UNSEEN
REALM

THE UNSEEN REALM

Recovering the supernatural
worldview of the Bible

Michael S. Heiser



The Unseen Realm

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Transliteration of words from biblical Hebrew and Greek, along with other ancient languages, has been simplified for English-only readers. More precise transliteration is used only when required by the discussion.

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PART 1

FIRST THINGS

Reading Your Bible Again— for the First Time

WE ALL HAVE WATERSHED MOMENTS IN LIFE, CRITICAL TURNING POINTS where, from that moment on, nothing will ever be the same.

One such moment in my own life—the catalyst behind this book—came on a Sunday morning in church while I was in graduate school. I was chatting with a friend who, like me, was working on a PhD in Hebrew studies, killing a few minutes before the service started. I don't recall much of the conversation, though I'm sure it was something about Old Testament theology. But I'll never forget how it ended. My friend handed me his Hebrew Bible, open to Psalm 82. He said simply, "Here, read that ... look at it closely."

The first verse hit me like a bolt of lightning:

God [*elohim*] stands in the divine assembly;
he administers judgment in the midst of the gods [*elohim*].¹

I've indicated the Hebrew wording that caught my eye and put my heart in my throat. The word *elohim* occurs twice in this short verse. Other than the covenant name, Yahweh, it's the most common word in the Old Testament for God. And the first use of the word in this verse worked fine. But since I knew my Hebrew grammar, I saw immediately that the second instance needed to be translated as plural. There it was, plain as day: *The God of the Old Testament was part of an assembly—a pantheon—of other gods.*

Needless to say, I didn't hear a word of the sermon. My mind was reeling.

How was it possible that I'd never seen that before? I'd read through the Bible seven or eight times. I'd been to seminary. I'd studied Hebrew. I'd taught for five years at a Bible college.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations come from the *Lexham English Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012). Typographical formatting used in the *Lexham English Bible* has been removed.

What did this do to my theology? I'd always thought—and had taught my students—that any other “gods” referenced in the Bible were just idols. As easy and comfortable as that explanation was, it didn't make sense here. The God of Israel isn't part of a group of idols. But I couldn't picture him running around with other real gods, either. This was the Bible, not Greek mythology. But there it was in black and white. The text had me by the throat, and I couldn't shake free.

I immediately set to work trying to find answers. I soon discovered that the ground I was exploring was a place where evangelicals had feared to tread. The explanations I found from evangelical scholars were disturbingly weak, mostly maintaining that the gods (*elohim*) in the verse were just men—Jewish elders—or that the verse was about the Trinity. I knew neither of those could be correct. Psalm 82 states that the gods were being condemned as corrupt in their administration of the nations of the earth. The Bible nowhere teaches that God appointed a council of Jewish elders to rule over foreign nations, and God certainly wouldn't be railing against the rest of the Trinity, Jesus and the Spirit, for being corrupt. Frankly, the answers just weren't honest with the straightforward words in the text of Psalm 82.

When I looked beyond the world of evangelical scholarship, I discovered that other scholars had churned out dozens of articles and books on Psalm 82 and Israelite religion. They'd left no stone unturned in ferreting out parallels between the psalm and its ideas and the literature of other civilizations of the biblical world—in some cases, matching the psalm's phrases word for word. Their research brought to light other biblical passages that echoed the content of Psalm 82. I came to realize that most of what I'd been taught about the unseen world in Bible college and seminary had been filtered by English translations or derived from sources like Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

That Sunday morning and its fallout forced a decision. My conscience wouldn't let me ignore my own Bible in order to retain the theology with which I was comfortable. Was my loyalty to the text or to Christian tradition? Did I really have to choose between the two? I wasn't sure, but I knew that what I was reading in Psalm 82, taken at face value, simply didn't fit the theological patterns I had always been taught. And yet there had to be answers. After all, the passages I had only now noticed had also been read by apostles like Paul—and by Jesus himself, for that matter. If I couldn't find help in finding those answers, I would just have to put the pieces together myself.

That journey has taken fifteen years, and it has led to this book. The path has not been easy. It came with risk and discomfort. Friends, pastors, and colleagues at times misunderstood my questions and my rebuttals of their

proposed answers. Conversations didn't always end well. That sort of thing happens when you demand that creeds and traditions get in line behind the biblical text.

Clarity eventually prevailed. Psalm 82 became a focal point of my doctoral dissertation, which also examined the nature of Israelite monotheism and how the biblical writers really thought about the unseen spiritual realm. I wish I could say that I was just smart enough to figure things out on my own. But in reality, even though I believe I was providentially prepared for the academic task I faced, there were times in the process when the best description I can give is that I was *led* to answers.

I still believe in the uniqueness of the God of the Bible. I still embrace the deity of Christ. But if we're being honest when we affirm inspiration, then how we talk about those and other doctrines must take into account the biblical text.

What you'll read in this book won't overturn the important appleglasses of Christian doctrine, but you'll come across plenty of mind grenades. Have no fear—it will be a fascinating, faith-building exercise. What you'll learn is that a theology of the unseen world that derives exclusively from the text understood through the lens of the ancient, premodern worldview of the authors informs *every* Bible doctrine in significant ways. If it sounds like I'm overpromising, just withhold judgment till you've read the rest of the book.

What you'll read in this book will change you. *You'll never be able to look at your Bible the same way again.* Hundreds of people who read the early drafts of this book over the past decade have told me so—and appreciated the experience deeply. I know they're right because I'm living that experience, too.

My goal is simple. When you open your Bible, I want you to be able to see it like ancient Israelites or first-century Jews saw it, to perceive and consider it as they would have. I want *their* supernatural worldview in *your* head.

You might find that experience uncomfortable in places. But it would be dishonest of us to claim that the biblical writers read and understood the text the way we do as modern people, or intended meanings that conform to theological systems created centuries after the text was written. *Our context is not their context.*

Seeing the Bible through the eyes of an ancient reader requires shedding the filters of our traditions and presumptions. They processed life in supernatural terms. Today's Christian processes it by a mixture of creedal statements and modern rationalism. I want to help you recover the supernatural worldview of the biblical writers—the people who produced the Bible. Obtaining and retaining that ancient mind-set requires observing a few ground rules, which we'll examine in the next chapter.