

THE UNSEEMLY REALM

A Critical Analysis of the Writings of
Michael S. Heiser

by

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Angels</i>	Heiser, Michael S. <i>Angels: What the Bible Really Says About God's Heavenly Host</i> . Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2018.
BDAG	Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
<i>Demons</i>	Heiser, Michael S. <i>Demons: What the Bible Really Says About the Powers of Darkness</i> . Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2020.
HAL	Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and Johann Jakob Stamm. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000.
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
<i>Supernatural</i>	Heiser, Michael S. <i>Supernatural</i> . Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2015.
SSL	Sokoloff, Michael. <i>A Syriac Lexicon</i> . Winona Lake, Indiana; Piscataway, New Jersey: Eisenbrauns; Georgias Press, 2009.
<i>Unfiltered</i>	Heiser, Michael S. <i>The Bible Unfiltered: Approaching Scripture on Its Own Terms</i> . Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2017.
<i>Unseen Realm</i>	Heiser, Michael S., <i>The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible</i> . Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2013.

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TRANSLITERATION TABLES

Table #1: Hebrew Transliterations

Hebrew Consonants		Hebrew Vowels	
א	ʾ	אָ	<i>ā</i>
ב בּ	<i>b b</i>	בֶּ	<i>p</i>
ג גּ	<i>g</i>	גֶּ	<i>e</i>
ד דּ	<i>d d</i>	דֶּ	<i>i</i>
ה	<i>h</i>	הֶ	<i>u</i>
ו	<i>w</i> <i>(pronounced ‘vav’)</i>	וֹ	<i>o</i>
ז	<i>z</i>	זֶ	<i>ē</i>
ח	<i>ḥ</i>	חֵ	<i>î</i>
ט	<i>ṭ</i>	טֵ	<i>û</i>
י	<i>y</i>	יֹ	<i>ô</i>
ך כּ כֶּ	<i>k k k</i>	כֶּ	<i>ō</i>
ל	<i>l</i>	לֵ	<i>â</i>
מ מּ	<i>m m</i>	מֶ	<i>ě</i> <i>ǎ</i> <i>ǎ</i> <i>ě</i>
נ	<i>n</i>	נֶ	
ס	<i>s</i>	סֶ	
ע	ʿ	עֶ	
פ פּ	<i>p p</i>		
ף	<i>f</i>		
צ צּ	<i>ṣ</i>		
ק	<i>q</i>		
ר	<i>r</i>		
ש	<i>s</i>		
שׁ	<i>š</i>		
ת תּ	<i>t ṭ</i>		

Table #2: Syriac Transliterations

Western (Jacobite) Script	Transliteration	Estrangelo Script	Transliteration
ܐ	ʾ	ܐ	ʾ
ܒ	<i>b</i>	ܒ	<i>b</i>
ܓ	<i>g</i>	ܓ	<i>g</i>
ܕ	<i>d</i>	ܕ	<i>d</i>
ܚ	<i>h</i>	ܚ	<i>h</i>
ܘ	<i>w</i>	ܘ	<i>w</i>
ܙ	<i>z</i>	ܙ	<i>z</i>
ܠ	<i>l</i>	ܠ	<i>l</i>
ܡ	<i>m</i>	ܡ	<i>m</i>
ܢ	<i>n</i>	ܢ	<i>n</i>
ܣ	<i>s</i>	ܣ	<i>s</i>
ܦ	<i>p</i>	ܦ	<i>p</i>
ܩ	<i>q</i>	ܩ	<i>q</i>
ܪ	<i>r</i>	ܪ	<i>r</i>
ܫ	<i>š</i>	ܫ	<i>š</i>
ܬ	<i>t</i>	ܬ	<i>t</i>

Table #3: Greek Transliterations

	Upper Case	Lower Case	Transliteration
Alpha	A	α	<i>a</i>
Beta	B	β	<i>b</i>
Gamma	Γ	γ	<i>g</i>
Delta	Δ	δ	<i>d</i>
Epsilon	E	ϵ	<i>e</i>
Zeta	Z	ζ	<i>z</i>
Eta	H	η	<i>$\bar{e}$</i>
Theta	Θ	θ	<i>th</i>
Iota	I	ι	<i>i</i>
Kappa	K	κ	<i>k</i>
Lambda	Λ	λ	<i>l</i>
Mu	M	μ	<i>m</i>
Nu	N	ν	<i>n</i>
Xi	X	χ	<i>x</i>
Omicron	O	$\omicron$	<i>o</i>
Pi	Π	π	<i>p</i>
Ro	P	ρ	<i>r</i>
Sigma	Σ	σ, ς	<i>s</i>
Tau	T	τ	<i>t</i>
Upsilon	Υ	υ	<i>u</i>
Phi	Φ	ϕ	<i>ph</i>
Chi	Ξ	ξ	<i>ch</i>
Psi	Ψ	ψ	<i>ps</i>
Omega	Ω	ω	<i>$\bar{o}$</i>

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At one time I was a youth minister in a local church. Every Christmas season a certain para-church organization would host a youth rally. It was always well populated with young people and youth ministers. Usually, the prevailing view involved an emphasis on experiencing the Christian life. There was not very much said about theology or doctrine. In one of these events I was engaged in a discussion with another youth minister about the place of doctrine in youth ministry. I was not surprised with his statement, which went something like this: “As a youth minister, I’m interested in leading young people to live the Christian life — to experience God! I’m not really into theology. To me that kind of talk is very dry and lifeless. I just want to love Jesus!” To this I responded, “Who is Jesus?” As soon as my companion began to tell me about Jesus, I interrupted with the challenge, “Aren’t you doing theology?” If a person does not know theology, then he or she will not be able to discern whether what is being experienced is in fact the *Christian* life. You can’t love Jesus if you don’t know who He is. The writer to the Hebrews declared, “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Heb 11:6).¹

There are a multitude of people who propagate their views through the many media avenues that permeate our culture. There are not only the many world religions that bombard us with conflicting and contradictory systems. For the Evangelical Christian, there is a barrage of claims and counter claims about who God is and what the Bible means. When it comes to considering the teaching that floods the market, Christians make two mistakes. First, most well meaning Christians argue that we should not judge. Usually, this claim derives from the a statement by Jesus in Matt. 7:1: “Do not judge so that you will not be judged.”² There is some truth in the modern Christian’s interpretation of Jesus’ statement. Jesus clarifies His command with an example: “Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3).³ We should not be judgmental so as to condemn others about what we think are their flaws while ignoring our own. Jesus’ statement has to do with being self-righteous and arrogant against others. This is the kind of judging we should not do.

¹ χωρὶς δὲ πίστεως ἀδύνατον εὐαρεσθῆσαι, πιστεῦσαι γὰρ δεῖ τὸν προσερχόμενον τῷ θεῷ ὅτι ἔστιν καὶ τοῖς ἐκζητοῦσιν αὐτὸν μισθαποδότης γίνεται (Heb. 11:6).

² μὴ κρίνετε, ἵνα μὴ κριθῆτε (Matt. 7:1).

³ τί δὲ βλέπεις τὸ κάρφος τὸ ἐν τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου, τὴν δὲ ἐν τῷ σῷ ὀφθαλμῷ δοκὸν οὐ κατανοεῖς; (Matt. 7:3).

However, in Jn. 7:24 Jesus commands, “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.”⁴ Is Jesus contradicting Himself? Of course not. In the context of Jesus’ statement the issue was making judgments according to the truth. We should not judge people according to appearance, but we must judge what people say, and this judgment must be according to the truth. If we do not judge what people teach, then we will not be able to make the distinction between truth and falsehood.

This leads to another common misunderstanding. Many people think that judging what others claim to be true commits an *ad hominem* fallacy. The expression “*ad hominem*” literally means “to the man.” An *ad hominem* fallacy is when someone abuses a person rather than evaluating the person’s arguments and claims. Not every *ad hominem* argument is a fallacy. “THE CLASSIC example of this fallacy is a scene in a British court of law. As the attorney for the defense takes the floor, his partner hands him a note: ‘No case. Abuse the plaintiff’s attorney.’ If you can’t shake the argument, abuse the person who advances it, and so discredit it through the back door. Go from facing the issue, which jurists call *ad rem*, to the man, *ad hominem*.’”⁵ Judging is not always condemning. Judging can be evaluating what someone says in order to discover whether the claims are true or false.

Judging the claims and teaching of Christian authors is particularly important today. This is certainly the case with the writings of Michael S. Heiser (1963–2023). Heiser has become a very popular author among Evangelical Christians. Heiser’s primary focus has been on the nature of the spiritual realm. Arguably his most popular book is *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*. On the dust jacket of Heiser’s book is the following section of the publisher’s blurb:

The Unseen Realm presents the fruit of Dr. Heiser’s fifteen years of research into what the Bible really says about the unseen world of the supernatural. His goal is to help readers view the biblical text unfiltered by common assumptions that leave no room for the strange/and wonderful view of the world the Bible offers. “People shouldn’t be protected from the Bible,” Dr. Heiser says. But modern theological systems often do just that, by “explaining away” difficult or troublesome passages of Scripture because their straightforward meaning doesn’t fit into our tidy systems.

Heiser employs certain hermeneutical, theological, and philosophical assumptions many of which are assumed but not expressed in his writings, and some of which he seems to be completely unaware. This is particularly the case with his underlying philosophical assumptions, but it is also true of his theology and hermeneutics. Because of his popularity and influence through his many publications, it is important to consider what it is he is saying about God and the Bible.

A difficulty that faces the effort to investigate someone’s body of work is that the investigation is often more involved than the material being investigated. As Stanley Rosen put it,

⁴ μὴ κρίνετε κατ’ ὄψιν, ἀλλὰ τὴν δικαίαν κρίσιν κρίνετε (Jn. 7:24).

⁵ Stuart Chase, *Guides to Straight Thinking: With 13 Common Fallacies* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1956), 58.

“... no progress can be made until the rubble is removed from the public highway.”⁶ It inevitably takes more time and space to explicate and analyze the background – the “rubble” in Rosen’s statement — that lies behind the surface assertions than it took the author to make the assertions.

There are two ways one can evaluate a system: 1) One can examine the system from within; a) considering all its parts to see that they all cohere; b) discover whether there are any *ad hoc*⁷ assertions that attempt to account for some claim or claims within the system but have no explanatory power and are invented simply to avoid an inconsistency in the system; c) that the system accounts for all facts that must be explained in order for the system to be viable. On the popular level this principle is called *Ockham’s Razor*, also called the principle of parsimony. It has been misrepresented as saying that the simplest explanation is usually the best. The principle was actually originally proposed by Aristotle as a minimal, necessary explanation.⁸ That is, an explanation should not multiply principles needlessly, but it should explain everything that must be explained. So it is a minimal explanation that accounts for every necessary part. If a system of belief does not account for everything necessary for the system to be viable, it cannot be true. The difficulty with this first approach is that it requires an extraordinary amount of labor and space, and it requires an intimate familiarity with the system on a par with the originator or proponent of the system.

2) A second way to evaluate a system is to investigate its foundation(s). If the foundation(s) of a system is irrational or faulty in some other sense, then, regardless of how coherent the system may be, the truth of the system is undermined. Heiser’s philosophical and theological assumptions that form the foundation of his arguments and claims will be considered at the appropriate places throughout this book. If the foundation of a system is refuted, then all of the claims, interpretations, and conclusions that are based on the foundation are demonstrated to be false. It will be our task to examine the foundation(s) of Heiser’s system and to understand his claims about God and the Bible. As Averroes (1126–1198) said, “For it is compulsory rather than voluntary to believe a thing to be true, the proof of which has already been established; that is, we cannot believe or disbelieve it as we like, as it depends upon our will to stand or not to do so.”⁹

I do not in any way want to imply nor do I believe that Heiser was not a committed Christian. He says he is committed to the orthodox Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, salvation by grace through faith, etc., and there is no reason to doubt this. He was without doubt a committed academic and scholar who was seeking to understand the meaning of the text. My discussion is not about Heiser as a person, a scholar, or a Christian. My interest is to consider his hermeneutic methodology, his theology, and his philosophical assumptions. Heiser says, “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.”¹⁰ Heiser uses a popular expression among Christians, but one that he does not define or describe. How was he

⁶ Stanley Rosen, *The Question of Being: A Reversal of Heidegger* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), x.

⁷ *Ad Hoc* means “to this.”

⁸ Aristotelis, *Αναλυτικῶν Ὑστερῶν το Πρῶτον*, Volumen Primum, *Opera Omnia Græce et Latine* (Parisiis: Editoribus Firmin-Didot et Sociis, 1927), 25.86a.31–86b.9.

⁹ Averroes, *Kitāb Faṣl Al-Maqāl/Decisive Treatise*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2017), 95.

¹⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 13.

“led”? Who was doing the leading? The implication is that he believed he was being led by the Holy Spirit? This kind of statement should alert the reader to be on guard about how Heiser expresses his views. There have been many persons who have claimed to be led by the Holy Spirit, but who have expressed views that are contrary and sometimes contradictory of what other Christians have argued who also claim to be led by the Holy Spirit.

In the first chapter of his book, *Unseen Realm*, Heiser sets out his contention:

If your background, like mine, is in the evangelical, noncharismatic branch of Protestantism, perhaps you consider yourself an exception to the patterns I’ve identified, or think that I’ve overstated the situation. But what would you think if a Christian friend confided to you that he believed he had been helped by a guardian angel, or that he had audibly heard a disembodied voice warning him of some danger? What if your friend claimed to have witnessed demonic possession, or was convinced that God had directed her life through a dream that included an appearance of Jesus?

Most of us noncharismatics would have to admit that our initial impulse would be to doubt. But we actually have a less transparent reflex. We would nod our head and listen politely to our friend’s fervent story, but the whole time we would be seeking other possible explanations. That’s because our modern inclination is to insist on evidence. Since we live in a scientific age, we are prone to think these kinds of experiences are actually emotional misinterpretations of the events—or, worse, something treatable with the right medication. And in any individual case, that might be so—but the truth is that our modern evangelical subculture has trained us to think that our theology *precludes* any experience of the unseen world. Consequently, it isn’t an important part of our theology.

My contention is that, if our theology really derives from the biblical text, *we must reconsider our selective supernaturalism and recover a biblical theology of the unseen world*. This is not to suggest that the best interpretation of a passage is always the most supernatural one. But the biblical writers and those to whom they wrote were predisposed to supernaturalism. To ignore that outlook or marginalize it will produce Bible interpretation that reflects *our* mind-set more than that of the biblical writers.¹¹

It would not be difficult to respond to someone who made claims about being helped by a guardian angel, or hearing a disembodied voice warning him of some danger, or having witnessed demonic possession, or that God had directed her life through a dream that included an appearance of Jesus. One question would be, “How do you know that was a guardian angel?” In the Spring of 1820, amid the clamor of conflicting and contradictory teaching, a young man went into the woods and knelt down and began to present to God his desire to understand the truth. This is his account of what happened.

I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun which descended gradually until it fell upon me. . . . When the light rested upon me I saw two personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them

¹¹ *Unseen Realm*, 17–18.

spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other — “This is my Beloved Son. Hear Him!”

Would you believe that the personages this young man saw were angels? Would you believe that this visitation was from God? That young man was Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormonism. A basic doctrine of the Mormon Church is that god was once a human man on a different earth. This is taught by Smith himself:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! . . . These are incomprehensible ideas to some, but they are simple. It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did; and I will show it from the Bible.¹²

Smith claims that this is taught in the Bible. Would you believe the teachings of Joseph Smith because he claims to have had a visitation from supernatural beings? Or would you ask something like this: “How do you know that it was God directing your life?” “How do you know that was Jesus?” Did not Paul say, “¹⁴No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds” (2 Cor. 11:14–15).¹³

Heiser says that our initial impulse to doubt is “because our modern inclination is to insist on evidence.” What if I, as the author of this book, told you that I was visited by Jesus who told me that Heiser was a deceiver who was attempting to lead His church into polytheism and henotheism¹⁴ and that his agenda needed to be exposed? Would you not want some evidence? Wanting evidence has nothing to do with the fact that we live in a scientific age. People have been seeking evidence ever since there were those who sought truth. When a young man informed David that Saul and Jonathan were dead, David sought evidence: “So David said to the young man who told him, ‘How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?’” (2 Sam. 1:5).¹⁵ Isn’t presenting evidence what Heiser is attempting to do in his own book? Is he not presenting what he believes is the evidence to support his claims?

Heiser says, “. . . but the truth is that our modern evangelical subculture has trained us to think that our theology *precludes* any experience of the unseen world.” Of the approximately 210

¹² Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith: Taken from his sermons and writings as they are found in the Documentary History and other publications of the Church and written or published in the days of the Prophet’s ministry Selected and arranged by the Historian, Joseph Fielding Smith, and his Assistants in the Historian’s Office of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1979), 345–46. Emphasis in original.

¹³ ¹⁴ καὶ οὐ θαῦμα, αὐτὸς γὰρ ὁ Σατανᾶς μετασχηματίζεται εἰς ἄγγελον φωτός· ¹⁵ οὐ μέγα οὖν εἰ καὶ οἱ διάκονοι αὐτοῦ μετασχηματίζονται ὡς διάκονοι δικαιοσύνης, ὧν τὸ τέλος ἐστὶ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν (2 Cor. 11:14–15).

¹⁴ Polytheism is the belief in more than one god. Henotheism is the worship of one god while acknowledging the existence of other gods.

¹⁵

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל-הַנַּעַר הַמִּנִּיד לֹא אֵיךְ יָדַעְתָּ כִּי-מֵת שָׁאִיל וַיְהוּנָתָן בְּנוֹ: (2 Sam. 1:5)

million Christians in the USA, how many do you think Heiser has talked to about the unseen world? I have been a Christian since 1972. I have been a pastor and a youth minister in local churches. I have attended a Christian university and Seminary earning a Ph.D. in Philosophy of Religion, and I have been a Seminary Professor for 34 years. I have never been taught that I should preclude any experience of the unseen world. I have been taught that it is critically important to test claims to see whether they are true. Heiser seems to want to prevent his reader from examining his claims and looking for evidence for or against what he is teaching. This is a logical fallacy called poisoning the well. Poisoning the well is the effort preemptively to present negative information about a person or their position in order to discredit anything that might be said. Heiser denigrates those who want evidence in order to preempt any arguments or evidence that is contrary to his views.

Heiser states his contention: “. . . if our theology really derives from the biblical text, *we must reconsider our selective supernaturalism and recover a biblical theology of the unseen world.*” What is the evidence that this is the case? Are we expected simply to accept Heiser’s claims without seeking any evidence that what he says is true? Ultimately what Heiser expects is that his readers must accept *his* notion of the unseen world or be deniers of the “supernatural.” But what if his notion of the unseen world is false? Without having presented any argument or evidence, Heiser vilifies those who disagree with his view about the supernatural. “If you don’t believe what I am telling you, then you are a victim of ‘selective supernaturalism,’ and you are unwilling to recover a biblical theology of the unseen realm!” Gee, you don’t want to be a victim of “selective supernaturalism” do you? Well, according to Heiser, you simply must accept his views!

John commanded us, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn. 4:1).¹⁶ The word translated “test” is δοκιμάζω (*dokimazō*). According to BDAG, the word means, “to make a critical examination of someth. to determine genuineness, *put to the test, examine.*”¹⁷ That is what this book is about. It is about testing the claims and teaching of Michael Heiser. It is a critical examination of his writings to discover whether what he is teaching is true.

¹⁶ Ἀγαπητοί, μὴ παντὶ πνεύματι πιστεύετε, ἀλλὰ δοκιμάζετε τὰ πνεύματα εἰ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν, ὅτι πολλοὶ ψευδοπροφῆται ἐξεληλύθασιν εἰς τὸν κόσμον (1 Jn. 4:1).

¹⁷ BDAG, s.v. “δοκιμάζω.” Emphasis in original.

CHAPTER 2

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

Worldview

In his book, *The Bible Unfiltered*, Heiser claims, “We need to get the worldview of the ancient world, shared by the biblical writers, into our heads.”¹ According to Heiser, this is what we need to do because, “Every other context is alien or at least secondary.”² A problem with this claim is brought out by John Walton:

Just as it would be foolish to think that all Europeans share the same culture, it would be a mistake to suppose that Babylonians, Hittites, Egyptians, Israelites, and Sumerians all shared the same culture. There would even be noticeable differences between the second-millennium Babylonians of Hammurabi’s time and the first-millennium Babylonians at the time of Nebuchadnezzar.³

There was no single worldview of the ancient world. Walton points out there were commonalities between the various peoples of Mesopotamia. He uses a metaphor of a cultural river “where the currents represent ideas and conventional ways of thinking.”⁴ Walton lists a number of ideas and currents in modern thinking that are supposedly foreign to these ancient cultures. Although some of these are quite different from these ancient cultures, some are not. Among Walton’s list are rights and natural laws. Of course, all ancient cultures had the notion of rights for some and not for others. Modern thinking holds the same “current.” Convicted murderers do not have the same rights as lawful citizens. Kings and emperors had certain rights in ancient cultures that were denied the mere citizen. Depending on what one means by “ancient culture,” Aristotle articulated natural law in the sense of natural justice and natural rights.

Walton goes on to assert,

We need to read the Old Testament in the context of its own cultural river. We cannot afford to read instinctively because that only results in reading the text through our own cultural lenses. No one reads the Bible free of cultural bias, but we seek to replace our cultural lenses

¹ *Unfiltered*, 13.

² *Unfiltered*, 13.

³ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2018), 5–6.

⁴ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 6.

with theirs. Sometimes the best we can do is recognize that we *have* cultural lenses and try to take them off even if we cannot reconstruct ancient lenses.⁵

The self-defeating nature of these assertions ought to be obvious. If “no one reads the Bible free of cultural bias,” then how can we know when we should “seek to replace our cultural lenses with theirs”? One must ask, is it Walton’s cultural bias that we should seek to replace our cultural lenses with theirs? If no one reads the Bible free of cultural bias, then how does Walton know that ancient cultures are different from ours? Is that simply his own cultural bias telling him that? And, how can we “take off” our cultural lenses? Apparently, Walton concedes that there are similarities between our modern culture and ancient cultures. But how can he know this if he is looking at these ancient cultures through his cultural bias?

The fact is, there are commonalities between these ancient cultures and modern culture. As we will see below, the notion that we look through our cultural lenses as if they were a pair of glasses is fatally flawed. Every worldview, no matter in what culture, no matter in what age, no matter what belief system, has the same foundation, namely, the basic laws of logic and rationality. These include the self-evident, undeniable first principles of thought and being. Everyone, everywhere, at all times, and in all places, either consciously or intuitively, holds at least to the three basic laws of logic: 1) Non-contradiction: a truth-claim cannot be both true and false in the same sense: 2) Identify: A is A; anything is what it is: 3) Excluded Middle — either A or ~A (the ~ means “not” or “non-.”). There is no middle between A and ~A. If any thing is A it is not non-A.

No doubt someone will object that Eastern belief systems do not hold to the laws of logic. On the contrary, in the book *Buddhist Logic*, the laws of non-contradiction, identity, and excluded middle are affirmed:

The active part of consciousness, its spontaneity in cognition begins with an act of dichotomy. As soon as our intellectual eye begins to glimmer, our thought is already beset with contradiction. The moment our thought has stopped running and has fixed upon an external point, so as to be able internally to produce the judgment « this is blue », at that moment we have separated the universe of discourse into two unequal halves, the limited part of the blue and the less limited part of the non-blue. The definite thought (*sic*) of the blue is nothing more than the definite exclusion of the non-blue . . . there is nothing intermediate.⁶

Heiser employs the law of excluded middle in his assertion: Every *other* context, A, is not the biblical context, ~A. To say that *every* context is foreign or secondary would be to affirm a falsehood. If *every* context is foreign or secondary, then this claim is itself foreign or secondary. Of course, this is not what Heiser is asserting. Without the basic laws of logic and rationality, there is no context at all.

Heiser claims that the discovery of ancient intellectual and cultural output enables the biblical scholar to “recover the worldview context (their ‘cognitive framework’ in scholar-speak) of the

⁵ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 6–7. Like most Evangelical scholars, Walton has imbibed the modern philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, which has led to the rejection of objectivity in interpretation. See Thomas A. Howe, *Objectivity in Biblical Interpretation* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

⁶ Th. Stcherbatsky. *Buddhist Logic*. In *Bibliotheca Buddhica: XXVI* (Leningrad: ЛЕНИНГРАД, 1932).

biblical writers as never before.”⁷ By what seems to be an analogy, Heiser says, “Think about it. How would anyone living a thousand years from now understand something you wrote unless they could get inside your head and see the world as you do?”⁸ Indeed, think about it. How would someone a thousand years from now get inside your head and see the world as you do today? Heiser explains:

They’d need your frame of reference. They’d need to know what was going on in the wider world that potentially concerned, angered, encouraged, or depressed you. They’d need to understand the pop culture of your day to be able to parse why you’re using this word and not that one, or to properly process an expression. There’s no way to do that unless they recover your frame of reference. That is what it means to interpret in context.⁹

Although Heiser’s use of the expression, “get inside your head,” is no doubt a common colloquialism, the fact is, the concept is simply false no matter how one chooses to express it. First, by what means would someone one thousand years from now get into your head when your head would not be available at the time? The only access they would have to your head is what you wrote. It would not help to discover what others said about you, since that is not *your* head. In fact, there is no way for anyone living today, even your closest friends and family, to get into your head apart from what you say. No one can get into anyone else’s head. As Etienne Gilson explains,

Defining the self by consciousness, he [professor Egger] observed that each is both incapable of penetrating others and of being penetrated by them, from which he inferred a law that he called, with a nuance of metaphysical respect, the law of consciences closed.

I was later to find this same law, presented by them as a simple fact, among the Fathers of the Church and Scholastic theologians. Convinced that God alone “searches the reins and the hearts,” all the theologians I have consulted on the matter agree in saying that, except in supernatural and truly miraculous cases, no man can read the thoughts of another man. It is a frequent subject of perplexity to know what is “going on in the head” of someone else, whose thoughts we cannot divine, even if we can know it.¹⁰

Of course someone will say Heiser is using this as a figure of speech. But that does not resolve the problem. If “getting into someone’s head” is a figure of speech for understanding the way someone thinks or feels, it is still impossible to know what someone else thinks or feels apart from

⁷ *Unfiltered*, 14.

⁸ *Unfiltered*, 14.

⁹ *Unfiltered*, 14.

¹⁰ Étienne Gilson, *Linguistique et Philosophie: Essai sur les constantes philosophiques du langage* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1969), 152–53. “Définissant le moi par la conscience, il observait que chacune est à la fois incapable de pénétrer les autres et d’être pénétrée par elles, de quoi il inférait une loi qu’il nommait, avec une nuance de respect métaphysique, *la loi des consciences closes*.”

Je devais plus tard retrouver cette même loi, présentée par eux comme un simple fait, chez des Pères de l’Eglise et des théologiens scholastiques. Persuadés que Dieu seul « sonde les reins et les cœurs », tous les théologiens que j’ai consultés sur la matière s’accordent à dire que, si on excepte des cas surnaturels et proprement miraculeux, nul homme ne peut lire les pensées d’un autre homme. C’est un sujet fréquent de perplexité que de savoir ce qui « se passe dans la tête » de quelqu’un d’autre, dont on ne peut diviner les pensées, si bien d’ailleurs qu’on puisse le connaître.”

reading or hearing what he or she says. Your access to someone else's "head" is always from the outside.

To claim that anyone one thousand years from now would need your frame of reference does not solve the problem either. How could they know your frame of reference? It cannot simply be the historical and cultural environment in which you live. In 1972, Ted Bundy graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in psychology. He was accepted into University of Puget Sound Law School in Utah, although he did not finish a degree. By many accounts, even from some of his victims, he was a charming and intelligent individual. But was the University of Washington and the University of Puget Sound Law School his frame of reference? Was the historical and cultural context of Washington his frame of reference? Was the USA his frame of reference? For some time they were certainly his historical and cultural context. In fact, Bundy claimed to have committed his first kidnaping in 1969 and his first murder in 1971. That he was a kidnaper and murderer was not known when he attended university, and without his confession, no one would have known by looking at his historical and cultural context. Was Bundy's frame of reference being a serial killer? But if being a serial killer was his frame of reference, that was discovered only by his own confession. Simply because a person or group lives in a certain historical and cultural context does not show that this context is or was that person's "frame of reference." As Ronald Nash has shown, the authors of the NT lived in a pagan culture, but they were not pagans nor influenced by pagan beliefs or practices. Although paganism was part of their historical and cultural context, it was certainly not their frame of reference even though they lived in that culture.

Understanding the historical and cultural context in which a text was produced is certainly important. However, simply because one can discover the context in which a text was produced does not mean that the interpreter necessarily understands the author's cognitive framework. Context may help, but it does not determine one's frame of reference. This is particularly the case with the Old Testament. What Heiser wants to do is to lead the reader to accept the notion that, in order to understand the OT, one must understand it through the worldview of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) culture and literature. However, no scholar has proved that the biblical authors borrowed from, or adopted, or employed, or were even influenced by the concepts of the surrounding cultures. No scholar has proved that the ANE culture formed the cognitive frameworks of the OT authors. What they have shown is that there are similarities between OT literature and ANE literature, but similarity of design does not necessarily mean identity of origin. More will be said about this below.

OED defines the word 'world-view,'¹¹ or 'worldview,' as "A set of fundamental beliefs, values, etc., determining or constituting a comprehensive outlook on the world; a perspective on life;"¹² Project Worldview gives the following definition: "More precisely, your worldview is a conceptual framework and a set of beliefs used to make sense out of a complex, seemingly chaotic reality based on your perceptions, experience and learning."¹³ The earliest known use of the term 'world-view' is from 1848:

¹¹ Throughout, I will employ a convention to distinguish between use and mention. To use a word is to make it function in its usual manner as a word in a sentence: "Bill is an analyst." To mention a word is to make reference to the word: "The word 'analyst' refers to someone who analyzes." To distinguish between use and mention, I will place words that are mentioned in single quotation marks.

¹² OED, s.v. "world-view."

¹³ <https://www.projectworldview.org/worldviews.htm>

Dante, or properly speaking, *Durante*, i.e. the enduring, was descended from the ancient, noble, and venerable family of *Alighieri* in Florence, where he was born in May, 1265, during the pontificate of Clement IV., a few years before the downfall of the illustrious imperial family of the Hohenstauffen. He prosecuted his studies in the Latin classics, especially Virgil, the Aristotelian philosophy, and the scholastic theology of his age, first in his native city, and afterwards in Bologna, Padua, and Paris, with such energy and spirit as to make his foreign material his own inmost property, and to work out of these single elements of culture an independent organic world-view.¹⁴

According to Philip Ryan,

A worldview—or “world-and-life view,” as some people call it—is the structure of understanding that we use to make sense of our world. Our worldview is what we presuppose. It is our way of looking at life, our interpretation of the universe, the orientation of our soul. It is the “comprehensive frame-work of our basic belief about things,” or “the set of hinges on which all our everyday thinking and doing turns.”¹⁵

Heiser asserts, “We view the Bible through the lens of what we know and what’s familiar.”¹⁶ However, J. P. Moreland points out that this cannot be the case:

There is a widely employed metaphor for depicting the nature and function of a worldview: We should understand it as a set of glasses. Unfortunately, no matter how ubiquitous this metaphor is, especially among Evangelicals, it is not only false, but extremely harmful. . . . While a worldview affects what one sees, it is a mistake to compare a worldview with a set of glasses such that (1) the worldview stands between us and reality and we see through it and (2) knowledge by acquaintance with or direct awareness of reality does not take place. Glasses stand between a person and the external world such that a person’s access to reality is mediated through the glasses. One does not have direct access to reality itself.”¹⁷

If a worldview is like glasses through which a person sees and understands everything, then it would not be possible to evaluate and correct one’s own worldview, or even to think outside of it. In order to evaluate one’s own worldview, one would necessarily view one’s worldview through one’s worldview (see **Figure 1** below). Is it reasonable to think that viewing my worldview through my worldview would yield conclusions that contradict the very worldview through which I view my worldview? As Moreland goes on to explain, “A better way to describe the role of a worldview in seeing reality is to depict it as a habituated way of directing our attention or inattention as the case

¹⁴ PS, “The Life and Genius of Dante Alighieri,” *The American Review: Devoted to Politics and Literature*, Vol. II, No. II (August, 1848), 125.

¹⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *What Is the Christian Worldview?* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2006), 7.

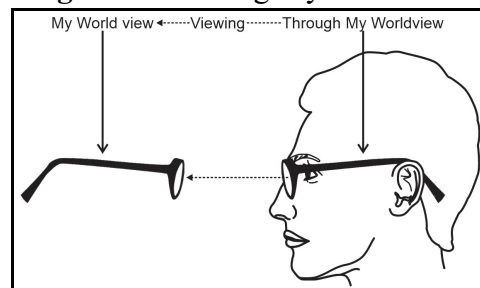
¹⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 15.

¹⁷ J. P. Moreland, “Why it is Harmful to Depict a Worldview as Glasses.” <https://www.jpmoreland.com/articles/worldview-as-glasses/>. last update 4/23/21.

may be. It is the difference between ‘thinking with’ a worldview vs. ‘thinking through’ a worldview.”¹⁸

A worldview includes one’s perspective, the shape of one’s thinking by education, training, and experience, one’s assumptions and presuppositions, one’s preunderstanding, and more. However, there are more things in one’s thinking and interpreting than are usually thought of in the popular notions of a worldview. Worldview thinking is particularly important in understanding Heiser’s hermeneutics method.

Figure 1: Viewing My Worldview



Interpreting With a Worldview

According to Heiser’s testimony, his book, *The Unseen Realm*, grew out of a critical turning point as he read Ps. 82:1. Heiser translates the verse, “God [elohim] stands in the divine assembly; he administers judgment in the midst of the gods [elohim].”¹⁹ The verse is set forth below with a word-for-word rendering into English (reading right to left):

Table #4: Ps. 82:1

יִשְׁפֹּט:	אֱלֹהִים	בְּקֶרֶב	אֵל	בְּעֵדוּת	נִצָּב	אֱלֹהִים
He judges.	gods	in the midst of	God	in the congregation of	taking a stand	God

Having read the verse, Heiser says, the Hebrew wording “caught my eye and put my heart in my throat.”²⁰ Heiser reports, “I knew my Hebrew grammar . . . 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.”²¹ It caught this reader’s eye that Heiser makes the following observation: “*The God of the Old Testament was part of an assembly—a pantheon—of other gods.*”²² Looking at the verse, there is no statement about God being a “part” of anything, there is no word corresponding to Heiser’s “pantheon,” nor does the text say anything about “other” gods. It seems transparently obvious that what Heiser claims the Bible says is not what the Bible actually says.

The word ‘pantheon’ is the combination of the Greek adjective *πᾶν* (*pan*) meaning “all,” and *θεόν* (*theon*) meaning “god.” A pantheon is a group of gods usually arranged in some hierarchical order with the highest and most powerful, and most important god at the top. In the Greek pantheon, Zeus was the king of gods. In Mesopotamia, An or Anu was “the prime mover in creation, and the

¹⁸ Moreland, “Worldview as Glasses,” 6.

¹⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 11.

²⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 11.

²¹ *Unseen Realm*, 11.

²² *Unseen Realm*, 11.. Emphasis in original.

distant, supreme leader of the gods.”²³ Since the text does not say what Heiser claims it says, the only way he could have arrived at his conclusion is by reading the text *through* his always-already-present worldview.

It is important to emphasize what is meant by the word ‘pantheon.’ A pantheon is the group of gods of any individual polytheistic religion, mythology, or tradition usually organized in a hierarchy. According to Black and Green, of the discoveries of Mesopotamian pantheon, “Altogether the names of over 3,000 divinities are preserved in the cuneiform records.”²⁴ John Walton points out, “All of the cultures around Israel were polytheistic.”²⁵ Walton goes on to explain,

The assembly in Mesopotamia was made up of the great gods, whose number, when designated, was fifty; among them were seven who determined destinies. This assembly carried the highest authority since it represented the collective community of deities. In earliest Sumerian literature, Anu is the head of the pantheon, with Enlil often taking the active lead. In the second millennium Marduk takes the lead in southern Mesopotamia and Ashur in Assyria. In Ugaritic literature the head of the pantheon is El. Here the gods of the assembly appear to be lesser gods, and the role played by El is more dominant than is evidenced by the head of the pantheon in Mesopotamia.²⁶

So, what Heiser says he observed in the text of Psalm 82 is an assembly, a pantheon of gods. Why would Heiser think that the text is referring to a pantheon “of other gods,” as he puts it? It cannot simply be the use of the word אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*, “god” or “gods”) that led Heiser to his conclusion. This same word is used of Moses: “Then YHWH said to Moses, ‘See, I make you God [אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*)] to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet” (Exod. 7:1).²⁷ Here God said He would make Moses “god” before pharaoh.

Commenting on Psalm 82, John Goldingay says,

While “the divine assembly” is more literally “the assembly of *’ēl*,” “God” and “gods” both translate the word *’ēlōhîm*. But at its first occurrence *’ēlōhîm* governs a singular verb and clearly refers to God (outside the Elohist Psalter, a psalm would use the name Yhwh), while at the second “in the midst of *’ēlōhîm*” is clearly plural. Confusingly to us, Hebrew can thus refer both to the one God and to the subordinate entities, the other heavenly powers, as *’ēlōhîm*. In this respect its use of the word for “god” corresponds to the practice in other Middle Eastern languages. There it can connote “not only major deities but also a wide variety

²³ Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1992), 30.

²⁴ Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 147.

²⁵ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 53.

²⁶ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 54–55.

²⁷ (Exod. 7:1) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה רְאֵה נִתְּנִיךָ אֱלֹהִים לְפָרְעֹה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶחָיֶךָ יְהִיָּה נְבִיאָךְ:

Most translations add the word ‘as’ or ‘like’ before the word ‘god,’ but there is no Hebrew word corresponding to these words. In a note, the NET Bible translators point out, “‘The word ‘like’ is added for clarity, making explicit the implied comparison in the statement ‘I have made you God to Pharaoh.’” *The NET Bible*, Second Edition. (Denmark: Thomas Nelson, 2019).

of other phenomena: monstrous cosmic enemies; demons; some living kings; dead kings or the dead more generally; deities' images and standards as well as standing stones; and other cultic items and places"—in fact, anything that is not regular humanity.²⁸

What Goldingay is describing is that the word אֱלֹהִים (*ʾēlōhîm*) can be used to refer to gods in a polytheistic and henotheistic belief system, or to other kinds of beings, or to the one God of Israel.

Mark Smith notes that the Akkadian word for “divine” has a large range of use:

In addition to words for “divine,” Akkadian uses a special sign (called a “determinative”) to mark divinity. The special sign for divinity applies not only to deities but also to many other phenomena such as demons, stars, the images of monstrous creatures, the determined order (*šimtu*), and legendary human heroes of old, such as Gilgamesh and Enkidu. On the whole, such an inventory suggests that divinity was attributed not only to major and minor deities but to a whole host of associated phenomena. It is further evident that distinctions were recognized among the figures and phenomena called “divine.”²⁹

Heiser argues that the Hebrew Bible is influenced by ANE literature, but he does not want to take along with this the possible meanings of the relevant words. According to Goldingay and Smith, the Akkadian word could be used to refer to divine beings, human beings, demons, living kings, etc. Since, the Akkadian word has such a wide range of use, and Heiser argues that the Hebrew is influenced by its Akkadian counterpart, it follows that the Hebrew word could also have this wide range of use. Why does Heiser write as if it can mean only “other gods”? In fact, since the word has such a wide range of meaning, it could be used to refer to human beings. So why does not Heiser alert his reader to the fact that the word can be used to refer to so many different entities. Heiser wants to take what fits his view and disregard the rest.

Many commentators also refer to Exod. 22:8f as an instance of the word אֱלֹהִים being used to refer to humans, and the Akkadian word has this possible use. In his book, *Unseen Realm*, Heiser does not deal directly with this text. In a note he says,

Space constraints make it impossible to fully address the flawed thinking behind the human explanation for *elohim* (in Psa 82 and elsewhere) in this chapter. In the discussion that proceeds, I touch on some of the more glaring logical and scriptural problems for this view. Arguments for the human view of *elohim* stemming from passages like Judg 18, Exod 7–9, Psa 45:7, or Jesus' quotation of Psa 82:6 in John 10:34 are dealt with at length on the companion website.³⁰

²⁸ John Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, vol. 2, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 561

²⁹ Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

³⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 28.n1.

Heiser completely ignores the fact that, if the Hebrew is influenced by the Akkadian, then the use of *elohim* to refer to humans stems from more than the few biblical passages. It could also correspond to the Akkadian use of the word.

Heiser does make some comments concerning Ps. 82:8 on his website. He takes exception to the argument that it refers to humans:

Taken straightforwardly, there is nothing in Exodus 18 that compels us to understand אֱלֹהִים or אֱלֹהִים as semantically plural, something that is essential for the notion that the men appointed in the episode are a convenient explanation for the אֱלֹהִים and אֱלֹהִים of both Exod 8 and Ps 82. Each occurrence of אֱלֹהִים or אֱלֹהִים in this passage can quite readily refer to the singular God of Israel (as the ESV has). The same is true of Exodus 22. There is nothing in either passage that compels a plural translation.³¹

However, Heiser has got his facts wrong. Exodus 22:9 states, “For every breach of trust, whether it is for ox, for donkey, for sheep, for clothing, or for any lost thing about which one says, ‘This is it,’ the case of both parties shall come before אֱלֹהִים [hā’ēlōhîm]; he whom אֱלֹהִים condemn יַרְשִׁיט [yaršîsun] shall pay double to his neighbor.”³² In this text, the word אֱלֹהִים without the definite article הָ (hā) is the subject of the word יַרְשִׁיט (yaršîsun), which is a plural verb. Contrary to Heiser’s assertion, when associated with Exod. 22:9, as Heiser does, there is something in Exodus 18 that compels us to understand אֱלֹהִים as semantically plural. Interestingly, the Syriac translates both אֱלֹהִים and אֱלֹהִים with the word ܕܝܢܐ (dyn’), meaning “judges.”³³

Cyrus Gordon takes the word אֱלֹהִים in Exod. 22:6–7 as semantically plural:

It is my contention that here אֱלֹהִים does not mean *God* as the Septuagint translates, nor *judges*, which is the interpretation of the Peshitto and the Targum Onkelos, followed by Rashi and Ibn Ezra (הרמב"ם), by several of the English versions and by the lexicon. The literal translation, *gods* (plural.), found in the Vulgate (*ad deos*) and Luther’s versoin (*vor die Götter*) is better suited to what appears to be the real meaning of the passage in light of newly discovered material.³⁴

Gordon also refers to Exod. 22:8, which he translates, “The cause of both of them shall come unto the gods. He whom the gods condemn shall pay double unto his neighbor.”³⁵ The point here is not that the word אֱלֹהִים should be translated “gods.” Contrary to Heiser’s claim, the word can and

³¹ Heiser, <https://www.moreunseenrealm.com/ch4/>

³² עַל-כָּל-דִּבְרֵי-פֶשַׁע עַל-שׁוֹר עַל-חֲמוֹר עַל-שֶׁה עַל-שִׁלְמָה עַל-כָּל-אֲבֹדָה אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר כִּי-הוּא זֶה עַד הָאֱלֹהִים יָבֹא דִבְרֵי-שְׁנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר יִרְשִׁיעַן אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁלַם שְׁנֵים לְרֵעֵהוּ: (Exod. 22:9)

³³ SSL, s.v. “ܕܝܢܐ.”

³⁴ Cyrus H. Gordon, “אֱלֹהִים in Its Reputed Meaning of *Rulers, Judges*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Sept., 1935): 140.

³⁵ Gordon, “אֱלֹהִים,” 143.

is taken by other scholars to be plural, and Heiser's claim that there is nothing in Exodus 18 or 22 that compels us to understand it as plural is simply not true.

Heiser refers to the Tanakh as if this somehow validates his interpretation: "the argument here actually depends on whether מִיְהוָה and מִיְהוָה in verse 8 is to be taken as singular (as the Tanakh translation has) or plural, and whether it in fact refers to human beings."³⁶ However, other competent scholars translate the word as a plural (see Table # 6 on page 21).

Commenting on these verses, Umberto Cassuto asserts, "originally the word *ʿēlōhīm* in the ancient legal tradition of the East undoubtedly denoted the idols standing in the court of justice; among the Israelites the expression remained a stereotyped term signifying the place of the court"³⁷ What Cassuto is pointing out is that the word אֱלֹהִים was originally taken to be semantically plural.

Since it is the case that the word אֱלֹהִים can and is used to refer to humans, and the fact that the word is grammatically plural and sometimes takes singular verbs and sometimes plural verbs, it is not the word itself that led Heiser to his conclusion. There is something in Heiser's always-already-present worldview that predisposed him to take the verse in the way he does. Heiser already assumes that there must be "other gods," and his prior theological assumption compels him to interpret the text according to this assumption. Heiser employs his always-already-present filter through which he interprets the text.

He says, "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."³⁸ Now, what does it mean when he says "face value"? Does "face value" refer to what the text says apart from any interpretation? This cannot be the case for Heiser since he says the "face value" did not "fit the theological patterns I had always been taught." If he surmised that the face value did not fit, this can only be because he had understood the text in a certain way that caused this conflict in his mind. But to take the text in a certain way is not "face value." It is the meaning that he got from the text when he interpreted it in a certain way.

In fact, in another place Heiser argues,

Christians are often taught to interpret the Bible literally. In Part One [of this text], we looked at some of the problems that can come out of overemphasizing literal interpretation, but I should point out that most people who advocate literalism do so to prevent self-serving or idiosyncratic interpretations. If we interpret the text at face-value, so the idea goes, we'll more often than not be interpreting Scripture correctly. This approach — though well-intentioned — isn't always the best strategy, for several reasons. One is that the most straightforward reading can produce bizarre outcomes.³⁹

³⁶ Heiser, "More Unseen Realm." <https://www.moreunseenrealm.com/ch4/>.accessed 7/6/2024.

³⁷ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Skokie, Illinois: Varda Books, 5765/2005), 267.

³⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 12.

³⁹ *Unfiltered*, 49.

So, if taking the text at “face-value” is not always “the best strategy,” why should anyone take the text of Psalm 82 at Heiser’s “face-value.” It might be the case that Heiser’s “face-value” is in fact one of those “bizarre outcomes.”

This reveals a hermeneutic philosophy that predisposed him to arrive at a certain conclusion. Whether this initial interpretation was wrong or right is not at present the issue. What is at issue is that it reveals his latent hermeneutic and theological assumptions which are part of his unexpressed worldview.

The force of Heiser’s unexpressed worldview is seen in his next step:

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.⁴⁰

Heiser claims that evangelicals “feared to tread” is designed to vilify those who interpret the text differently. On what basis did Heiser *know* that these interpretations could not be correct? He explains,

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.

Heiser is referring to the remainder of the Psalm:

² He says, “How long will you make unjust legal decisions and show favoritism to the wicked? (Selah)

³ Defend the cause of the poor and the fatherless. Vindicate the oppressed and suffering.

⁴ Rescue the poor and needy. Deliver them from the power of the wicked.

⁵ They neither know nor understand. They stumble around in the dark, while all the foundations of the earth crumble.

⁶ I thought, ‘You are gods; all of you are sons of the Most High.’

⁷ Yet you will die like mortals; you will fall like any one of the princes.”

⁸ Rise up, O God, and execute judgment on the earth! For you own all the nations.⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 12.

⁴¹

² עֲדֹמָתִי תִשְׁפֹּטוּ עוֹלָם וּפְנֵי רָשָׁעִים תִּשְׁאוּ-סֵלָה:

³ שִׁפְטוּ-דָל וְיָתוֹם עָנִי וְרֵשַׁע הִצְדִּיקוּ:

⁴ פִּלְטוּ-דָל וְאֶבְיוֹן מִיַּד רָשָׁעִים הִצִּילוּ:

⁵ לֹא יָדְעוּ וְלֹא יִבִּינּוּ בַחֲשֹׁכָה יִתְהַלְכוּ יְמוּשׁוּ כָל-מוֹסְדֵי אֶרֶץ:

⁶ אֲנִי-אָמַרְתִּי אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם וּבְנֵי עֲלִיוֹן כָּלְכֶם:

⁷ אֲכֵן כְּאָדָם תִּמּוּתוּן וּכְאַחַד הַשָּׂרִים תִּפְּלוּ:

First of all, Heiser rejects these interpretations because, he says, “The Bible nowhere teaches that God appointed a council of Jewish elders to rule over foreign nations.” Interestingly, Psalm 82 does not claim that these *elohim* are appointed to rule over foreign nations. Verse 8 states, “Rise up, *elohim*, and execute judgment on the earth! For you own all the nations.” Heiser takes this to be a reference to the *elohim*, not to God. However, Heiser does not tell his reader that the statement in the final portion of the verse says “For you own all the nations.” Here the word translated “you” is the singular personal pronoun אַתָּה (*’attāh*).

Table #5: Ps. 82:8

הַגּוֹיִם:	בְּכָל-	תִּנְחַל	אַתָּה	כִּי-
the nations.	all	hold as a possession	You	for

If the text is referring to the *elohim*, “gods,” then Hebrew grammar requires that the personal pronoun be plural, אֲתֶם (*’etkem*), not singular אַתָּה (*’attāh*). Earlier it was pointed out that Heiser appealed to the Tanakh to support his view. In Ps. 82:8 the Tanakh translation reads, “Arise, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are Your possession.”⁴² Since in verse 8 the personal pronoun אַתָּה (*’attāh*, “you”) is singular, the word אֱלֹהִים must be taken to refer to God, as the Tanakh translates it, not to Heiser’s *elohim*.

Additionally, HAL points out, נָחַל (*nahl*) “with בְּ to hold as a possession (nations) Ps 82:8.”⁴³ This is referring to the בְּ that is prefixed to the word נָחַל. According to HAL, the word does not even mean “rule over” in any of its uses in the Hebrew Bible. Heiser is reading into the text what he needs it to say in order to support his view, and in the process he ignores the Hebrew grammar, which he claims to know.

Heiser argued that interpreting the text to refer to Israel is wrong because this is not taught anywhere in Scripture. Likewise, nowhere does the Scripture teach that *elohim* rule all the nations. And, apart from verse 8, there is no other place in the Psalm that refers to nations. Why does Heiser take this to be a reference to the *elohim* rather than to God? Because of his always-already-present assumptions. Here Heiser, who earlier said “I knew my Hebrew grammar,” ignores the Hebrew grammar in order to make the text fit his view. Heiser’s characterization that some answers “Frankly . . . weren’t honest,”⁴⁴ applies here to Heiser’s arguments.

And Heiser is simply wrong that, “The Bible nowhere teaches that God appointed a council of Jewish elders to rule over foreign nations.” In fact, God declares that Israel will rule over the nations:

¹ At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. ² This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact

⁸ קִוְּמָה אֱלֹהִים שְׁפֹטָה הָאָרֶץ כִּי־אַתָּה תִּנְחַל בְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם:

⁴² Jewish Publication Society, *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), Ps 82:8.

⁴³ HAL, s.v. “נָחַל.”

⁴⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 12.

it of his neighbor and his brother, because the remission of YHWH has been proclaimed.³ From a foreigner you may exact it, but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother.⁴ However, there will be no poor among you, since YHWH will surely bless you in the land which YHWH your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess,⁵ if only you listen obediently to the voice of YHWH your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today.⁶ For YHWH your God will bless you as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; *and you will rule over many nations*, but they will not rule over you (Deut. 15:1–6).⁴⁵

In verse 6 God specifically declares וּמִשְׁלַּתְּ גוֹיִם רַבִּים (*ûmāšaltā gôyim rabbim*, “and you will rule over nations many”). In this instance, the text actually uses the word “rule” (משל, *mšl*). Heiser has conveniently added the words “council of Jewish elders,” which the text of Psalm 82 does not use, but God specifically asserts that Israel will rule over many nations. Not only does Heiser read into the text what it does not say, he also ignores what the text in fact does say, and then adds to the text what he needs it to say.

Later Heiser rejects the claim that *elohim* refers to humans. He says. “Other Christians who see the problems with this first idea [that *elohim* refers to the Trinity] try to argue that the sons of God are human beings . . . This ‘human view’ is as flawed as the Trinitarian view. At no point in the Old Testament does the Scripture teach that Jews or Jewish leaders were put in authority over the other nations.”⁴⁶ As we have seen, the Scripture in fact *does* teach that the Jews will have authority over other nations by virtue of ruling over them. Heiser is simply wrong on this point.

However, to claim that nowhere is something taught is an illicit conclusion since this one place could be the very place where it is taught. Heiser assumes that his interpretation is the only possible one, and, on the basis of his interpretation, he makes this illicit conclusion. It is simply not honest to assert that at no point in the OT is a view taught when in fact this could be the one place that it is taught. Also, simply because a statement is made only once in the Bible does not disqualify a particular interpretation. Only in 1 Cor. 6:3 is it taught that we will judge angels: “Do you not know that we will judge angels?” (1 Cor. 6:3).⁴⁷ The fact that it is not taught anywhere else in Scripture does not disqualify the interpretation that we will judge angels.

In fact, taking the statement in the Psalm to be a reference to the *elohim*, “other gods,” rather than God does not fit the content of the Psalm. The Psalmist is speaking about the failure of the *elohim* to do justice and that they will ultimately die and fall, so the cry is to God to execute the very justice that the *elohim* have failed to do. Verse 7 says, “Nevertheless like man [כְּאָדָם, *kě’ādām*] you will die and like one of the princes [הַשָּׂרִים, *hasārīm*] you will fall.” (Ps. 82:7).⁴⁸ In fact, a similar

⁴⁵ מִקֵּץ שִׁבְע־שָׁנִים תַּעֲשֶׂה שְׂמִיטָה: ² וְזֶה דְּבַר הַשְּׂמִיטָה שְׂמוֹט כָּל-בַּעַל מִשָּׁה יָדוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִשֶׁה בְּרֵעֵהוּ לֹא-יִגַּשׁ אֶת-רֵעֵהוּ וְאֶת-אֶחָיו כִּי-יִקְרָא שְׂמִיטָה לַיהוָה: ³ אֶת-הַנִּזְכָּרִי תִגַּשׁ וְאֲשֶׁר לָדָּ אֶת-אֶחָיו תִּשְׁמַט יָדָּ: ⁴ אָפֶס כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה-בְּךָ אֶבְיֹן כִּי-יִבְרַךְ יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נִתַּן לְךָ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: ⁵ כִּי אִם-שְׂמוּעַ תִּשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לִשְׁמֹר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֶנִּי מֵצִוְּךָ הַיּוֹם: ⁶ כִּי-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּרַכְךָ בְּאֶשֶׁר כִּי-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּרַכְךָ בְּאֶשֶׁר דִּבֶּר-לְךָ וְהִעֲבַטְתָּ גוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאַתָּה לֹא תַעֲבֹט וּמִשְׁלַתְּ בְּגוֹיִם רַבִּים וּבְךָ לֹא יִמְשְׁלוּ: (Emphasis added) (Deut. 15:1–6)

⁴⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 29.

⁴⁷ οὐκ οἶδατε ὅτι ἀγγέλους κρινοῦμεν (1 Cor. 6:3).

⁴⁸

אֲכַן כְּאָדָם תָּמוּתוֹן וּכְאֶחָד הַשָּׂרִים תִּפֹּל: (Ps. 82:7)

expression is used in Judg. 16:7: “Samson said to her, ‘If they bind me with seven fresh cords that have not been dried, then I will become weak and be like one of the men [כְּאַחַד הָאָדָם, *kē’ahad hā’ādām*].”⁴⁹ Here Samson is saying that he will become weak “like one of the men.” The expression is used again in Judg. 16:11 and means “like any other man [כְּאַחַד הָאָדָם, *kē’ahad hā’ādām*].” Here in Psalm 82 the verse states, “as any other man you will die, and as any other of the princes, you will fall.” So, the *elohim* are referred to as other men and other princes, not “other gods.” It is also patently absurd to think that gods can die. According to Jesus, even angels cannot die (Lk. 20:36).

As we saw above, Heiser rejects other interpretations because, “The Bible nowhere teaches that God appointed a council of Jewish elders to rule over foreign nations.” But the fact that the Bible nowhere teaches that God is part of a pantheon of gods does not deter Heiser from interpreting the text this way. Not only does the word ‘pantheon’ not occur in Psalm 82. It does not occur anywhere in the Hebrew Bible or in the New Testament. The first verse of Psalm 82 states, “God is standing [or taking a stand] in the assembly . . .” But God does not stand anywhere since God is not a physical being. God is not “in” or “in the midst of” an assembly since He is omnipresent. God’s omnipresence follows from His eternity. God is not limited by space or time. As Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley put it, “God is fully present in every place in creation.”⁵⁰ These are figures of speech. That being the case, why not take the word *elohim* as a figure of speech? It is characteristic of poetry to use figurative language. Heiser takes this literally without any explanation or justification for his interpretation. He merely assumes that this is the “face value” of the text, but this is highly questionable.

There are competent scholars who take Exod.22:8 as referring to God or to the judges of Israel as *elohim*.⁵¹ “If the thief is not caught, then the owner of the house shall appear before the *elohim*, [הָאֱלֹהִים, *hā’ēlōhīm*] to determine whether he laid his hands on his neighbor’s property.” Heiser goes on to say, “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.”⁵²

The question that this raises is, How does he come to know how the biblical writers would have thought about the spiritual realm? The only access, if he in fact is loyal to the text, is the text itself. But there is no place in the text that specifically instructs the reader on how the biblical writers

⁴⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ שְׁמֹשׁוֹן אִם-יִצְאֶרְנִי בְּשִׁבְעָה יָתָרִים לַחִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִחָרְבוּ וְחִלִּיתִי וְהָיִיתִי כְּאַחַד הָאָדָם:
(Judg. 16:7)

⁵⁰ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Revelation and God*, vol. 1, *Reformed Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019–2024), 652. See also, Geisler, *God, Creation*, 146–47.

⁵¹ See for example, Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 506–507. “What the law calls for is a decision by God (‘the owner of the house must appear before God,’ v. 8; ‘both parties are to bring their cases before God,’ v. 9).” See also Cassuto, *Exodus*, 286. Brevard Childs refers to *elohim* as the judge, not judges or gods: Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 475. According to John Durham, “The property owner and the person to whom he has entrusted his possessions are thus to be understood as coming into the presence of God, no doubt at the local sanctuary or holy place, to seek and oracle of God”: John I. Durham, *Exodus*, vol. 3, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 326. John Currid refers to the *elohim* as judges: John D. Currid, *Exodus 19–20*, vol. 2, *A Study Commentary on Exodus* (Auburn, Massachusetts: Evangelical Press, 2001), 93.

⁵² *Unseen Realm*, 13.

would have understood the spiritual realm. So, to what sources would he have gone to discover this? If he goes to the Bible to discover how they would have understood the biblical text, then his claim actually begs the question. He would need to have an always-already-present hermeneutic grid, that is, a hermeneutic philosophy, in order to discover the hermeneutic grid in the text. To claim that he went to the text to discover how they would have thought about the spiritual realm is therefore circular. One goes to the text to discover how they would have thought about the spiritual realm, one interprets the text in such a way so as to grasp how they would have thought about the spiritual realm, then he uses these conclusions to show how they would have thought about the spiritual realm. But his conclusions about how they would have thought about the spiritual realm are not from the “face value” of the text, but from his interpretation of the text, an interpretation which he then uses as the grid through which to verify his interpretation of the text.

It is certainly the case that everyone interprets the text through a hermeneutical grid, Heiser no less than anyone else. The problem is that Heiser presents his interpretation as if it is simply a reading of the text in a manner that is devoid of any presuppositions or filters. That is why he uses the expression “face value.” It is perhaps excusable that someone is unaware of the philosophical presuppositions that control his interpretation, particularly since this awareness may presuppose a familiarity with philosophy in general and hermeneutic philosophy in particular; although one might expect a biblical scholar to know more about these issues. It is not the case that objective interpretation is impossible, but Heiser ought to have some familiarity with these issues, and he ought not present his interpretation as if it is simply a matter of the “face value.”

That Heiser is not actually reading the text at “face value” is evident in his initial translation of Ps. 82:1: “God [*elohim*] stands in the divine assembly; he administers judgment in the midst of the gods [*elohim*].”⁵³ In the footnote to this translation Heiser notes, “Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations come from the *Lexham English Bible* . . .”⁵⁴ There are other translations:

Table #6: Some Translations

NASB	God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers.
NET	God stands in the assembly of El; in the midst of the gods he renders judgment.
AV	God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods.
NIV	God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the “gods”
KJV	God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; He judgeth among the gods.
NKJV	God stands in the congregation of the mighty; He judges among the gods.
ESV	God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:

⁵³ *Unseen Realm*, 11.

⁵⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 11.n1.

LEB	God stands in the divine assembly; he administers judgment in the midst of the gods.
Peshitta	ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ “God stands in the congregation of the messengers/angels [ܡܠܟܐ, <i>dml'k'</i>]; he judges among the messengers/angels [ܡܠܐ, <i>ml'k'</i>].”
Göttingen Septuagint (Ps. 81)	Ὁ θεὸς ἔστη ἐν συναγωγῇ θεῶν, ἐν μέσῳ δὲ θεοῦ διακρίνει “The God stood in <i>the</i> congregation of gods, and in <i>the</i> midst he judges gods.”
Biblia Sacra Vulgata (Ps. 81)	Deus stetit in synagoga deorum in medio autem Deus deiudicat. “God has stood in the congregation of gods: and being in the midst of them God judges.”

Several of these translations have notes related to certain words. The notes often point out different views that different theologians, interpreters, and translators take. The point here is not whether Heiser’s translation is good, or bad, or any other value judgment, but that his translation is not simply the “face value.” Unless one is willing to dismiss all these other translations and translators as being “unscholarly,” or simply wrong, or not taking the text in its “face value,” a scholar ought at least to acknowledge that his own translation is not necessarily the only way to understand the text. Heiser does not do this. He presents his translation as if this is the only way to translate the text.

All translation involves interpretation. The translator must have a command of both the source language (SL) and the target language (TL).⁵⁵ From the meaning of the words and the sentences of the source text (ST), the translator must choose from a range of words from the target text (TT) whose meanings reflect what the translator holds to be the meaning of the source text (ST). This aspect of choice necessarily involves a prior theory on the part of the translator. Many argue that it is a simple matter of making one’s translation as closely equivalent to the ST as possible. However, in contemporary Translation Studies, the concept of “equivalence” is recognized as an ambiguous and problematic concept. Dorothy Kenny provides a typical definition of ‘equivalence’: “equivalence [is] the relationship between source text (ST) and a target text (TT) that allows the TT to be considered as a translation of the ST in the first place.”⁵⁶ Kenny goes on to point out the problem with even trying to define equivalence: “The above definition of equivalence is not unproblematic, however. Pym, for one, has pointed to its circularity: equivalence is supposed to

⁵⁵ The standard abbreviations in Translation Studies are: SL = Source Language (the language of the text being translated; here we are talking about the SL as a system, e.g., Latin, Greek, Hebrew, etc.); TL = Target Language (the language into which the translation is being made; here we are talking about the TL as a system, such as English); ST = Source Text (the specific text that is being translated); TT = Target Text (the specific text of the TL that is the product of the translation project). See, Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications* (London: Routledge, 2001), and Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, 3rd (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁵⁶ Dorothy Kenny, “Equivalence,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000), 77.

define translation, and translation, in turn, defines equivalence.”⁵⁷ Jeremy Munday observes that translation studies and theory have marginalized the notion of equivalence: “equivalence is an issue that will remain central to the practice of translation, even if translation studies and translation theory has, for the time being at least, marginalized it.”⁵⁸ Of course they marginalize it because they cannot define it.

W. V. O. Quine argues for what he identifies as the indeterminacy of translation. Quine presents his case for the indeterminacy of translation in *Word and Object*:

A rabbit scurries by, the native says ‘Gavagai,’ and the linguist notes down the sentence ‘Rabbit’ (or ‘Lo, a rabbit’) as tentative translation, subject to testing in further cases. The linguist will at first refrain from putting words into his informant’s mouth, if only for lack of words to put. When he can, though, the linguist has to supply native sentences for his informant’s approval, despite the risk of slanting the data by suggestion. Otherwise he can do little with native terms that have references in common. For, suppose the native language includes sentences S_1 , S_2 , and S_3 , really translatable respectively as ‘Animal,’ ‘White,’ and ‘Rabbit.’ Stimulus situations always differ, whether relevantly or not; and, just because volunteered responses come singly, the classes of situations under which the native happens to have volunteered S_1 , S_2 , and S_3 , are of course mutually exclusive, despite the hidden actual meanings of the words. How then is the linguist to perceive that the native would have been willing to assent to S_1 in all the situations where he happened to volunteer S_3 , and in some but perhaps not all of the situations where he happened to volunteer S_2 ? Only by taking the initiative and querying combinations of native sentences and stimulus situations so as to narrow down his guesses to his eventual satisfaction.⁵⁹

Quine’s central claim about the indeterminacy of translation is that any number of inferences from observation can be connected to specific empirical stimulations. Without any data from “previously accepted translation practices,” a linguist attempting to translate a language will need to rely on “the concomitances of native utterance and observable stimulus situation.”⁶⁰ Quine’s notion of the indeterminacy of translation is certainly self-defeating. He could not know the indeterminacy of translation unless he possessed a determinate translation that he could use as a measure by which to measure that all translations are indeterminate. Yet Quine’s notion indicates that translation is not simply a “face value” prospect or simply a matter of equivalence.

Again, the point is not whether Heiser’s translation is good, bad, or indifferent. The point is, for Heiser to assert that his reading of Psalm 82, “taken at face value,” hides a lack of awareness of the issues surrounding the task of translation and the place that one’s own worldview and presuppositions play in the process. At worst, Heiser attempts to hide these factors from his reader. I would rather think that Heiser is simply unaware of the philosophical issues than that he is deliberately attempting to hide them from his reader.

⁵⁷ Kenny, “Equivalence,” 77.

⁵⁸ Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies*, 50.

⁵⁹ W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1960), 29.

⁶⁰ Quine, *Word and Object*, 29.

He goes on to say, “Frankly, the answers just weren’t honest with the straightforward words in the text of Psalm 82.”⁶¹ One must wonder who determines what words are “straightforward”? Heiser’s translation reads, “God stands in the divine assembly; he administers judgment in the midst of the gods [*elohim*].” There is no “straightforward” word for “divine” in the text. This may be a perfectly good interpretation of the phrase, “in the assembly of god [לֵאלֹהִים, ’ēl].” But it is not “straightforward.” No doubt Heiser would object to my point, but this *is* the point. The translation of the phrase is simply not a matter of being “straightforward” in the way Heiser wants his reader to think. Heiser makes this statement as if his translation is beyond dispute, yet we have seen that there are other competent scholars who translate the text differently. For Heiser to present his translation as if it is “straightforward” is, frankly, not honest.

Why Does It Matter?

Allow me to give a humorous example. Some friends were concerned about one of their group. Their friend said to them, “I am dead.” He did not mean this figuratively. He actually believed he was dead. His friends argued with him for hours giving him a number of examples and arguments that he is not dead. Ultimately they argued that living people bleed and dead people do not bleed. The friend finally admitted, “I guess you’re right. I guess living people bleed and dead people don’t.” Someone suddenly pricked the friend’s finger, which began to bleed. The friend cried out, “Dead people do bleed!” One’s worldview will influence the way he or she interprets.

Let me give you another more serious example that relates particularly to biblical interpretation. Finis Jennings Dake (1902–1987) was an American Pentecostal minister and evangelist. His most popular publication, which can be purchased in almost any Christian bookstore, was his *Annotated Reference Bible*. Although his complete reference Bible was published in 1963, the New Testament section was published in 1961 and was endorsed by W. A. Criswell (1909–2002) and Ted W. Engstrom (1916–2006).⁶² Dake taught that the Triune God was composed of three distinct beings, each having a spirit-body, a soul, and a spirit. Dake believed and taught that God the Father has a spirit-body: “God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, each angel and man, and every separate person in the universe has a personal body, soul, and spirit, which are separate and distinct from all others . . .”⁶³

Now some people think that this is because of a faulty method of interpretation. However, when one interrogates Dake’s hermeneutic method it sounds very much like the method any orthodox Christian interpreter would adopt. Dake says, “*Remember this: Take the Bible literally*

⁶¹ *Unseen Realm*, 12.

⁶² Criswell was an American pastor, author, and a two-term president of the Southern Baptist Convention. He was the senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas for five decades. He is regarded by many to have been a key figure in the “Conservative Resurgence” in the Southern Baptist Convention that took place in the 1970s. Ted Engstrom (1916–2006) was the head of Youth for Christ and World Vision International. He was an evangelical leader and author, and one of the founding architects of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability. Both of these individuals were considered to be conservative, orthodox Christians. See, Finis Jennings Dake, *Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible: The New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), back of dust jacket on the hardback edition.

⁶³ Finis Jennings Dake, *God’s Plan for Man* (Lawrenceville, Georgia: Dake Bible Sales, 1977), 42.

wherever it is at all possible. When the language cannot be taken literally, then we know it is figurative. Then get the literal truth conveyed by the figurative language as if it were expressed in literal language without the use of figures.”⁶⁴ Dake refers to Jn. 4:24⁶⁵ as teaching that God is a spirit being: “God is a Spirit Being, not the sun, moon, stars; nor an image of wood, stone, or metal; and not beast or man. He is not the air, wind, universal mind, love or some impersonal quality. He is a person having a personal spirit body, a personal soul, and a personal spirit, like that of angels, and like that of man except His body is a spirit substance instead of flesh and bones (Job 13:8; Heb. 1:3).”⁶⁶

The problem here is that the Greek of the New Testament did not have an indefinite article corresponding to the English ‘a’ or ‘an.’ The text reads πνεῦμα ὁ θεός (*pneuma ho theos*), literally, “spirit the God.” By Greek, grammatical considerations alone there is no way to prove that this should not be translated, “a spirit the God,” or simply, “spirit the God.”⁶⁷ Dake sees no difficulty in the assertion that God is *a spirit being* among other spirit beings such as angels and men.

Dake refers to a number of Bible passages to prove to his own satisfaction that God has a body and body parts: “He is a spirit being with a body, shape, form, back, heart, hands . . .”⁶⁸ So, when the Bible says that God spoke to Moses face to face, Dake takes this to indicate that God has a face that could be physically seen by Moses. Commenting on Ex. 33:11,⁶⁹ Dake says, “Verse 11 says that ‘the Lord spoke unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh with a friend.’ This proves that Moses saw God with the eyes.”⁷⁰ However, concerning Ruth 2:12,⁷¹ which says, “. . . the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust,” Dake remarks, “This is figurative of trust in God, proving that she had already come to love the Jewish God and had attached herself to the Jewish faith.”⁷² Since presumably in this and other passages Dake employs the same hermeneutic principle, how do we explain the fact that he does not believe that God has wings, yet he does believe that God has a visible face?

This can be explained only by a prior commitment, a presupposition, part of his worldview that provided a grid by which Dake discriminated between passages and statements and led him to understand them in a certain way. A big part of this prior commitment was philosophical in nature. Why cannot God have wings? Because, according to Dake, God is a person, and persons do not have wings. Why does God have a face? Because God is a person, albeit a divine person, and persons have faces. It is contrary to the nature of a person to have wings, but it is part of the nature of a person to have a face. But the question of natures is a philosophical question, particularly a metaphysical one.

⁶⁴ Dake, *God's Plan for Man*, 42.. (Emphases in the original).

⁶⁵ “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth”; πνεῦμα ὁ θεός, καὶ τοὺς προσκυνοῦντας αὐτὸν ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ δεῖ προσκυνεῖν (Jn. 4:24).

⁶⁶ Dake, *Dake's Annotated Reference Bible*, 97. (Emphases in the original).

⁶⁷ Some argue that John is employing a Hebrew expression using a verbless clause.

⁶⁸ Dake, *God's Plan for Man*, 56.

⁶⁹ “Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent” (Ex 33:11);

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים כְּאִשֶּׁר יְדַבֵּר אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ וְשָׁב אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה וּמִשְׁרָתוֹ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נוּן נָעַר לֹא יָמִישׁ מִתּוֹךְ הָאֹהֶל: (Ex. 33:11)

⁷⁰ Dake, *God's Plan for Man*, 58.

⁷¹ (Ruth 2:12) וְשָׁלֵם יְהוָה פְּעֻלָּתוֹ וְתָהִי מִשְׁכַּרְתּוֹ שְׁלֵמָה מֵעַם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־בָּאת לַחֲסוֹת תַּחַת־כַּנְּפָיו:

⁷² Dake, *Dake's Annotated Reference Bible*, 292, note m, Ruth 2:12.

It was Dake's assumed metaphysic that provided the presuppositional framework that led him to understand the statements of the Bible the way he did. Although Dake rejected philosophy, it was his philosophical assumptions that led him to interpretative conclusions even though he did not acknowledge this. In fact, Dake repudiated all philosophy.

As in the case of Dake, a person's philosophy provides a vital part of the framework that influences how one interprets the text, and the conclusions at which one arrives. So often, disputes between rival interpretations cannot be settled by appealing to Scripture verses. Anyone who has ever witnessed to a Jehovah's Witness knows this. It is often a question of one's assumptions and presuppositions, and even one's worldview. There is more to one's worldview than philosophical assumptions. Theological assumptions are also part of one's worldview. If an interpreter already has a certain view of the nature of God and the spiritual realm, these views can determine how particular verses are interpreted.

Heiser begins his book, *Supernatural*, with the question, "Do you really believe what the Bible says?"⁷³ Of course, it is not simply a matter of *believing* what the Bible says. First one must *discover* what the Bible says. It is a matter of translation and interpretation. Heiser's claims about what the Bible says are his interpretations of the text, which he presents as if this *is* what the Bible says: "The story — God's goal, its opposition by the powers of darkness, its failure, and its ultimate future success — is what this book is about, just as it's what the Bible is about."⁷⁴ So, Heiser believes that the Bible says God's plan was initially a failure even though it will have success in the future. Does the Bible really say that God's plan was a failure at any point? In fact, in Isa. 46:10, God declares, "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure."⁷⁵ Heiser seems not to be able to grasp that what he interprets as a failure was actually part of God's plan all along. To the disciples, the death of Jesus on the cross appeared to be a failure, but it was part of God's plan to save all those who believe. God's plans do not fail.

Heiser closes the first chapter of this book with the statement, "May God open your eyes to see, so that you'll never be able to think about the Bible the same way again."⁷⁶ This is very good description of the part a worldview can play in a person's understanding of the Bible. Heiser is saying is, "If you change the way you think about things — if you change your assumptions, your presuppositions, and your worldview — you will not think about the Bible in the same way again." What Heiser wants you to do is to see the Bible the way he sees it, and, if you do this, you will know what the Bible actually means. The important question is, should anyone adopt Heiser's view? If Heiser is right, then, great! But what if his teaching is actually false? And how can you know?

In this chapter we have looked at what a worldview is. A worldview is not like a pair of glasses through which someone sees the world. A worldview is a way of viewing the world, but we view the world *with* our worldview, not through it. A serious problem with Heiser's hermeneutic method is that he takes the ANE worldview as the context *through which* one must interpret the biblical text. That's why it matters.

⁷³ *Supernatural*, 11.

⁷⁴ *Supernatural*, 15.

⁷⁵ (Isa. 46:10): אֵשֶׁה וְכָל-חֲפָצִי אֲעָשֶׂה: מִגִּיד מִרְאשִׁית אַחֲרִית וּמִקֶּדֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-נֶעֱשָׂה אָמַר עַצְתִּי תִקּוּם וְכָל-חֲפָצִי אֲעָשֶׂה:

⁷⁶ *Supernatural*, 16.

CHAPTER 3

THE NATURE OF THE DIVINE BEING

Introduction

Why is it important to discuss the nature of God at this point? As we have seen, one's worldview will often determine how one interprets. Although we do not interpret all things *through* our worldview as if they were glasses through which we see everything, we do interpret with our worldview. Sometimes, one's worldview will lead an interpreter to conclusions that are irrational or simply false, like the guy in the example above who declared, "Dead people do bleed!" As the Psalmist said, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" (Ps. 14:1).¹ It is actually irrational to think there is no God. Since, like all interpreters, Heiser's view of God informs his interpretations, it is important to set out the nature of God so as to see whether Heiser's interpretations affirm or deny the nature of the Divine Being.

A foundational part of a Christian's worldview is what he or she believes about God. Is God eternal? Does God change His mind? Can God fail? What one believes about God will often lead the interpreter to understand passages according to what he or she already assumes to be true about God. If someone believes there is more than one God, this can influence his interpretation of passages that use the word *elōhim* (אֱלֹהִים), which is a morphologically plural noun. This also makes it almost impossible to adjudicate interpretations simply by referring to various passages, since each passage will be interpreted according to the interpreters always-already-present philosophical and theological assumptions.

How can these differences be resolved? One way to do that is to discover whether the nature of God can be demonstrated by rational argument apart from appeal to any particular Bible passage. This approach has been employed as long as there have been those who have defended the Christian faith. It has traditionally been referred to as Natural Theology. No doubt some will object that this is an appeal to philosophy. But as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) asserted, "Whichever of these may be the case, it is of little concern to us, because the study of philosophy aims not at knowing what men feel, but at what is the truth of things."² Of course, the objection that this is an appeal to philosophy is itself an appeal to philosophy.

¹

אָמַר נָבֵל בְּלִבּוֹ אֵין אֱלֹהִים (Ps. 14:1)

² Thomae Aquinatis, *In Libros Aristotelis: De Caelo et Mundo Expositio*, Tomus Tertius, *Opera Omnia: Leonis XIII* (Romae: Ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1886), Liber I.Cap. X.Lect. XXII.8.91 "Quidquid autem horum sit, non est nobis multum curandum: quia studium philosophiae non est ad hoc quod sciatur quid homines senserint, sed qualiter se habeat veritas rerum."

On the basis of reason, the knowledge of God has proceeded from the creation to the Creator. The subject matter of natural theology is the same as that of Sacred theology, namely, God. However, as Holloway points out, “what lights up my knowledge about God are not created things ‘speaking to me about God,’ but rather what God himself has told me about himself or other things.”³ In other words, whereas the source of Sacred theology is God’s Revelation, the source of natural theology is God’s creation. God speaks through His Word, and God speaks through His creation. As Holloway explains,

A Christian student is one who wishes to develop and to use his intelligence in the service of Christ the King. The fact that it is in this service that he is putting his intelligence demands an excellence and an effort that is as perfect as the student can make it. But if anyone wants to be an intelligent Christian, he must acquire truth for its own sake. If a person, for example, wants to practice medicine for God, he must first begin by learning the science of medicine, and this means that he must begin to learn the science of medicine *for itself*, since that is the only way a knowledge of a science can be acquired. No one can use anything unless he first possesses it; once we possess a thing we can always use it as an instrument. And that is why we must always begin by learning a science for its own sake. The end of a theoretical science, such as the science of natural theology, is to know and understand the truth of things.⁴

Natural theology is the effort to understand the nature of God and to affirm this by rational of demonstration apart from an appeal to Scripture. If it can be shown by rational demonstration that there are certain aspects of God’s nature that must be the case, this will become a means by which to adjudicate between conflicting interpretations. If it can be shown by rational demonstration that God is eternal, and assuming, as this author does, that the Bible is inerrant in all that it affirms,⁵ this will mean that we cannot take any biblical statement as meaning that God is temporal. If it can be shown by rational demonstration that God is immutable, this means that we cannot take any Bible passage as meaning that God changed His mind or came to a conclusion as a result of discursive reasoning.

Depending upon whom you ask, or whom you read, there are several attributes of God. A very common list includes omnipotence — that God has all power; omniscience — that God has all knowledge; that God is eternal, simple, impassible, immutable, etc. For our purposes, we will consider three of these attributes; simplicity, eternity, and immutability.

Simplicity

To be simple means not to be composed of parts. To be simple is not the same as to have unity or to be a unit. Beings that are composed of parts can be beings that have unity. Human beings are composed of both the physical and spiritual. Humans also have physical parts. But these parts are

³ Maurice R. Holloway, *An Introduction to Natural Theology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), 18.

⁴ Holloway, *An Introduction to Natural Theology*, xiii–xiv

⁵ To say that the Bible is inerrant in all that it affirms means, for example, that although the Bible records the lies of others, it does not affirm that these lies are true. What it affirms is that these lies were told. More will be said about this below.

ordered to each other to form a unity of the being as one human being. By contrast, to be simple means not to have any parts, or not to be composed.

That God is simple has been predicated of God since the early church Fathers. Athenagoras of Athens (c.133–190) argued that God is one and indivisible:

Therefore, that there is one God, who has been the creator of this universe from the beginning, consider in this way that you may understand the reason for our faith. If there were two or more Gods from the beginning, either they were joined together in one and the same nature, or they were separate. But they could not be alike in one and the same nature, since, although they were Gods, they were not similar, but rather unlike, as if they were begotten or generated; That is to say, things that are begotten are similar to their models, but begotten things are not the same, since they are made neither from anything nor for anything. But if the Gods, like the hand and the eye and the foot, constitute one body, combining all the parts, forming one component, God is one. Although Socrates, inasmuch as he is subject to generation and corruption, is composed of parts and is again divided into them, God, on the other hand, is neither generated nor suffered nor divided; therefore it does not consist of parts.⁶

Athanasius (c. 296–373), a Greek church father, declared that God is simple:

35. But if when we hear, I am who I am; and, In the beginning God made heaven and earth; and, Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord; and thus says the Lord Almighty; we understand nothing else but the simple [*simplicem*], blessed, incomprehensible substance of him who is; for although we are unable to comprehend what that is, yet when we hear these words, Father, God, Almighty, we conceive that nothing else but the substance of him who is.⁷

⁶ Ἀθηναγορου/Athenagorae, Ἀθηναίου φιλοσόφου Χριστιανοῦ περὶ Χριστιανῶν/*Atheniensis philosophi Christiani supplicatio pro Christianis* (Halis: C. E. M. Pfeffer, 1856), CAP.VIII.26–29. Deum igitur unum esse, qui inde ab initio hujus universitatis opifex fuerit, hoc modo considerate, ut rationem fidei nostrae percipiatis. Si duo aut plures ab initio Dii fuerunt, vel conjuncti in una eademque natura pariter illi, vel separati fuere singuli. Sed in una eademque natura pariter esse non poterant, quum, quamvis Dii, non essent similes sed potius dissimiles, utpote qui ingeniati aut geniti essent; nempe quae genita sunt, exemplaribus suis sunt similia, ingenita vero non item, quum neque de aliquo neque ad aliquid facta sint. Quod si vero Dii velut manus et oculus et pes unum corpus constituunt, partes cunctas componendo, componentes unum, Deus unus est. Quamquam Socrates, quatenus generationi et corruptioni obnoxius est, e partibus componitur et rursus in eas dividitur, Deus vero neque generatur neque patitur neque dividitur; ergo non ex partibus constat.

⁷ Ὅτι τοίνυν εἰς ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὁ τοῦδε τοῦ παντός ποιητὴς θεός, οὕτωςι σκέψασθε, ἵν' ἔχητε καὶ τὸν λογισμὸν ἡμῶν τῆς πίστεως. εἰ δύο ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἢ πλείους ἦσαν θεοί, ἤτοι ἐν ἐνὶ καὶ ταῦτά ἦσαν, ἢ ἰδίᾳ ἕκαστος αὐτῶν. ἐν μὲν οὖν ἐνὶ καὶ ταῖτά εἶναι οὐκ ἡδύναντο· οὐ γὰρ, εἰ θεοί, ὅμοιοι, ἀλλ' ὅτι ἐγέννητοί τε καὶ γεννητοί, οὐχ ὅμοιοι· τὰ μὲν γὰρ γενητά, ὅμοια τοῖς παραδείγμασι, τὰ δὲ ἀγέννητα, ἀνόμοια, οὔτε ἀπὸ τινος, οὔτε πρὸς τινα γινόμενα. εἰ δὲ ὡς χεὶρ καὶ ὀφθαλμὸς καὶ πούς, περὶ ἐν σώμα εἰσιν, συμπληροῦντες τὰ μέρη ἓνα αὐτῶν συμπληροῦντες, ὁ θεός εἰς. καίτοι ὁ μὲν Σωκράτης παρὸ γεννητός καὶ φθαρτός, συγκεῖμενος καὶ διαιρούμενος εἰς μέρη, ὁ δὲ θεός ἀγέννητος καὶ ἀπαθής καὶ ἀδιαίρετος· οὐκ ἄρα συνεστώς ἐκ μερῶν.

⁷ Athanasii, “De synodis Arimini in Italia, et Seleucæ in Isauria, celebratis,” Tomus 26, *Patrologiae Graecae* (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1857), I.35.753–54. 35. Εἰ δὲ ὄνταν ἀκούμεν Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν καὶ Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεός τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ Ἄκουε, Ἰσραὴλ, Κύριος ὁ Θεός σου Κύριος εἷς ἐστὶ καὶ, Τάδε λέγει Κύριος παντοκράτωρ οὐχ ἕτερόν τι ἀλλ' αὐτὴν τὴν ἀπλὴν καὶ καὶ μακαρίαν καὶ ἀκατάληπτον τοῦ ὄντος οὐσίαν

Divine simplicity was a doctrine adamantly advanced by Augustine also: “But if the Father too who begot wisdom becomes wise with it, and if for him to be is not the same as to be wise, then the Son will be a quality of his, not his offspring, and there will no longer be absolute simplicity in God. This however is unthinkable, since in fact we have there absolutely simple being. With God to be is the same as to be wise.”⁸

Francis Turretin (1623–1687), a Genevan-Italian Reformed theologian, defines simplicity in the following way: “The simplicity of God considered not morally, but physically, is his incommunicable attribute by which the divine nature is conceived by us not only as free from all composition and division, but also as incapable of composition and divisibility.”⁹ Turretin explains,

Is God the most simple and devoid of all composition?

Aff. against Socin. & Vorstius.

IV It is clear that this belongs to God: I. From His independence; because composition is of the formal nature of originating and dependent Being; since nothing can be composed by itself, but whatever is composed by another must necessarily be composed. But God is the first and independent Being, which acknowledges none before. 2. From His unity, because He who is absolutely one is also absolutely simple, and therefore cannot be divided or composed. 3. From His perfection, because composition produces an imperfection, insofar as it presupposes passive power, dependence, and mutability. 4. From activity, because God is the most pure act, who has no admixture of potency, and who therefore rejects every composition; because in God there is nothing that He may perfect, or receive perfection from another; but it is whatever He can be, nor can He be other than what He is. Whence He is wont to be described not only by concrete names, but also by abstract names, of Life, Light, Truth, &c.¹⁰ John Preston

νοοῦμεν· ἅν γὰρ ἀδυνάτως ἔχομεν καταλαθεῖν, ὅ τι τοτέ ἐστίν, ἀλλ’ ἀχούοντες τὸ, Πατὴρ, καὶ τὸ, Θεός, καὶ τὸ, Παντοκράτωρ, οὐχ ἕτερόν τι, ἀλλ’ αὐτὴν τὴν τοῦ ὄντος οὐσίαν σημαινομένην νοοῦμεν.

35. Sin autem cum audimus: Ego sum qui sum; et, In principio fecit Deus cælum et terram; et, Audi, Israel, Dominus Deus tuus Dominus unus est; et Hæc dicit Dominus omnipotens; non aliud nisi ipsam simplicem, beatam, incomprehensibilem ejus, qui est, substantiam intelligimus; quamvis enim quidnam ille sit comprehendere nequeamus, attamen cum has voces audimus, Pater, Deus, Omnipotens, nihil aliud quam ejus, qui est, substantiam indicari concipimus.

⁸ Sancti Aurelii Augustini, *De Trinitate Libri XV*, in *Opera Omnia*, Tomus Octavus, *Patrologæ Cursus Completus* (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1815), Liber Septimus. Caput Primum. 1.2.184. “Quod si et Pater qui genuit sapientiam, ex ea fit sapiens, neque hoc est illi esse quod sapere, qualitas ejus est Filius; non proles ejus, et non ibi erit jam summa simplicitas. Sed absit ut ita sit; quia vere ibi est summe simplex essentia: hoc ergo est ibi esse quod sapere.” Translated by Edmund Hill.

⁹ Francisco Turretino, *Institutio Theologiæ Elencticae* (n.p.: Fredericum Haring, and Ernestum Voskuyl, 1696), Locus Tertius.Q.7.3. “*Simplicitas Dei*, quatenus non *moraliter*, sed *physicè* sumitur, est *Attributum ejus incommunicabile*, per quod *Natura Divina* à nobis concipitur, non solum ut *expers omnis compositionis & divisionis*, sed etiam *incapax componibilitatis & divisibilitatis*.”

¹⁰ Turretino, *Institutio Theologiæ Elencticae*, 3.7.IV.210.

An Deus sit Simplicissimus, & omnis Compositionis expers?

Aff. contra Socin. & Vorstium.

IV. Hanc Deo competere patet, I. Ab ejus *independentia*; quia compositio est de ratione formali Entis orti & dependentis, siquidem nihil à seipso componi potest, sed quicquid componitur ab alio componatur necesse est; At Deus est Ens primum & independens, quod nullum se prius agnoscit. 2. Ab ejus *unitate*, quia qui est absolutè unus, est etiam absolutè simplex, quique ideo dividi nequit, vel componi. 3. Ab ejus *perfectione*, quia compositio imfectionem infert,

(1587–1628), a Calvinistic Puritan and preacher, declared that God must, “. . . not only have a simple, but a living and most perfect being. . . It is required to eternity . . . There is no succession: as, suppose all the pleasures that are in a long banquet, were drawne together into one moment; suppose all the acts of mans understanding, and will, from the beginning of his life to the end, could be found in him in one instant; such is eternity. *God* possesseth all things altogether, he hath all at once . . . As if hee should say, there is no time past, present, or to come with me;”¹¹

John Miley (1813–1895), an American Methodist Episcopal minister and theologian, asserted God’s simplicity: “God is a spiritual being, and, with a distinction of attributes, a simple unity of being, without any spatial or quantitative quality. . . . God is one in perfect simplicity and unchangeableness of being, one in an absolute, eternal unity.”¹²

Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), a Dutch Calvinist theologian, asserts that divine simplicity is taught in Scripture:

Yet this simplicitas Dei is of the greatest significance for the knowledge of God. Not only is it taught in Scripture where God is called light, life, love, etc., but it also flows naturally from the idea of God and is necessarily given with the other attributes. The contradiction of this is simply put together. If God is composed of parts, like a body, or also of genus and differentia, substantia and accidentia, materia and forma, potentia and actus, essentia and existentia, then his perfection, his unity, his independence, his immutability cannot be maintained. . . . But God is of himself and has nothing above him; He is therefore completely one with wisdom, with grace, with love, etc.; He is absolutely perfect, nothing higher than God can be imagined; . . . But God is the Infinite, and all that is in Him is infinite. All his qualities are Divine and therefore infinite, one with his essence. Therefore He is and can only be sufficient, complete and glorious in Himself. . . This already shows that this simplicity of God is by no means a metaphysical abstraction.¹³

quatenus supponit potentiam passivam, dependentiam & mutabilitatem. 4. Ab *actuositate*, quia Deus est actus purissimus qui nullam habet potentiam admixtam, quique ideo omnem compositionem respuit; quia in Deo nihil est quod perficeregeat, aut ab alio perfectionem sumat, sed est quicquid esse potest, nec potest esse aliud quàm quod est. Unde non tantum nominibus concretis, sed etiam abstractis solet describi, Vitæ, Lucis, Veritatis & c.

¹¹ John Preston, “The Fifth Sermon,” in *Life Eternall or A Treatise of the Knowledge of the Divine Essence and Attributes* (London: R. B., 1631), 157–58.

¹² John Miley, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1893), 1.147, 216.

¹³ Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: J. H. Bos. 1897), Tweede Deel. §26.B.5.142–43. “Toch is deze simplicitas Dei voor de kennis Gods van de grootste beteekenis. Niet alleen wordt ze in de Schrift geleerd waar God licht, leven, liefde enz. wordt genoemd, maar ze vloeit ook uit de idee Gods vanzelve voort en is met de andere eigenschappen noodzakelijk gegeven. Eenvoudig is hier de tegenstelling van samengesteld. Als God samengesteld is uit deelen, gelijk een lichaam, of ook uit genus en differentia, substantia en accidentia, materia en forma, potentia en actus, essentia en existentia, dan is zijne volmaaktheid, zijne eenheid, zijne onafhankelijkheid, zijne onveranderlijkheid niet te handhaven. . . . Maar God is van zichzelf en heeft niets boven zich; Hij is dus met de wijsheid, met de genade, met de liefde enz. volkomen één; Hij is absoluut volmaakt, iets hooger dan God kan er niet gedacht worden; . . . Maar God is de oneindige, en alwat in Hem is, is oneindig. Al zijne eigenschappen zijn Goddelijk en dus oneindig, met zijn wezen één. Daarom is Hij en kan Hij ook alleen zijn genoegzaam, volzalig en volheerlijk in zichzelf. . . . Hieruit blijkt reeds, dat deze eenvoudigheid Gods volstrekt geen metaphysische abstractie is.”

There is probably no single scriptural reference more widely used to support the claim of divine simplicity than the Shema, Deut. 6:4: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד: “Hear Israel, YHWH our God, YHWH one.” From the oneness of God follows His absolute simplicity. Additionally, the Scriptures testify that God is Spirit: πνεῦμα ὁ θεός (Jn. 4:24). As John Dick points out, “If it has already appeared that he is an immaterial Being, it is a necessary consequence that he is not compounded, in the grosser acceptation of the term, because a spirit has no parts, and is indivisible and incorruptible.”¹⁴

Several arguments have been set forth throughout the history of Christian theology to demonstrate the divine simplicity. James Petigru Boyce (1827–1888), a prominent Baptist theologian, sets forth some of these arguments quite well.

But in God there can be no composition, and therefore his spiritual nature must be uncompounded. Even his attributes and his nature must be in such a manner one, that his attributes essentially inhere in that nature and are not capable of separation from it, which really makes them one with that nature.

The reasons for this are:

1. Because composition (or a putting together,) involves possibility of separation. But this would involve destructibility, and changeableness, each of which is inconsistent with absolute perfection and necessary existence.

2. Composition involves a time of separate existence of the parts compounded. If so, then there was a time when God did not exist, because the parts of his nature had not been united, or, when he existed imperfectly, not having yet received to his essential nature the additions subsequently made; all of which is inconsistent with absolute perfection and necessary existence.

3. If the parts have been compounded, it has been done by some force from without, or has been a growth in his nature. They have not been added from without, because God is independent, and therefore cannot be affected from without. Besides all outward form and all else than God had its origin in him, and he existed as God before it. They have not been a growth in him, for, if so, he is not unchangeable. Any such addition to God or growth in him is also inconsistent with absolute perfection and necessary existence.

In ascribing simplicity to God, therefore, we declare that his nature is so purely or simply one as not to be compounded of separate substances, as matter and spirit, or even of the same substance, in different forms, or of a substance with separable attributes; and we assert that even his attributes are one with his essence, and that he is not only essentially spiritual, but also essentially wise, and good, and holy, and just, and true, and almighty, and omnipotent.¹⁵

Aquinas follows a different path in establishing the absolute simplicity of God. Garrigou-Lagrange summarizes this method:

¹⁴ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology* (Oxford: David Christy, 1836), 21,108.

¹⁵ James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (n.p.: Christian Gospel Foundation, 1887), 67–68.

Concerning God we must consider what He is and how He is, or rather how He is not, for in this life we cannot know His essence, since this would be to see the Deity. Hence we inquire how God is not, by removing from Him what does not apply to Him, such as composition and motion. Thus we must treat of God's simplicity, perfection, infinity, immutability, and unity. But we shall afterward see how God is known and named by us.

This question of God's simplicity starts out by excluding from Him what is known as physical composition, or of really distinct parts. In the first four articles it is established: that God is not a body; (2) that He is not composed of matter and form; (3) nor of nature and suppositum; (4) nor of essence and existence. Then what is known as metaphysical composition, which consists of *genus* and *differentia*, is excluded in the fifth article.

Finally, it is shown that there is no accident in God (a. 6), that God is altogether simple (a. 7), and that He does not enter into the composition of other things, either as form or matter, since He is the extrinsic cause, which means that He is the efficient and final cause of all things (a. 8). In these last three articles we have the refutation of pantheism, and they are the result of the conclusions of what was established in the fourth article, namely, that only God is the self-subsisting Being. This fourth article contains the dominating principle of this question, that is, it is the terminus in the ascending order by way of investigation, and the beginning in the descending order by way of judgment, since wisdom judges of all things by the highest of reasons.¹⁶

Objections to the Doctrine of God's Simplicity

Alvan Plantinga articulates a scenario that supposedly presents a dilemma opposing God's sovereignty and God's simplicity.

Still further, suppose God has a *nature*—a property he has essentially that includes each property essentially to him. Perhaps God is essentially omniscient; that is, perhaps it's just not possible that he fail to be omniscient. If so, then it isn't up to him to whether he has that property; his having it is in no way dependent upon his own decision or will. He simply finds himself with it; and that he has it is in no way up to him. So God's having a nature seems incompatible with his being in total control.¹⁷

Ronald Nash explains that an attempt to avoid the dilemma which Plantinga has articulated was "formulated by Aquinas" as a "way of escape from this dilemma." However, it is clear that the doctrine of simplicity was articulated hundreds of years before Thomas Aquinas employed it in his formulations. But it is not necessary to see Aquinas' formulation of the doctrine as an attempt to avoid this dilemma. The dilemma is false in itself. If it is the case that the properties of God do not depend upon Him such that it seems to violate his sovereignty, then either God is sovereign by no choice of His own, or sovereignty is a property which God has chosen. But if God chose to be

¹⁶ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The One God: A Commentary on the First Part of St. Thomas' Theological Summa*, trans. Bede Rose (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Company, 1943), 171.

¹⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 7–8.

sovereign, then there was a time when he was not sovereign. But if there was a time when God was not sovereign, then it may have been at this time that God chose to be simple. This is absurd.

In fact, according to Plantinga's reasoning, God is either God by choice, or not. If God is God by choice, then, according to Plantinga's argument, this violates His sovereignty. But, this is absurd since to violate God's sovereignty God would have to be God before He chose to be God. If each of the properties which constitutes the nature of God are properties which God had to choose in order to avoid conflict with His sovereignty, then to what does the term "God" refer before "God" chooses His properties? Plantinga's scenario is absurd.

The Indistinguishableness of God's Attributes

Nash asserts that the doctrine of simplicity as articulated by Aquinas "is unsatisfactory because it entails conclusions that conflict with other important tenets of Christian theism."¹⁸ The first conflict that Nash articulates is the conclusion that simplicity entails an indistinguishableness among God's attributes.

First, equating God with each of His properties entails that each of God's properties is identical with His other properties. If A is identical with B and if B is identical with C, then A is identical with C. Clearly, then, if God is identical with His property of knowledge and also identical with His property of perfect goodness, it then follows that the property of knowledge is identical with the property of perfect goodness. If each of God's properties is identical with all of God's other properties, the obvious conclusion to be drawn is that God has only one property. But this is mystifying, to say the least. While obviously there are many things about God that human beings may be incapable of comprehending, one of the things we do seem to know very clearly is that power and love and knowledge and mercy are not identical properties.¹⁹

Essentially Nash's first objection to the doctrine of simplicity is that it leads to a conclusion about the nature of God that does not make sense from the perspective of finite creatures. But, when has our lack of understanding ever disqualified a claim about the nature of God. The same argument could be directed at the doctrine of the Trinity, or the two natures of Christ. Additionally, Nash has simply begged the question by defining his position into existence. He concludes by saying, "one of the things we do seem to know very clearly is that power and love and knowledge and mercy are not identical properties." But simply because these "properties" appear distinct to us does not entail that they must be distinct in God. In fact, this is the very question under consideration. Ultimately, Nash claims that these "properties" must be distinct in God because they must be distinct. But where is the argumentation that they must be distinct? Nash simply asserts this without support.

In response, it must first be pointed out that there is a hierarchy of significance in the problems that accompany the doctrine of simplicity, or any other doctrine for that matter. It is much more serious a result to assert of God that which is ontologically impossible, than to assert that

¹⁸ Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 95.

¹⁹ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 94.

which is epistemologically incomprehensible to us. We dare not deny God's ontology on the basis of our limited epistemology. If God is not simple, then He is composed. But to be composed one either composes oneself, which is impossible since one would have to exist and not exist in the same sense, or one would have to be composed by another. But if God is composed by another, then there is another who is ontologically prior to God. But this is absurd since by "God" we mean that Being who is ontologically first. Additionally, if God is composed, then He has the potential to decompose. But to decompose is to die. But God cannot die. Therefore, God must be simple. The conclusions that follow from denying God's simplicity are much more serious than the conclusions that follow from our lack of being able to comprehend how the simplicity and attributes of God cohere. Contrary to Nash's assertion that "Christian theologians have no good reason to affirm the doctrine of divine simplicity," in fact the Christian theologian has every good reason, and a critical necessity to affirm the doctrine of simplicity. The consequences of denial are simply too high a price to pay.

However, Nash's scenario simply does not follow. It is possible to distinguish between God's attributes without denying God's simplicity. As Garrigou-Lagrange observes, "The metaphysical degrees are not actually distinct in a thing before the mind's consideration, as, for instance, in Peter, animality, vitality, rationality, and substantiality; for these are reduced to the same concept of humanity, of which animality is the genus, and rationality is the specific differentia. Thus they correspond to the same reality that is in itself one but virtually multiplex."²⁰ So, even in the natural realm we find examples in which properties are conceptually distinct, yet not merely subjective, and at the same time constitute the one nature. If this is possible in the natural realm *a fortiori* it is possible with God. Animality and rationality are two distinct concepts that cannot be *reduced* to identity. Nevertheless, they both inhere in the one human nature without being actually distinct in that nature. Likewise, knowledge and love are distinct conceptions about the one simple essence of God.

Incompatibility of Personhood and Simplicity

Plantinga offers another criticism of simplicity:

In the second place, if God is identical with each of his properties, then, since each of his properties is a property, he is a property—a self-exemplifying property. Accordingly God has just one property: himself. This view is subject to a difficulty both obvious and overwhelming. No property could have created the world; no property could be omniscient, or, indeed, know anything at all. If God is a property, then he isn't a person but a mere abstract object; he has no knowledge, awareness, power, love or life. So taken, the simplicity doctrine seems an utter mistake.²¹

Nash then applies this to Aquinas' articulation of the doctrine of simplicity. He asserts, "It leads to the odd suggestion that the biblical teaching that God is characterized by a variety of distinct

²⁰ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The One God*, 167.

²¹ Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* 47.

properties is wrong. It also appears to deny the personhood of God.”²² However, neither Plantinga’s nor Nash’s conclusions follow since it has already been demonstrated that the attributes of God cannot be reduced to a single property. Simply because the attributes of God are identical with God does not mean they are not distinct from each other. As has been shown, even in created beings there are properties that inhere in the nature of one being that nevertheless are not reducible to each other. The doctrine of the Trinity states that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct Persons such that one Person is not reducible to the others, yet these three Persons are the one indivisible God. Although this is beyond our comprehension, we accept this doctrine as true and accurate. Both Plantinga and Nash are confusing epistemology with ontology.

Plantinga also employs an equivocation in his argument. On the one hand he employs the term ‘property’ to identify those attributes which have traditionally been predicated of God, such as omnipotence, omniscience, etc. On the other hand he denies that these properties are these properties. Even if we concede that God is a property, He is still the property to whom is attributed these attributes. It simply does not make sense to say that since God is identical with the properties of omniscience and omnipotence that He is therefore not omnipotent or omniscient. If the properties which God is are the properties which include the aspects of knowledge and power, then how can Plantinga assert that “No property could have created the world; no property could be omniscient”? If God is identical with these properties, then He is these properties. And if He is these properties, then He is not a property in the same sense that we distinguish these properties. God is these properties, which means that He is omnipotent, and thus able to create, and that He is omniscient, and thus He knows all things. Either Plantinga is using the term ‘property’ in two senses, in which case he is equivocating, or God is the properties with which He is identical, in which case this is not a denial either of any specific property or that He is all these. Nor is it a denial of His personhood, which is one of the properties with which He is identical, in which case God is a person.

Additionally, it is simply a misunderstanding of the doctrine of simplicity to assert that God is identical with His properties. The doctrine of simplicity, at least as articulated in the history of Christian theology, never asserts that God is identical with His properties. Since God is His properties, God is identical with Himself.

Stump and Kretzman offer a resolution to Nash’s and Plantinga’s confusion.

According to the doctrine of simplicity, what human beings call God’s omnipotence or God’s omniscience is the single eternal action considered under descriptions they find variously illuminating, or recognized by them under different kinds of effects or manifestations of it. What the doctrine requires one to understand about all the designations for the divine attributes is that they are all identical in reference but different in sense, referring in various ways to the one actual entity which is God himself or designating various manifestations of it. Perfect power’ and ‘perfect knowledge’ are precise analogues for ‘the morning star’ and ‘the evening star’: non-synonymous expressions designating quite distinct manifestations of one and the same thing. There is as much truth and as much potential misinformation in ‘Perfect power is identical with perfect knowledge’ as there are in ‘The morning star is identical with the evening star’. And ‘Perfect power is identical with perfect knowledge’ does not entail that

²² Nash, *The Concept of God*, 94–95.

power is identical with knowledge any more than the fact that the summit of a mountain's east slope is identical with the summit of its west slope entails the identity of the slopes.²³

The attributes of God are not really distinct from each other. Rather, they are virtually distinct. But, a virtual distinction is founded upon the reality of the nature of God so that they are not simply subjective impressions in the minds of men. There is no doubt, as Nash observes, that the relation between God's simplicity and God's attributes is "mystifying." As Garrigou-Lagrange observes, "How the perfections are contained is mysterious; but the divine attributes are so identified in the most eminent and formal concept of the Deity as not to be destroyed by it. They are contained formally in it, and yet are not formally distinct. In fact, they are found in their purest state, without any imperfection, only in the Deity."²⁴

Simplicity Is Not Unique to God

Nash's final objection to the doctrine of simplicity is that this doctrine is not unique to God. As Nash articulates this objection,

One of the most serious problems with claims made for the doctrine of simplicity is the fact that simplicity does not seem to be unique to God. There is a sense in which every human essence is also simple. Let us suppose that every human being has an essence. The essence of Socrates, for example, is the set of properties Socrates has in every possible world in which he exists. Any change in his set of essential properties would mean the end of his existence as the particular individual Socrates. Socrates' essence, then, is indivisible in the sense that none of his essential properties can be pulled out, so to speak, from his nature. His essence is an indivisible whole; it is, in other words, simple. If E (some set of properties) constitutes the essence of some being, it follows from the definition of essence that all the properties of E are necessary in the sense that the loss of any one property would alter the identity of the being in question. Since every human essence possesses properties that cannot be lost without that essence ceasing to exist, there is a sense in which every human essence is simple. It is difficult to see how simplicity is unique to God; and if it is not unique to God, simplicity is not an attribute of that being who bears the title "God."²⁵

Essentially, Nash is arguing that since the concept of simplicity can reasonably be predicated of other beings, it should not be predicated of God. Ignoring for the moment that Nash's scenario serves to disprove his other objections against simplicity, it simply does not follow that because an attribute is not unique in every sense, it is not unique in any sense. Employing Nash's reasoning, we must deny existence to God because in some sense humans exist, and, after all, it is difficult, though not impossible, to see how existence is unique to God. In fact, existence is unique to God in one sense, and common to all existing things in another sense, because all existing things exist. By the

²³ Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy*, 1 (October 1985), 356–57.

²⁴ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The One God*, 169.

²⁵ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 95.

same reasoning, we would need to deny that God is loving since humans love and it is difficult to see how love is unique to God. Simplicity, like all other attributes, is predicated analogically of God and man. God is absolutely simple, not composed of parts. Men are simple in the sense that they are a unity of parts that are ordered to each other to constitute one man. Both God and man exist, but God does not “be” in the same way men “be.” Although both man and God “be,” they do not “be” in the same way. Whereas men have being, God is Being. So, their being is analogical—unique to God in some sense, but common to both God and man in another sense. It is beyond our present task to engage in an exposition of analogical predication and the analogy of being.²⁶ However, this brief response is sufficient to answer the objection.

Absolute simplicity belongs only to God. In order for two beings to be absolutely simple, they must be distinguished by some difference. As Garrigou-Lagrange puts it, “If there could be a multiplication of the Deity, we should be able to distinguish in each of the gods the abstract from the concrete, the divine essence common to all of them from their individualized conditions.”²⁷ But if two beings can be distinguished by some difference, then at least one of these beings must possess some aspect that is different, in which case that being is not absolutely simple. There cannot be two beings that are absolutely simple since there could be no distinction between them, and two things that cannot be distinguished are not two beings, but one being.

Immutability

Classical theism has traditionally asserted the immutability of God. Immutability simply means that God cannot change. Garrigou-Lagrange provides a definition of this classical determination: “He who is Being itself is absolutely *immutable*. He can acquire nothing, not being in potentiality for further determination, since He is supremely determined and pure act. Neither can He lose anything, since He is absolutely simple. This absolute stability of the divine being applies necessarily to His wisdom and will.”²⁸ Thomas Weinandy points out that the “early Christological controversies and debates were never concerned with the immutability and impassibility of God as such,”²⁹ and Reinhold Seeberg observes that among the early apologists the true Christian doctrines included, “There is One God, the Creator, Adorner, and Preserver of the world. The invisible God is unbegotten, nameless, eternal, incomprehensible, unchangeable Being.”³⁰ Irenaeus himself

²⁶ See, for example, Gregory P. Rocca. *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

²⁷ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature* (St. Louis, Missouri: B. Herder Book Company, 1941), 2.44.

²⁸ Garrigou-Lagrange, *God*, 2.51.

²⁹ Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Change?* (Still River, Massachusetts: St. Bede’s Publications, 1985), xxi. “The root meaning of ‘impassibility’ is that God is not passible or subject to passion (im = not and passible = having passion). God cannot undergo passion or suffering; nothing in the created universe can make God feel pain or inflict misery on Him.” Geisler, *God, Creation*, 112. Since God is immutable, He cannot change. Since He cannot change, He cannot be caused to change from anything outside Himself.

³⁰ Reinhold Seeberg, *Die Dogmengeschichte der alten Kirche*, Erste Hälfte, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (Erlangen Und Leipzig: A. Deichert’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Nachif (Georg Böhme), 1895), §13.2.73. “Gott ist einer, der Schöpfer, Bildner und Erhalter der Welt (Just. I.6. Ath. 8. Theoph. III, 9). Der unsichtbare Gott ist ein unerzeugtes, namenloses, ewiges, unfäßliches, unveränderliches, bedürfnisloses, von allen Affekten freies Wesen.” Translated by

asserted, “let them learn that God alone, who is Lord of all, is without beginning and without end, being truly and for ever the same, and always remaining the same unchangeable Being.”³¹

As Weinandy points out, among the early church fathers, “the immutability of God, as philosophically understood, is taken for granted.”³² And according to Etienne Gilson, the question of God’s immutability was for St. Augustine not simply one aspect of his doctrine, but was “perhaps, the most profound and most constant element in his metaphysical thought.”³³ As Augustine states in *De Trinitate*,

For as wisdom is so called from the being wise, and knowledge from knowing; so from being (1) comes that which we call essence. And who is there that is, more than He who said to His servant Moses, “I am that I am;” and, “Thus shall thou say unto the children of Israel, He who is hath sent me unto you?” (2) But other things that are called essences or substances admit of accidents, whereby a change, whether great or small, is produced in them. But there can be no accident of this kind in respect to God; and therefore He who is God is the only unchangeable substance or essence, to whom certainly BEING itself, whence comes the name of essence, most especially and most truly belongs.³⁴

In his *Body of Divinitie*, Bishop James Ussher (1581–1656) asserted, “God’s essence or substance cannot be augmented or diminished . . . his nature and will cannot be changed: but he remaineth constant without shadow of change, and will be alwaies such as he hath been from all eternity. . . . The Repentance attributed so often to God in the Scriptures, signifieth no mutation in God’s nature; but in his actions, immutably decreed from all eternity. And the Scripture in this speaketh after our manner, that we may better understand what is the nature of God against sin.”³⁵

Charles E. Hay.

³¹ Irenaei, *Adversus Haereses: Libri quinque*, Pars I (Romae: Ex Officina typographica Forzani et Socii, 1907), 2.34.2. “discant, quoniam sine initio et sine fine, vere et semper idem et eodem modo se habens, solus est Deus, qui est omnium Dominus.”

³² Weinandy, *Does God Change?*, xxi.

³³ Étienne Gilson, *Introduction a L’étude De Saint Augustin*, Troisième Édition (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1949), 27. “On ne saurait trop insister sur le fait qu’il ne s’agit pas ici d’un à côté de la doctrine d’Augustin, mais de ce qu’il y a peut-être de plus profond et de plus constant dans sa pensée métaphysique.”

³⁴ Sancti Aurelii Augustini, *De Trinitate Libri Quindecim*, Pars VI, *Opera Polemica* (Parisiis: Pud Parent-Desbarres, Editorem, 1889), V.III.334. “Sicut enim ab eo quod est sapere dicta est sapientia, et ab eo quod est scire dicta est scientia, ita ab eo quod est esse dicta est essentia. Et quis magis est, quam ille qui dixit famulo suo Moysi: « Ego sum qui sum, et: Dices filiis Israël: Qui est misit me ad vos? » Sed aliæ quae dicuntur essentiae, sive substantiae capiunt accidentias quibus in eis fiat vel magna vel quantacumque mutatio: Deo autem aliquid eiusmodi accidere non potest; et ideo sola est incommutabilis substantia vel essentia, quae Deus est, cui profecto ipsum esse, unde essentia nominata est, maxime ac verissime competit. Quod enim mutatur, non servat ipsum esse; et quod mutari potest, etiamsi non mutetur, potest quod fuerat non esse; ac per hoc illud solum quod non tantum non mutatur, verum etiam mutari omnino non potest, sine scrupulo occurrit quod verissime dicatur esse.”

³⁵ James Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie, or the Summe and Substance of Christian Religion; Catechistically Propounded, and Explained, by way of Question and Answer: Methodically and Familiarly Handled* (London: Printed by M.F. for Tho: Downes and Geo: Badger, 1647), 35.

The immutability of God has been the predominate view of the Christian Church. Indeed, in his article titled “Does God Change His Mind?”³⁶ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., Department Chair and Senior Professor of Old Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, acknowledges, “Most Christian theologians have affirmed that God is immutable.”³⁷

Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–202), a Greek Bishop and Christian apologist, affirmed that God is immutable:

let them learn that without beginning and without end, truly and always being the same and in the same way, God alone is the Lord of all. But all things which are from Him, whatever things have been made and are made, indeed receive their beginning of generation, and by this means they are inferior to Him who made them, since they are not begotten; but they continue and are extended to the length of the ages, according to the will of God the maker:³⁸

Francis Turretin gives the following definition of immutability: “Immutability is an incommunicable attribute of God by which is denied of him not only all change, but also all possibility of change, as much with respect to existence as to will.”³⁹ Once again James Boyce offers a helpful and succinct summary of the arguments for God’s immutability.

By the immutability of God is meant that he is incapable of change either in duration of life, or in nature, character, will or happiness. In none of these, nor in any other respect is there any possibility of change.

1. This is implied in his absolute perfection. Perfection permits neither increase as though he lacks, nor decrease as though he can lose. Change must be for the worse or for the better, but God cannot become worse or better.

2. It arises in like manner from the pure simplicity of his nature. That which is not and cannot be compounded cannot be changed.

3. It is expressly taught by the Scriptures in the following as well as in other particulars. A few passages out of many are referred to in support of each.

(a) They declare him to be unchangeable in *duration and life*: Gen. 21:33; Deut. 32:39, 40; Ps. 9:7; 55:19; 90:2; 102:12; Hab. 1:12; Rom. 16:26; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16.

(b) They affirm the unchangeableness of his *nature*: Ps. 104: 31; Mal. 3:6; Rom 1:23; James 1:17.⁴⁰

³⁶ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “Does God ‘Change His Mind’?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (October-December 1995): 387–99.

³⁷ Chisholm, “Does God ‘Change His Mind’?” 387.

³⁸ Irenaei, *Adversus Haereses*, II.34.2.469. “discant, quoniam sine initio et sine fine, vere et semper idem et eodem modo se habens, solus est Deus, quiescit omnium Dominus. Quæ autem sunt ab illo omnia, quæcunque facta sunt et fiunt, initium quidem suum accipiunt generationis, et per hoc inferiora sunt ab eo qui ea fecit, quoniam non sunt ingenerata; perseverant autem et extenduntur in longitudinem sæculorum, secundum voluntatem factoris Dei.”

³⁹ Turretino, *Institutio Theologiæ Elencricæ*, Locus Tertius.Q.11.1. “*Immutabilitas* est attributum Dei incommunicabile, quo negatur de Deo non tantum omnis mutatio, sed etiam possibilitas mutationis, tam quoad existentiam, quam quoad voluntatem.”

⁴⁰ Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, 73.

Boyce goes on to supply an abundance of scriptural references in support of God's immutable will and character. Aquinas employs three arguments to demonstrate God's immutability.

First, because it was shown above that there is some first being, whom we call God; and that this first being must be pure act, without the admixture of any potentiality, for the reason that, absolutely, potentiality is posterior to act. Now everything which is in any way changed, is in some way in potentiality. Hence it is evident that it is impossible for God to be in any way changeable.

Secondly, because everything which is moved, remains as it was in part, and passes away in part; as what is moved from whiteness to blackness, remains the same as to substance; thus in everything which is moved, there is some kind of composition to be found. But it has been shown above (3, 7) that in God there is no composition, for He is altogether simple. Hence it is manifest that God cannot be moved.

Thirdly, because everything which is moved acquires something by its movement, and attains to what it had not attained previously. But since God is infinite, comprehending in Himself all the plenitude of perfection of all being, He cannot acquire anything new, nor extend Himself to anything whereto He was not extended previously. Hence movement in no way belongs to Him. So, some of the ancients, constrained, as it were, by the truth, decided that the first principle was immovable.⁴¹

Herman Bavinck declares that the doctrine of God's immutability is part of Christian theology:

Everything changes but He remains standing, He remains who He is, Ps. 102:26—28. He is YHWH, the being and ever the same as himself; the first and with the last the same God, Isa. 41:4, 43:10, 46: 4, 48:12. He is who He is, Deut. 32:39, cf. Joh. 8:58, Heb. 13:8, ἀφθαρτος, ὁμοιος ἔχων ἀθανασίαν, always ὁ αἰτός Rom 1:23, 1 Tim. 1:17, 6:16, Heb. 1:11,12. And unchangeable in His existence and essence, He is also unchangeable in His thought and will, in all His purposes and decisions. He is not a man that He should lie or repent. What He says, He does, Num. 15:29. 1 Sam. 15 :29. . . . In a word, He, YHWH, does not change, Mal. 3:6; . . . The doctrine of the immutability of God was built on this in Christian theology. . . . This

⁴¹ Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Tomus Quartus, *Opera Omnia Leonis XIII P. M.* (Romae: Ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1888), Ia.9.1. "Primo quidem, quia supra ostensum est esse aliquod primum ens, quod Deum dicimus; et quod huiusmodi primum ens oportet esse purum actum absque permixtione alicuius potentiae, eo quod potentia simpliciter est posterior actu. Omne autem quod quocumque modo mutatur, est aliquo modo in potentia. Ex quo patet quod impossibile est Deum aliquo modo mutari.

Secundo, quia omne quod movetur, quantum ad aliquid manet, et quantum ad aliquid transit; sicut quod movetur de albedine in nigredinem, manet secundum substantiam. Et sic in omni eo quod movetur, attenditur aliqua compositio. Ostensum est autem supra quod in Deo nulla est compositio, sed est omnino simplex. Unde manifestum est quod Deus moveri non potest.

Tertio, quia omne quod movetur, motu suo aliquid acquirit et pertingit ad illud ad quod prius non pertinebat. Deus autem, cum sit infinitus, comprehendens in se omnem plenitudinem perfectionis totius esse, non potest aliquid acquirere, nec extendere se in aliquid ad quod prius non pertinebat. Unde nullo modo sibi competit motus. — Et inde est quod quidam antiquorum, quasi ab ipsa veritate coacti posuerunt primum principium esse immobile."

concept of an eternal and unchangeable being cannot be obtained through the senses, because every creature, including man himself, is changeable; . . . If God were not unchangeable, He would not be God . . . But God, who is, cannot change, because any change would be a diminution of being. And as unchangeable as God is in His being, He is also in His knowledge, will and decisions.⁴²

Objections to the Doctrine of God's Immutability

The idea of the immutability of God has come under attack of late both by philosophers and theologians. As Nash observes, "Of all the current debates about the divine attributes, the disagreement over the property of immutability is the most heated."⁴³ In another section of this same book Nash refers to the "static God of Thomistic theism."⁴⁴ This derogatory comment indicates the focus of the quarrel that some theologians and philosophers have with the idea of immutability. As David Brown summarizes, "philosophers [are] concerned about the coherence of a divine relationship with the world on such a schema given that it also involves a commitment to the timelessness of God, theologians [worry] about the implied inactivity of God and the resultant distancing of him from his creation."⁴⁵ The question of God's immutability has been raised with reference to several problems.

Immutability and Immobility

As has been pointed out, the idea that God is immutable has been assailed as a concept that renders God "static" or "immobile." Nash summarizes this objection to immutability: "If God is immutable, He cannot be the religiously available God of the Scripture."⁴⁶ The reason for this dilemma, according to Nash, is explained by him in a quote which Nash provides from W. Norris Clark.

Now, if we are to take seriously the religious dimension of human experience . . . then it is clear that one of the central tenets of man's religious belief in God (at least in Judaeo-

⁴² Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Tweede Deel.IV.§26.A.119–20. "Alles verandert maar Hij blijft staande, Hij blijft die Hij is, Ps. 102:26–28. Hij is IJvh, de zijnde en zichzelf steeds gelijkblijvende; de eerste en met de laatsten nog dezelfde God, Jes. 41:4, 43:10, 46:4, 48:12. Hij is die Hij is, Deut. 32:39, cf. Joh. 8:58, Hebr. 13:8, ἀφθαρτος, ὁμοιος ἔχων ἀθανασίαν, altijd ὁ αἶτος Rom 1:23, 1 Tim. 1:17, 6:16, Hebr. 1:11,12. En onveranderlijk in zijn bestaan en wezen, is Hij het ook in zijn gedachte en wil, in al zijne voornemens en besluiten. Hij is geen mensch dat Hij liegen of berouw hebben zou. Wat Hij zegt, doet Hij, Num. 15:29, 1 Sam. 15:29. . . In één woord, Hij, IJvh, verandert niet, Mal. 3:6; . . . Hierop werd in de christelijke theologie de leer gebouwd van de immutabilitas Dei. . . Door de zintuigen is dit begrip van een eeuwig en onveranderlijk /wezen niet te verkrijgen, want alle schepsel, ook de mensch zelf, is veranderlijk; . . . Indien God niet onveranderlijk ware, zou Hij niet God zijn, Conf. . . . God echter, die is, kan niet veranderen, wijl elke verandering eene vermindering van zijn zou wezen. En even onveranderlijk als God is in zijn wezen, is Hij het ook in zijn kennen, willen en besluiten."

⁴³ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 99.

⁴⁴ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 22.

⁴⁵ David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1985), 254-55.

⁴⁶ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 100.

Chrisitan religion) is that He is one who enters into deep personal relations of love with His creatures. And an authentic interpersonal relation of love necessarily involves not merely purely creative or one-way love, but genuine mutuality and reciprocity of love, including not only the giving of love but the joyful acceptance of it and response to it. This means that our God is a God who really cares, is really concerned with our lives and happiness, who enters into truly reciprocal personal relations with us, who responds to our prayers—to whom, in a word, our contingent world and its history somehow make a genuine difference. In short, the God of Judaeo-Chrisitan religion must be a “religiously available” God on the personal level.⁴⁷

There are a number of problems with this characterization of the classical formulation of immutability. However, the most devastating critique of Clarke’s assertions is the simple logical fallacy of his major premise. Clarke simply defines his position into existence. He simply stipulates that an “authentic interpersonal relation of love” must include “genuine mutuality.” Neither Clarke nor Nash make any attempt to substantiate this claim. Once Clarke has stipulated that an authentic relationship must be a mutable relationship, and that a God who “really cares” would be a God who “inters into truly reciprocal personal relations,” then it is a simple step to disqualify the notion of an immutable God. After all, who wants to believe in a God who is not “really concerned with our lives and happiness” or who does not “really care”? Of course to “really” care and to “really” be concerned, God must be mutable, since that is the definition of an “authentic interpersonal relation of love,” according to Clarke.

This is clearly a straw-man argument. However, as H. P. Owen observes, “We need not identify the changelessness that classical theists attribute to God with an impersonal or static state of being. From the beginning Christian theists have identified God’s actuality with the Biblical revelation of his personal energy.”⁴⁸ Bavinck declared that immutability as part of Christian theology should not be confused with immobility:

Yet this immutability is not a monotonous unity, not a rigid immovability. Scripture itself precedes us to describe God in the most manifold relationships to all his creatures. Unchangeable in Himself, yet He lives, as it were, the life of His creatures and participates in their changes. Scripture speaks of God in a human way and cannot do otherwise. But however humanly she may speak, at the same time she forbids us to make any change in God himself. There is change around Him and outside Him, there is change in the relationship with Him, but there is no change in God Himself.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ W. Norris Clarke, S.J., “A New Look at the Immutability of God,” in *God, Knowable and Unknowable*, ed. Robert J. Roth, S.J. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973), 44.

⁴⁸ H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 145.

⁴⁹ Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Tweede Deel, §26.A.2.125. “Toch is deze onveranderlijkheid geen monotone eenheid, geen star onbewegelijk zijn. De Schrift zelve gaat ons voor, om ons God te beschrijven in de menigvuldigste relatiën tot al zijne schepselen. Onveranderlijk in zichzelf, leeft Hij toch als het ware het leven zijner schepselen mede en neemt in hunne wisselingen deel. De Schrift spreekt van God op menselijke wijze en kan niet anders. Maar hoe menselijk zij spreke, zij verbiedt ons tegelijkertijd, om eenige verandering in God zelve te stellen. Er is verandering om Hem heen en buiten Hem, er is verandering in de relatie tot Hem, maar er is geen verandering in God zelve.”

The assumption that immutability implies inactivity is predicated upon a misunderstanding of the classical formulation of immutability, at least as this is articulated by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas' first argument has demonstrated that God is pure act without any potentiality. From pure act it follows that God is immutable, as he shows in Question 9, Article 1, Response. Now, to say that God is pure act without the admixture of any potentiality means that there is nothing about God that is not in act. But, what can be more active than pure act? In fact, a mutable relationship is not an "authentic" relationship at all. Any relationship that admits of potentiality for change is a relationship which either is in need of improvement, or is in danger of dissolution. But, any relationship that is in need of improvement is to that degree not authentic. Any relationship that is authentic is an actual relationship. But any relationship that admits of potentiality has as an aspect of this relationship something that is not actualized. But, what is not actualized in a relationship is not authentic. Therefore, to the degree that there is mutability in a relationship, to that degree it is not authentic. But, God's relationship to us is in no need of improving, nor is it in danger of dissolution. It follows then, that God's immutability is a more authentic relationship than the mutable relationships which Clarke and Nash take to be the standard.

Nash's characterization of the Thomistic concept of God by the pejorative use of the term 'static' is a misunderstanding of the nature of God's Being as pure act, and it is a misapplication of the term in that it begs the question. Something should be considered "static" if it should be mutable and isn't. For example, a puddle of water becomes "static," with all the negative connotations associated with static water, because it should be moving, but it is not. It has remained in a state that has allowed it to accumulate impurities, pollutants, etc. But God is not "static" simply because He is immutable. By nature God should not change, and, since it is the nature of God to be immutable, then to be what He must be is not to be "static"—it is to be immutable. Nash assumes that God should change, and since the Thomistic concept asserts that God does not change, Nash characterizes it as "static." This clearly begs the question and is the fallacy of an improper use of emotive language.

Immutability and Personhood

A second objection that is raised against the doctrine of God's immutability is that it seems to deny His personhood. Again quoting Clarke, Nash proposes the problem in the following description: "the immutability attributed to God must be that proper to a perfect personal being—i.e., an immutable intention to love and save us, which intention then includes all the adaptations and responses necessary to carry this intention through in personal dialogue with us. Thus personal immutability includes rational mutability."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 101. W. Norris Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University Publications, 1979), 108; quoted in Nash, 101. Since the publication of his book, Clarke has changed his position. Whereas in his earlier book he held the view that God does not have a real relation to the world, although the world has a real relation to God as its Creator, in his second edition, he argues, "And since the divine consciousness as knowing and loving is truly related, by distinct and determinate relations in the intentional order, to creatures—relations based on His distinct ideas of them—it follows, even for St. Thomas, that it is both correct and necessary to say that God is *truly personally* related to the world." W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The Philosophical Approach to God: A Neo-Thomist Perspective*, Second Revised Edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 134.

Here again Clarke makes the mistake of simply defining his position into existence. Neither Clarke nor Nash see fit to defend the claim that “acting and interacting with His creation in an interpersonal way”⁵¹ necessarily involves mutability. Nash simply stipulates that “change necessarily accompanies God’s interpersonal relations with Creatures . . .”⁵² This assertion is made on the bald-faced assumption that “real” interpersonal relations necessarily involve mutability. But neither Clarke nor Nash have proven that point.

However, assuming for the moment that God’s immutability must include all the adaptations and responses necessary to carry this intention through in personal dialogue, as Clarke stipulates, it does not follow that the necessary adaptation and response is in fact a case of mutability. It is simply asserted by Clarke and Nash that adaptations and responses must be mutable. But this is the very point that is being debated. Once again Clarke and Nash have begged the question.

This lack of a capacity to enter into real personal relationships because they necessarily entail some mutability impinges upon the personhood of God if He is held to be absolutely immutable. But neither Clarke nor Nash are willing to surrender all immutability. As Nash puts it, “the immutability attributed to God should not be inconsistent with God’s existence as a person,”⁵³ and, of course, Clarke and Nash simply stipulate that a real person must be able to enter into mutable personal relationships. To solve the problem of allowing God to enter into mutable personal relationships, and hence protect His personhood, and at the same time avoid the serious implication of absolute mutability, Nash, quoting Clarke, proposes the following solution.

Change is repugnant in God only if it involves some imperfection in God’s real being, some lack of perfection in God’s inner plenitude. But if change is restricted to the relational dimension of God’s consciousness, we can rethink the concept of change so that it is seen to involve no imperfection at all. The giving and receiving in a mutual relation of interpersonal love is not an imperfection for a person, but an integral part of the very perfection proper to a person, as we understand this theoretically so much more fully than the Greeks.⁵⁴

There are at least two serious problems with Clarke’s assertions. First of all, to assert that the consciousness of God is mutable while the “real being” remains immutable is to introduce real distinctions in the nature of God. But, if there is a real distinction between God’s consciousness and God’s “real being,” then God is composed of at least these two parts. If God is composed of these two parts, then God must have been composed by some composer. All the consequences of denying God’s simplicity that have been dealt with above follow from Clarke’s and Nash’s argument.

Secondly, to assert that mutability in interpersonal relationships of love is not an imperfection for a person begs the question. In fact, the only reason one would entertain change in a personal relationship was because the relationship was imperfect and needed to move closer to perfection. Although mutable personal relationships may not be improper to mutable beings, if God is immutable, mutability in personal relationships would indeed involve imperfection. Simply to

(Emphasis in original). Even with this change, Clarke still affirmed God’s immutability.

⁵¹ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 101.

⁵² Nash, *The Concept of God*, 101.

⁵³ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 101.

⁵⁴ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 101–02. (emphasis in original).

stipulate that it is not, does not establish this as a fact. From Clarke's assertions, Nash concludes, "Any person, including God, who could not enter into mutual relations of love would be imperfect."⁵⁵ As true as this might be, neither Nash nor Clarke have demonstrated that mutual relations of love must be mutable relations. This has simply been asserted, not demonstrated. Such a stipulation derives from univocal predication of the attribute of personhood to both God and man. But, God is not a man that He should change. Personhood is predicated of God and of man analogically, not univocally. Therefore, it is in fact in the immutable God that true personhood is found, not in mutable humans. Mutability implies instability, and instability implies imperfection. But God is not imperfect. Therefore God is not mutable.

Eternity

Since the early church fathers, orthodox Christian theology has taught that God is eternal, immutable, and simple. Boethius (c. 480–524) asserted that God is eternal:

It is otherwise, of course, with God. "He is everywhere" seems to mean not that he is in every place, for he cannot be in any place at all—but that every place is present to him for him to occupy, although he himself is not received by any place, and therefore he is said to be nowhere in place, since he is everywhere but not in any place. Now time is predicated in the same way, as, of a man, "He came yesterday," of God, "He ever is." Here again it is not as if "he of whom yesterday's coming is predicated" is said actually to be something, but what is added to him in terms of time is predicated. But what is said of God, "ever is," signifies only one thing, that he was, as it were, in all the past, is in all the present—however that term be used—and will be in all the future. According to the philosophers this may be said of the heavens and of other immortal bodies, but of God it is said in a different way. He is ever, because "ever" is with him a term of present time, and there is this great difference between the present of our affairs, which is now, and the divine present: our "now" connotes changing time and sempiternity; but God's "now," abiding, unmoved, and immovable, connotes eternity.⁵⁶

In *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius discussed at length the eternity of God, only a small portion of which is given here:

⁵⁵ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 102.

⁵⁶ Anicii Manlii Severini Boethii, *Trinitas Unus Deus Ac Non Tres Dii*, trans. H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), 4.20–23. ⁵⁵ De deo vero non ita, nam quod ubique est ita dici videtur non quod in omni sit loco (omnino enim in loco esse non potest) sed quod omnis ei locus adsit ad eum capiendum, cum ipse non suscipiatur in loco; atque ideo nusquam in loco esse dicitur, ⁶⁰ quoniam ubique est sed non in loco. "Quando" vero eodem praedicatur modo, ut de homine heri venit, de deo semper est. Hic quoque non quasi esse aliquid dicitur illud ipsum de quo hesternus dicitur adventus, sed quid ei secundum tempus accesserit praedicatur Quod vero de deo dicitur "semper est," ⁶⁵ unum quidem significat, quasi omni praeterito fuerit, omni quoquo modo sit praesenti est, omni futuro erit. Quod de caelo et de ceteris immortalibus corporibus secundum philosophes dici potest, at de deo non ita. Semper enim est, quoniam "semper" ⁷⁰ praesentis est in eo temporis tantumque inter nostrarum rerum praesens, quod est nune, interest ac divinarum, quod nostrum "nune" quasi currens tempus facit et sempiternitatem, divinum vero "nune" permanens neque movens sese atque consistens ⁷⁵ aeternitatem facit."

Therefore, that God is eternal is the common judgment of those who dwell in the common sense. Let us then consider what eternity is. . . . Eternity, therefore, is the all-absorbing and perfect possession of endless life; which is more clear from the temporal comparison. for whatever lives in time, the present proceeds from the past into the future: and there is nothing established in time that can equally embrace the whole span of its life. But indeed he has not yet grasped the craft: but he has already lost yesterday. you live no more in the present life than in that mobile and transitory moment. . . . Since, therefore, he comprehends all judgment according to his own nature, which are subject to him; but it is always an eternal and present state to God: his knowledge, too, transcending all motion of time, remains in its own simplicity of presence, embracing the infinite spaces of the past and future, and considering everything, as if it were already happening, in its simple knowledge.⁵⁷

Aquinas, following Boethius, defines eternity as, “The simultaneously-whole and perfect possession of interminable life.”⁵⁸ Interestingly, this same definition is adopted by Francis Turretin:

True eternity has been defined by the Scholastics to be “the interminable possession of life—complete, perfect and at once.” Thus it excludes succession no less than end and ought to be conceived as a standing, but not a flowing now. The reason is because nothing flows away with time from the life of God as from ours. God has every moment at once whatever we have divided by succession of time. Hence philosophers have well said that neither the future nor the past (he will be or was), but only the present (he is) can properly be applied to him. For the eternal duration of God embraces indeed all time—the past, present and future; but nothing in him can be past or future because his life remains always the same and immutable.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Anicii Manlii Severini Boetii, *Consolationis Philosophiae*, Libri Quinque (Glasgae: In Aedibus Academicis, 1751), Book V. Prose. VI.150–52. “Deum igitur aeternum esse, cunctorum ratione degentium commune iudicium est. quid sit igitur aeternitas, consideremus. . . . haec enim naturam nobis pariter divinam, scientiamque patefecerit. aeternitas igitur est, interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio; quod ex collatione temporalium clarius liquet. nam quidquid vivit in tempore, id praesens a praeteritis in futura procedit: nihilque est in tempore constitutum, quod totum vitae suae spatium pariter possit amplecti. sed craftinum quidem nondum apprehendit: hesternum vero jam perdidit. in hodierna quoque vita non amplius vivitis, quam in illo mobili transitorioque momento. . . . Deum quidem aeternum, mundum verò dicamus esse perpetuum. Quoniam igitur omne iudicium secundum sui naturam, quae sibi subjecta sunt, comprehendit; est autem Deo semper aeternus, ac praesentarius status: scientia quoque ejus, omnem temporis supergressa motionem, in suae manet simplicitate praesentiae, infinitaque praeteriti ac futuri spatia complectens, omni, quasi jam gerantur, in sua simplici cognitione considerat.”

⁵⁸ Aquinas, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.10.1. “aeternitas est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio.”

⁵⁹ Turretino, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, Locus Tertius.Q.10.6. “Huc facit quod à Scholasticis vera aeternitas describi solet per *interminabilem vitae totam simul & perfectam possessionem*, ut scilicet excludat successionem non minus ac terminum, & per *nunc stans*, non verò *fluens* concipi debeat: Ratio est: quia de vita Dei, sicut de nostra, nihil cum tempore effluit, sed Deus quovis momento simul habet quicquid divisim per successum temporis habemus. Unde Philosophi bene dixerunt, nec futurum nec praeteritum, *erit* vel *fuit*, sed solum praesens sive *est*, de Deo rite dici posse; quia aeterna Dei duratione omnia quidem tempora, praeteritum, praesens & futurum complectitur, sed nihil in eo potest esse praeteritum aut futurum, quia vita ejus eadem semper & immutata perseverat.”

Eternity cannot be conceived as simply without beginning and without end. This is simply infinity. Yet, an infinite regress of causal relations is an impossibility, and the same holds for an infinite regress of temporal relations. The Kalam cosmological argument presents the strongest arguments against the existence of an actual infinite. But, if an actual infinite cannot exist, then it cannot exist in the person of God any more than it can actually exist in any other being.

As Turretin points out,

Scripture teaches that such eternity belongs to God, not only when it calls God “eternal” (Gen. 21:33; “who inhabits eternity,” Is. 57:15; “the king eternal, immortal, invisible,” 1 Tim 1:17; “who was before the world was formed . . . from everlasting and to everlasting,” Ps. 90:1, 2), but also when it ascribes all the properties of eternity to him (Ps. 102:26-28): both dividedly that he is without beginning because he was before the foundation of the earth (Ps. 102:25), without end—“who is ever the same, and whose years shall have no end” (Ps. 102:27); without succession because he is said “to remain” without any change and “always to be the same” (Ps. 102:27)—for he is not always the same from almost every moment something anteriorly is removed and by whom posteriorly something is added.⁶⁰

James Orr defines eternity: “Eternity is best conceived, not in the merely negative form of the non-temporal, or immeasurable time, but positively, as the mode of the timeless self-existence of the Absolute Ground of the universe.”⁶¹ Timeless eternity follows from the simplicity and immutability of the Divine nature. That which is simple and immutable does not have parts and cannot change from what it is. But what does not admit parts or change is simultaneously whole. That which is simultaneously whole is not dispersed. However, to exist in time is to have one’s existence dispersed through temporal progression. Therefore, what is simultaneously whole is not dispersed through temporal progression. Therefore, a simple and immutable being is a timeless being. Also, eternity belongs only to God, as Aquinas says, “I answer that, eternity is truly and properly in God alone. Because eternity results in immutability, as is clear from what has been said: but God alone is completely immutable, as was shown above.”⁶²

James Ussher poses the following questions concerning the doctrine of God’s eternity: “*Is it necessary that we should know this?* Yea: that we may here stay our selves with the certain hope of eternall life; grounded upon his eternity. *How may that hope be grounded upon his eternity?* Very well. For God being eternall, he can for ever preserve us: & seeing he hath promised, he will for ever

⁶⁰ Turretino, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, Locus Tertius.Q.10.3. “Deo talem Aeternitatem competere Scriptura docet, non modò quando *Deum* vocat *aeternum*, Gen. 21.33. qui *habitat aeternitatem*, Is. 57.15. *Regem seculorum, immortalem, invisibilem*, 1. Tim. 1.17. qui *fuit antequam mundus esset conditus*, Psal. 90.1.2. *à seculo & in seculum*. Sed etiam quum illi omnes aeternitatis proprietates tribuit, Ps. 102.26. 27.28. Tum divisim; quòd sit sine initio; quia fuit ante foundationem terræ v. 26. sine fine, qui *in seculum permanet*, & *cujus anni non deficiunt* v. 25.28. sine successione, quia dicitur *permanere* citra omnem mutationem v. 27. & *semper idem esse* v. 28. non enim semper idem est cui singulis pene momentis per prius aliquid decedit & per posterius aliquid accedit.”

⁶¹ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Albany, Oregon: Ages Software, 1999), s.v. “Eternity.”

⁶² Aquinas, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.10.3. “RESPONDEO DICENDUM quod aeternitas vere et proprie in solo Deo est. Quia aeternitas immutabilitatem consequitur, ut ex dictis patet: solus autem Deus est omnino immutabilis, ut est superius ostensum.”

preserve us. *Ps.* 48.14. & 103 17. Hereby likewise are we strengthened not only in the immortality of our soul, but also in the immortality of our bodies after the resurrection; considering that by his everlastingness he giveth continual being to such of his creatures as he is pleased to give a perpetuall continuance unto.”⁶³

As Ronald Nash observes, “If the God of theism exists, He exists eternally. About this, there can be no disagreement.”⁶⁴ The controversy is not whether God is eternal, but what does “eternity” mean. Two positions have historically been taken on this issue. The traditional position is the one articulated above, namely, that eternity is atemporal or timeless. The rival interpretation is that to be eternal means to be everlasting. Generally, the advocates of everlastingness have proposed their position by means of objections to timelessness.

Aquinas argues that to distinguish between time and eternity on basis that eternity is simply a matter of having no beginning and no end is simply an accidental difference and not a difference as to the respective natures: “I answer that, it is clear that time and eternity are not the same. But some have assigned the reason for this difference to the fact that eternity lacks a beginning and an end, but time has a beginning and an end. But this difference is accidental, and not in itself . . . because eternity is the measure of permanent being, but time is the measure of movement.”⁶⁵ Turretin asserts the same: “We hold that God is truly immune from all difference in time, and no less from succession than from beginning and end.”⁶⁶

Objections to the Doctrine of God’s Eternality

Objections to the God’s eternity have come from many sources. A new challenge comes from a group identified as Neotheists. According to Geisler and House, “Recently a group of Christian thinkers carved out a new concept of God by combining aspects of panentheism, or process theology, with traditional theism.”⁶⁷ Panentheism is the belief that God has two poles, one is spiritual and one is physical.

Not Taught in Scripture

William Hasker argues, “First of all, it is clear that the doctrine of divine timelessness is not taught in the Bible and does not reflect the way the biblical writers understood God.”⁶⁸ First of all it is disingenuous to present the argument in this manner. There are many things that are taught in Scripture that do not do use the words that we use to designate these concepts. Even though the word

⁶³ Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie*, 38.

⁶⁴ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 73.

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.10.4. “RESPONDEO DICENDUM quod manifestum est tempus et aeternitatem non esse idem. Sed huius diversitatis rationem quidam assignaverunt ex hoc quod aeternitas caret principio et fine, tempus autem habet principium et finem. Sed haec est differentia per accidens, et non per se. . . quia aeternitas est mensura esse permanentis, tempus vero est mensura motus.”

⁶⁶ Turretino, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, Locus Tertius.Q.10.1. “Nos verò Deum ab omni temporis differentia, & non minùs à successione quàm à principio & fine, esse immunem statuimus.”

⁶⁷ Norman L. Geisler and H. Wayne House, *The Battle for God* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), 9

⁶⁸ William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994),

‘timelessness’ is not used does not mean the concept is not taught. The word ‘trinity’ is not used either, but the doctrine of the Trinity is certainly taught. Of course, Hasker is assuming that the word ‘eternity’ does not mean “timelessness,” but this assumes a view that needs justification, a justification that Hasker did not give before using the term in his claim.

If it is the case that “eternity” means “timelessness,” then it is most certainly taught in Scripture: “The eternal God is a dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms; and He drove out the enemy from before you, and said, ‘Destroy!’” (Deut. 33:27).⁶⁹ As Geisler and House point out, “Hasker rejects the teaching of Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58 regarding the eternal nature of God, but offers no better explanation of the texts.”⁷⁰

If God is not timeless, then God exists in a relation of before and after. Any being that exists in a relation of before and after exists in time. As Aristotle taught: “When it is for the before and after, then we say time. For this is time, the number of movement according to the before and after.”⁷¹ If God exists in a series of before and afters, then God must have had a beginning since there cannot be an actual infinite regress of before and after. But, of course, God did not have a beginning, therefore God must be timelessly eternal.

God Entered Time

Clark Pinnock argues that God can enter time:

The God of the Bible is not timeless. His eternity means that there has never been and never will be a time when God does not exist. Timelessness limits God. If he were timeless, God would be unable to work salvation in history, would be cut off from the world, have no real relationship with people and would be completely static. God is not temporal as creatures are, however, but can enter into time and relate to sequence and history.⁷²

If God can enter time, it follows that either time is endless, or time had a beginning. If time is endless, having no beginning and no end. If time is infinite, then there is an infinite distance between the infinite past and the present. Since time flows from the past into the future, it must traverse an infinite distance. However, by adding moment to moment, an infinite distance cannot be traversed since another moment can always be added. William Lane Craig has demonstrated that an infinite past cannot be traversed:

(3) The argument from the finitude of motion, time, and temporal objects: motion cannot be from eternity, for an infinite temporal regress of motions is impossible, since finite parts can

⁶⁹ (Deut. 33:27) מְעֻנָּה אֱלֹהֵי קֶדֶם וּמִתַּחַת זְרַעַת עוֹלָם וַיִּגְרֶשׁ מִפְּנֵיךְ אוֹיֵב וַיֹּאמֶר חֲשִׁמָּד:

⁷⁰ Geisler and House, *Battle for God*, 89.

⁷¹ Aristotelis, Φυσικῆς Ἀκροασεως/*Naturalis Auscultationis*, in *Opera Omnia Græce et Latine* (Parisiis: Ambrosio Firmin-Didot, 1927), IV.11.219a. “Ὅταν δὲ τὸ πρότερον καὶ ὕστερον, τότε λέγομεν χρόνον· τοῦτο γὰρ ἔστιν ὁ χρόνος, ἀριθμὸς κινήσεως κατὰ τὸ πρότερον καὶ ὕστερον./Quum autem prius et posterius sentimus, tunc dicimus esse Tempus. Tempus enim nihil aliud est quam numerus motus secundum prius et posterius.

⁷² Clark H. Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 121.

never add up to an infinite whole; therefore, the world and motion must have had a beginning. Or again, motion cannot be from eternity, for an infinite temporal regress of motions is impossible, since an infinite cannot be traversed. Or again, if at any given point in time, an infinite series has transpired, then at an earlier given point only a finite series has transpired; but the one point is separated from the other by a finite interval; therefore, the whole time series must be finite and created.⁷³

Since an infinite past cannot be traversed, time must have had a beginning. Since time had a beginning, God was outside of time in order to bring time into existence. It follows that God is timeless.

If God could enter time, then it follows that God can move from being outside of time to being in time. If God can move from being outside of time to being in time, God must have already possessed the possibility of motion. If God can move from A to B, then it must have been possible for God to move from A to B. But if God possessed the possibility of motion, then this must have been an aspect of His nature. Since time is the measure of motion, God must have always been in time because He had the possibility of motion in his nature. In fact, some neotheists argue that God is temporal precisely because God could enter time. For example, William Hasker asserts, “So it may be worthwhile to state briefly the reasons for preferring the view that God is temporal—that he lives and interacts with us through the changes of time.”⁷⁴ So, God did not “enter” time, but was always temporal. But if God was always infinitely temporal, then God could not exist today since it is not possible to traverse an infinite. But God does exist today, therefore God is not temporal, nor did God have the possibility of entering time.

To claim that timelessness limits God is not a coherent objection since entering time also limits God. In fact, God does have limits. God cannot lie: “. . . in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago” (Titus 1:2).⁷⁵ God cannot be tempted by evil: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone” (James 1:13).⁷⁶ God cannot create a square circle. God is not a man that He should change. Since God is simple and immutable, God cannot be temporal. Therefore, God is timelessly eternal.

God Acts in Time

To claim that God could not work salvation in history involves a confusion, as Geisler and House point out: “In this argument there is confusion between the eternal *Actor* (God) and His temporal *actions*. The neotheist assumes that the cause of any temporal act must itself be temporal. But no proof is offered that this must be the case. The argument merely proves that the effect must be temporal, not the Cause.”⁷⁷ There is no reason why the eternal God would be cut off from the

⁷³ William Lane Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1979), 8.

⁷⁴ Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 128.

⁷⁵ ἐπ’ ἐλπίδι ζωῆς αἰωνίου, ἣν ἐπηγγείλατο ὁ ἀψευδὴς θεὸς πρὸ χρόνων αἰώνων (Titus 1:2).

⁷⁶ μηδεὶς πειραζόμενος λεγέτω ὅτι Ἀπὸ θεοῦ πειράζομαι· ὁ γὰρ θεὸς ἀπείραστός ἐστιν κακῶν, πειράζει δὲ αὐτὸς οὐδέν (James 1:13).

⁷⁷ Geisler and House, *Battle for God*, 92.

world, or have no real relationship with people, or would be completely static. Each one of these objections makes illicit assumptions. To claim that God would be cut off from the world assumes that the only way not to be cut off from the world is to be temporal, but this assumes what must be proven. To claim that God would have no “real” relationship with people assumes what it means for a relationship to be “real,” but this has not been proven. To claim that He would be completely static is simply an emotional response. It necessarily assumes a negative sense to the word ‘static.’ There is no reason why God cannot be eternal without being negatively “static.”

Primarily, the contributors to the book on open theism argue that God must be dynamic rather than static. But that is not an argument. It is rather only a preference, and it involves the same confusions and false assumptions pointed out above; between the eternal Actor and His temporal actions. Also, if God is dynamic, this necessarily involves change, and change necessarily involves temporality. But God cannot be temporal. Therefore God can be unchanging and yet His acts take place in time. As Geisler and House explain,

So God was ontologically prior to time but not chronologically prior to it. Hence, this is no impediment to God’s creating a world in time without Himself being temporal. No temporal continuum existed before He created the world. Hence, it was not necessary for Him to choose a moment in time in which to create. Rather, from all eternity God chose to create the temporal continuum itself, which has a beginning.⁷⁸

People often argue against a view with the response, “How can that be?” Simply because we cannot explain “how,” it does not follow that the objection is true. Simply because finite humans cannot comprehend how God can be timelessly eternal, and still be personal, loving, and have real relations with us shows only our limitations. It does not limit God.

Why Does It Matter?

Why does it matter whether God is simple, immutable, and eternal? That God is simple, immutable, and eternal determines how we interpret the Bible. If God is simple, immutable, and eternal this means that statements about God changing must be interpreted as anthropomorphisms. An anthropomorphism is a figure of speech by which an author will describe or depict God in terms of human characteristics or actions without at the same time attributing to God the limitations associated with these human characteristics or actions. That God is simple, immutable, and eternal also means that we can infer an author’s concept of God by how he interprets the text. So, if an author claims that God is involved in a decision making process, or that God reacts to events, or that God changes His plans, these interpretations tell the reader that the author either does not understand what simplicity, immutability, and eternity mean, or the author rejects these attributes as belonging to God. However, since it has been rationally demonstrated that God is simple, immutable, and eternal, an author who rejects these as attributes of God rejects the orthodox doctrine of the nature of God. It also demonstrates that the author who interprets the text in such a manner as to deny God’s

⁷⁸ Geisler and House, *Battle for God*, 96.

simplicity, immutability, and eternity has misinterpreted the text, and his conclusions and assertions that follow from this rejection are false.

CHAPTER 4

ONLY ONE DIVINE BEING

Introduction

That God is absolutely simple, immutable, and eternal ultimately leads to the conclusion that there can be only one God. Although Heiser states that the members of the divine council are created by God, he repeatedly refers to them as “other gods.” The question is, other than whom? In the instances in which Heiser refers to these “divine beings” as “other gods,” they can be only *other than* God. In spite of his protests, Heiser’s view necessarily denies that there is only one God. In this chapter we will support the claim that there is only one divine being. The first part will show that from the holiness of God there can be only one Divine Being. By a survey of the history of Christian thought, the second part will show that a belief that there is only one God has been the orthodox conviction of the church. The third part will demonstrate by rational argument that there can be only one God.

Holiness of the Divine Being

It is very common for Christians to equate holiness with morality. As Louis Berkhof (1873–1957), a Dutch-American Reformed theologian, explains, “From this it already appears that it is not correct to think of holiness primarily as a moral or religious quality, as is generally done. Its fundamental idea is that of a *position* or *relationship* existing between God and some person or thing. . . . In its original sense it denotes that He is absolutely distinct from all His creatures, and it exalted above them in infinite majesty.”¹ According to Geisler, “Theologically, God’s holiness means that He is totally and utterly set apart from all creation and evil.”² Franz Pieper (1852–1931) describes God’s holiness:

- a. The Holiness of God (*Sancitias Dei*). God’s holiness refers first of all to God’s majesty, according to which God is exalted above all created things. Thus in the “Thrice-Holy,” Isa. 6:3: קדוש קדוש קדוש יהוה זבאות, where the קדוש describes God as the Separate One, who indeed penetrates and fills everything, but at the same time remains exalted above all created things, who sits on a high and lofty throne (אֲרָם) and before whom the seraphim cover their

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941), 73.

² Norman L. Geisler, *God, Creation*, vol. 2, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2003),

faces and their feet. In the New Testament the קדוּשׁ is rendered as δόξα θεοῦ, John 12:41: “This is what Isaiah said when he saw his glory and spoke of him.” Taken in this sense, the holiness of God includes all the other attributes of God, and “the Holy One of Israel” is in factual parallelism with the “God of Israel” as the one true God, besides whom there is no other, Psalm 71:22: “I will give thanks to you, O my God; . . . I will sing praises to you, O Holy One of Israel.”³

The holiness of God is not primarily an aspect of God’s moral character. The problem with this thinking is the question, “What measure would someone would use to measure God’s moral character?” God cannot be measured by some moral standard beyond Himself. This was the very problem with the arguments of Job’s companions. They believed that God must abide by what all men know to be justice. God’s own nature is the measure of morality, and God is not measured by our concepts of morality.

God’s holiness is primarily the fact that God is utterly distinct from all that He has created. It is God’s distinctness that is the basis for God’s demand that we be different from the world. Our difference from the world should reflect the fact that God is different from creation. It follows from God’s holiness that there is no being that is comparable to God. Because, according to Heiser, the “divine beings” have been created by God, they are not “other gods.”

Demonstrated from the History of Theology

That there is only one God has been the doctrine of the Christian Church from the beginning. This is specifically asserted in the New Testament. “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, who died some time between 108–140, affirmed that there is only one God:

For the holy prophets lived according to Jesus Christ; and therefore they also suffered persecution, inspired by grace to the manifestation of unbelievers, because there is one almighty God, who manifested himself through Jesus Christ his Son, who is his Word, not

³ Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, Erster Band (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1924), 561. a. Die Heiligkeit Gottes. (*Sanctitas Dei*.) Gottes Heiligkeit bezeichnet zunächst Gottes Majestät, wonach Gott über alles Erschaffene erhaben ist. So in dem „Dreimal-Heilig,” Ies. 6, 3: קדוּשׁ קדוּשׁ קדוּשׁ יְהוָה זָבָא: Ies. 6, 3: קדוּשׁ קדוּשׁ קדוּשׁ, wo durch das קדוּשׁ Gott als der Abgesonderte beschrieben wird, der zwar alles durchdringt und erfüllt, aber dabei doch über alles Erschaffene erhaben bleibt, der auf einem hohen und erhabenen Thron (אֲרָם) sitzt und vor dem die Seraphim ihr Antlitz und ihre Lüsse bedecken. Im Neuen Testament ist das קדוּשׁ wiedergegeben mit δόξα θεοῦ, Joh. 12, 41: „Solches sagte Iesaias, da er seine Herrlichkeit sah, und redete von ihm.” In diesem Sinne genommen, begreift die Heiligkeit Gottes alle andern Attribute Gottes in sich und „der Heilige Israels” in sachlichem Parallelismus mit dem „Gott Israels” als dem einem wahren Gott, außer dem es keinen andern gibt, Ps. 71, 22: „Ich danke dir, mein Gott; . . . ich lobsinge dir, du Heiliger Israeles.”

⁴ εἰς γὰρ θεός, εἰς καὶ μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων ἄνθρωπος Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς (1 Tim. 2:5).

prolative, that is, but substantial, not the utterance of an articulate voice, but the operation of Deity;”⁵

Tertullian (c.155–c. 220), an early Christian apologist, declared that we worship the one God: “What we worship is the one god; who, with all the instruments of elements, bodies, spirits, words, which he commanded, the reason which he arranged, the power which he could, expressed out of nothing, into the ornament of his majesty.”⁶

In another place Tertullian affirmed that there is only one God who has all power:

We give offence when we preach the One God under One Name only, from Whom are all things, and under Whom is the universe. Speak a testimony, if you know this to be the truth. For we hear you everywhere openly and with full liberty (which is denied to us), proclaiming, “May God grant it,” and “If God wills.” By that word you signify that there is someone, and you confess that all power belongs to Him to Whose will you look. At the same time you say that the rest are not gods, inasmuch as you call them by their own names—Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Minerva. For you affirm Him alone to be God Whom you call simply God; and hence when you do sometimes also call the others gods, you seem to do so by a derived and, as it were, a borrowed use of the word.⁷

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 120–200) affirmed that there is only one God:

But there is only one God the maker, this one who is above all principality, and power, and dominion, and power: this Father, this God, this founder, this maker, this fabricator, who made them by himself, that is, by the Word and by Wisdom his own, heaven, and earth, and the seas, and all that is in them: this is just, this is good: this is he who formed man, who planted paradise, who made the world, who brought the flood, who saved Noah: this is the God of

⁵ Ignatius, Του Αυτου Επιστολη Προς Μαγνησιους/Eiusdem Epistola Ad Magnesianos, in *Corpus Ignatianum: A Complete Collection of the Ignatian Epistles* (London: Francis & John Rivington, 1849), VIII.67–68. Οἱ γὰρ θεϊότατοι προφῆται κατὰ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἔζησαν. Διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἐδιώχθησαν, ἐμπνεόμενοι ἀπὸ τῆς χάριτος, εἰς τὸ πληροφορηθῆναι τοὺς ἀπειθοῦντας, ὅτι εἷς Θεός ἐστιν ὁ παντοκράτωρ, ὁ φανερώσας ἑαυτὸν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, ὅς ἐστιν αὐτοῦ λόγος, οὐ ῥήτος, ἀλλ’ οὐσιώδης· οὐ γὰρ ἐστιν λαλιᾶς ἐνάρθρου φώνημα, ἀλλ’ ἐνεργείας θει κῆς οὐσίας γεννητή·

Sancti enim Prophetæ secundum Jesum Christum vixerunt; ideoque et persecutionem passi sunt, inspirati gratia ad manifestationem incredulis, quia unus est Deus omnipotens, qui manifestavit seipsum per Jesum Christum Filium suum, qui est Verbum ipsius, non prolative scilicet, sed substantiale, non locutio articulatae vocis, sed operatio Deitatis;

⁶ Tertulliani, *Liber Apologeticus Adversus Gentes*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: J. Deighton, 1850), 17. “Quod colimus [nos], deus unus est; qui totam molem istam cum omni instrumento elementorum, corporum, spirituum, verbo, quojussit, ratione, qua disposuit, virtute, qua potuit, de nihilo expressit, in ornamentum majestatis suæ:”

⁷ Tertulliani, *De Testimonio Animæ* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1952), II.1.6–7. Non placemus deum prædicantes hoc nomine unico unicum, a quo omnia et sub quo universa. Dic testimonium, si ita scis. Nam te quoque palam et tota libertate qua non licet nobis, domi ac foris audimus ita pronuntiare, Quod deus dederit, et, Si deus voluerit. Ea voce et aliquem esse significas et omnem illi confiteris potestatem, ad cuius spectas voluntatem, simul et ceteros negas deos esse, dum suis vocabulis nuncupas, Saturnum, Iovem, Martem, Minervam. Nam solum deum confirmas quem tantum deum nominas, ut, et cum illos interdum deos appellas, de alieno et quasi pro mutuo usa videaris.

Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of the living, whom the Law proclaims, whom the prophets proclaim, whom Christ reveals, whom the apostles deliver, whom the Church believes.⁸

I Clement, which was composed some time between 70 A.D. and 96 A.D. and attributed to Clement of Rome (c. 35–99), affirmed monotheism in terms of only one God: “6. What do you think, beloved? That Moses did not know beforehand that this was going to happen? Assuredly he knew, but he acted thus that there should be no disorder in Israel, to glorify the name of the true and only God, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.”⁹ Tertullian also affirmed monotheism in the sense that there are no other gods: “All this confession of theirs, their avowal that they are not gods, their response that there is no God but the One whose servants we are, is amply enough to repel the charge brought against us of treason above all to the religion of Rome.”¹⁰

Athanasius (c. 296–373), Archbishop of Alexandria, asserted that there is one God: “So also the Godhead of the Son is the Father’s; whence also it is indivisible; and thus there is one God and none other but He.”¹¹ Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390) declared that the belief in many gods was an error of the Greeks: “but let truth prevail through the middle of the two opinions, and removing from both heresy, and receiving from both that which is of use. From the Jews indeed take away the dogma, both by admitting the Word and believing the Spirit: but those who stand by the Greeks let the error of many gods be abolished, which is according to nature bounding unity and restraining the imagination of plurality.”¹² Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo, said, “Therefore we love this in the Trinity, which is God: but we have not seen or known any other God, because there is one God,

⁸ Irenaei, *Adversus Haereses*, II.30.9.453. Sed solus unus Deus fabricator, hic qui est super omnem principalitatem, et potestatem, et dominationem, et virtutem: hic Pater, hic Deus, hic conditor, hic factor, hic fabricator, qui fecit ea per semetipsum, hoc est per Verbum et per Sapientiam suam, caelum, et terram, et maria, et omnia quae in eis sunt: hic iustus, hic bonus: hic est qui formavit hominem, qui plantavit paradysum, qui fabricavit mundum qui diluvium induxit, qui Noë salvavit: hic Deus Abraham, et Deus Isaac, et Deus Iacob, Deus vivorum, quem et Lex annuntiat, quem prophetae praeconant, quem Christus revelat, quem apostoli tradunt, quem Ecclesia credit.

⁹ I Clement, *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, in *Clement, II Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Didache, Barnabas*, vol 1, *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), XLIII.83. “6. τί δοκεῖτε, ἀγαπητοί: οὐ προήδει Μωϋσῆς τοῦτο μέλλειν ἔσεσθαι; μάλιστα ἤδει· ἀλλ’ ἵνα μὴ ἀκαταστασία γένηται ἐν τῷ Ἰσραήλ, οὕτως ἐποίησεν, εἰς τὸ δοξασθῆναι τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ καὶ μόνου θεοῦ· ᾧ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων. ἀμήν.” Not much is known about I Clement. It has been proposed that this text was composed some time between 75 and 110 A.D.

¹⁰ Tertullian, *Apology*, trans. T. R. Glover (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), XXIV.1.94. “Omnis ista confessio illorum qua se deos negant esse quaque non alium deum respondent praeter unum, cui nos mancipamur, satis idonea est ad depellendum crimen laesae maxime Romanae religionis.”

¹¹ Athanasii, “Liber de incarnatione Verbi Dei et contra Arianos,” Tomus Secundus, *Opera Omnia Quae Exstant*, Tomus XXVI, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus* (Paris: J.–P. Migne, 1857), 3.4.395. Ἄλλ’ οἱ θαυμαστοὶ, ὥσπερ Ἕλληγες, ἐκπεσόντος τῆς περὶ τοῦ ἐνὸς θεοῦ ἐννοίας, εἰς πολυθεότητα κατήλθον, οὕτω καὶ οὗτοι, μὴ πιστεύοντες ἓνα εἶναι τὸν τοῦ Πατρὸς Λόγον, εἰς πολλῶν ἐπίνοιαν πεπτώκασιν.

¹² Gregorii Episcopi Nysseni, *Oratio Catechetica Magna*, Tomus Secundus, *Opera Quae Reperiri Potuerunt Omnia*, Tomus XLV, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca* (Paris: J.–P. Migne, 1858), III.18–19. “sed per medium duarum opinionum prodeat veritas, et utramque tollens haeresim, et ab utraque accipiens id quod est usui. Nam Judaei quidem dogma tollit, et Verbum admittendo, et credendo Spiritum: eorum autem qui stant a Graecis aboletur error multorum deorum, ea quae est secundum naturam unitate circumscribente et arcente multorum phantasiam.”

He alone whom we have not yet seen, and we love by believing.”¹³ Aquinas argues that when a Catholic uses the word ‘god,’ he is saying there is one God: “Besides, no one can signify what he does not know: but the Gentile does not know the divine nature: therefore, when he says that *God is an idol*, he does not mean the true deity. But this is what the Catholic means when he says that there is one God.”¹⁴

Aquinas also demonstrated that it is not possible for there to be many gods.

I answer that, it can be shown from three sources that God is one. First from His simplicity. For it is manifest that the reason why any singular thing is *this particular thing* is because it cannot be communicated to many: since that whereby Socrates is a man, can be communicated to many; whereas, what makes him this particular man, is only communicable to one. Therefore, if Socrates were a man by what makes him to be this particular man, as there cannot be many Socrates, so there could not in that way be many men. Now this belongs to God alone; for God Himself is His own nature, as was shown above. Therefore, in the very same way God is God, and He is this God. Impossible is it therefore that many Gods should exist.¹⁵

Aquinas gives a second argument from God’s infiniteness:

The second ground is drawn from the infiniteness of divine completeness. For it was shown above that a god contains within himself the whole completeness of being. Now if there were many gods, they would have to be different. There would be some trait ψ that belonged to one and did not belong to another. If the latter’s having ψ were a privation, the alleged god would not be unqualifiedly complete [and hence would not be a god]; on the other hand, if his not having ψ counted as a completive trait, the other alleged god would be lacking [and hence would not be a god]. So it is impossible for there to be many gods. This is why the ancient philosophers, too, who posited an infinite first source, posited just one of them. They were compelled, as it were, by this truth.¹⁶

¹³ S. Aurelii Augustini, *De Trinitate*, Tomus XLII, *Patrologiæ Cursus Completus* (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1845), 8.5.8.954. “Hoc ergo diligimus in Trinitate, quod Deus est: sed Deum nullum alium vidimus, aut novimus, quia unus est Deus, ille solus quem nondum vidimus, et credendo diligimus.”

¹⁴ Aquinatis, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.13.10. “PRAETERA, nullus potest significare id quod non cognoscit: sed gentilis non cognoscit naturam divinam: ergo, cum dicit *idolum est Deus*, non significat veram deitatem. Hanc autem significat catholicus dicens unum esse Deum.”

¹⁵ Aquinatis, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.11.3. “RESPONDEO DICENDUM quod Deum esse unum, ex tribus demonstratur. Primo quidem ex eius simplicitate. Manifestum est enim quod illud unde aliquod singulare est *hoc aliquid*, nullo modo est multis communicabile. Illud enim unde Socrates est homo, multis communicari potest: sed id unde est hic homo, non potest communicari nisi uni tantum. Si ergo Socrates per id esset homo, per quod est hic homo, sicut non possunt esse plures Socrates, ita non possent esse plures homines. Hoc autem convenit Deo: nam ipse Deus est sua natura, ut supra ostensum est. Secundum igitur idem est Deus, et hic Deus. Impossibile est igitur esse plures Deos.”

¹⁶ Aquinatis, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.11.3. “Secundo vero, ex infinitate eius perfectionis. Ostensum est enim supra quod Deus comprehendit in se totam perfectionem essendi. Aliquid ergo conveniret uni, quod non alteri. Et si hoc esset privatio, non esset simpliciter perfectus: si autem hoc esset perfectio, alteri eorum deesset. Impossibile est ergo esse plures Deos. Unde et antiqui philosophi, quasi ab ipsa coacti veritate, ponentes principium infinitum, posuerunt unum tantum principium.” Translated by William H. Marshner.

Ockham (1287–1347), a Franciscan friar and Catholic theologian, asserted that by faith one must hold that there is only one God:

Whether it can be proved by natural reasoning that there is only one God

Regarding the first I say that the name ‘God’ can have different descriptions: one is that God is something nobler and better than anything else; another description is that God is that in which there is nothing better or more perfect.

Second article: Conclusion 2: Secondly, I say that if it could be clearly proved that God is, by thus accepting God, that the oneness of God could then be clearly proved. The reason for this is that if there were two Gods, *a* and *b*, by that description, then *a* would be more perfect than anything else by itself, and so *b* would be more perfect, and *b* would be more imperfect than *a*, similarly, *b* would be more perfect than *a*, because God it is by positing; and consequently *b* would be more perfect and imperfect than *a*, and *a* than *b*, which is a manifest contradiction. therefore, if it could be clearly proved that God is, by thus accepting God, the oneness of God could be clearly proved.

Conclusion 4: It must be known, however, that it can be demonstrated that God exists, by taking ‘God’ in the second way previously mentioned, because otherwise the process would be infinite unless there were something in beings in which there is no other-something before or more perfect. But it does not follow from this that it can be demonstrated that there is only one such thing, but this is only held by faith.¹⁷

In more than one place, John Calvin (1509–1564) declared that there is one God: “Let us remember, therefore, whenever each one considers his own nature, that there is one God who governs all natures in such a way that he wants us to look back at him, to direct our faith to him, to worship and be invoked by us.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Guillelmi De Ockham, *Quodlibeta Septem*, Edidit Joseph C. Wey, vol. IX, *Opera Theologica* (St. Bonaventure. New York: St. Bonaventure University, 1980), Quodlibet Primum, Quaestio 1, 1–3.

“Utrum possit probari per rationem naturalem Quod Tantum Est Unus Deus

Primus articulus

Circa primum dico quod hoc nomen ‘Deus’ potest habere diversas descriptiones: una est quod Deus est aliquid nobilius et melius omni alio a se; alia descriptio est quod Deus est illud quo nihil est melius nec perfectius.

Secundus articulus: Conclusio 2: Secundo dico quod, si posset evidenter probari quod Deus est, sic accipiendo Deum, quod unitas Dei posset tunc evidenter probari. Cuius ratio est quia, si essent duo Dei, *a* et *b*, per illam 35 descriptionem, tunc *a* esset perfectior omni alio a se, et ita esset perfectior *b*, et *b* esset imperfectior *a*, similiter, *b* esset perfectior *a*, quia Deus est per positum; et per consequens *b* esset perfectior et imperfectior quam *a*, et *a* quam *b*, quod est manifesta contradictio; igitur si posset evidenter probari quod Deus est, sic accipiendo Deum, posset evidenter probari unitas Dei.

Conclusio 4: Sciendum tamen quod potest demonstrari Deum esse, accipiendo ‘Deum’ secundo modo prius dicto, quia aliter esset processus in infinitum nisi esset aliquid in entibus quo non est aliquid prius nec perfectius. Sed ex hoc non sequitur quod potest demonstrari quod tantum est unum tale, sed hoc tantum fide tenetur.”

¹⁸ Ioannis Calvini, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Berolino: Apud Gustavum Eichler, 1834), I.V.6.48. “Meminerimus ergo, quoties quisque naturam suam considerat, unum esse Deum qui sic gubernat omnes naturas, ut velit nos in se respicere, fidem nostram ad se dirigi, coli et invocari a nobis:”

Moreover, we said at the beginning that the knowledge of God does not rest in cold speculation, but carries with it the honoring of him. In passing, we also touched upon how he is to be rightly worshiped, a point that will have to be dealt with at greater length in other places. Now I only briefly repeat: as often as Scripture asserts that there is one God it is not contending over the bare name, but also prescribing that nothing belonging to his divinity is to be transferred to another.¹⁹

Turretin (1623–1687) taught that there is only one God:

That there is but one God both the Scriptures frequently assert and reason proves . . . Reason also confirms the same thing. It is a contradiction to suppose more infinite, eternal, omnipotent and most perfect beings (such as God should be) and also more rulers of the world: “No good thing is a multitude of lords; let there be one lord, one king . . .” (οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίῃ· εἰς κοίρανος ἔστω²⁰). “if God is not one, he is not at all” (Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.3)—for if there are more, they would either be equal (and so neither would be first and most perfect); or unequal (and so the inferior would not be God); or one would be the cause of all the rest (and so he alone would be the true God); or not (and so no one of them would be God because he would not be the cause fo all).²¹

Thomas Ridgley (c.1667 – 1734), an English Dissenting minister, devotes a lengthy section — pages 57–60 of his folio, *Body of Divinity* — to the question of whether there is only one God: “QUEST. VII. *Are there more Gods than one?* ANSW. There is but one only, the living and true God.”²² In point 4 he argues,

Since omnipotency is a divine attribute, there can be but one almighty being, and therefore but one God; which will farther appear, if we consider, that if there were more Gods than one, all of them must be said to be able to do all things, and then the same individual powe, that is exerted by one, must be exerted by another, than which nothing is more absurd. And it will

¹⁹ Calvini, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, I.XII.1.34. “Deum ab idolis discerni, ut solus in solidum colatur. Diximus autem initio, Dei notitiam non esse positam in frigida speculatione, sed secum trahere eius cultum: ac obiter attigimus (cap. 5. ss. 6. 9. 10.) quomodo rite colatur, quod aliis locis fusius explicandum erit (Lib. 2. c. 8.): nunc tantum breviter repeto, quoties asserit Scriptura unicum esse Deum, non pugnare de nudo nomine, sed hoc etiam praecipere, ne alio transferatur quicquid in divinitatem competit: unde etiam patet quid a superstitione differat pura religio.”

²⁰ Homer, *Iliad: Books 1–12*, trans. A. T. Murray and William F. Wyatt (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2.205–4.76–77.

²¹ Turretino, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, Locus Tertius, Q.III.199. “Unum esset Deum & Scriptura passim asserit, & Ratio evincit. . . . Ratio etiam idem confirmat. Quia implicat dari plura infinita, æterna, omnipotentia, perfectissima; quale debet esset Deus, nec ut & plures Rectores mundi, οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίῃ· εἰς κοίρανος ἔστω, unde Tertull. cont. Marcio.1.4. *Deus si unus non est, non est*: Nam si plures essent; vel essent æquales, & sic neuter esset primus & perfectissimus; vel inæquales, & sic inferior non esset Deus; vel unus esset causa reliquorum, & sic solus esset verus Deus; vel non, & sic neuter esset Deus, quia non esset causa omnium.”

²² Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, 3d ed. (Glasgow: John Bryce, 1670), 57.

also follow, that he who cannot do that which is said to be done by another, is not almighty, or able to do all things, and consequently that he is not God.²³

The Rev. John Brown of Haddington (1722–1787), a Scottish divine and minister, argued that there can be only one Divine Being:

His ONENESS, in respect of which, on account of his infinite perfection, there neither is, nor can be any other *like* to, or *equal* with him. This doth not mean, that there is but one *Supreme God*, as Arians and Socinians profess, who admit *subordinate gods*. Nor that there is but *one specific divine nature*, which different beings may possess, as Tritheists pretend: Nor that there is but *one divine person* exhibited in different characters, and by different names, as Sabellians contend. But it means, that there neither is, nor can be any more than *one individual*, or as others speak, *numerical divine substance*. This the necessary self-existence of God, his absolute eternity, infinity, omnipotence, and sovereignty, which exclude every rival partaker, demonstrate.²⁴

Timothy Dwight (1752–1817), an American Congregationalist minister and theologian, also argued that there can be only one God.

2dly. *Although the proofs of the existence of God are complete, yet there is no proof of the existence of more than one God,*

The argument for the being of God, which I mentioned as exhibited in the happiest manner by *Mr. Locke*, proves unanswerably the being of one eternal, self-existent Cause, possessed of sufficient Intelligence to contrive, and sufficient Power to create, the Universe of worlds, and all which it contains. The existence of one such Cause completely removes from the mind every difficulty, and satisfactorily accounts for every thing. But this argument proves nothing concerning the existence of a second Cause; nor does it possess the smallest influence to persuade us that a second exists.²⁵

Bavinck (1854–1921) asserts that there is only one Divine Being:

The Divine Being [*Godelijk Wezen*] is one; there is only one Being, who is God and may be called God. In creation and re-creation, in nature and grace, in church and world, in state and society, everywhere and always we have to do with the one, same, living, true God. The unity of the world, the unity of humanity, the unity of truth, virtue, justice, and beauty depend on

²³ Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, 4.58.

²⁴ Rev. John Brown, *A Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion* (Philadelphia: David Hogan, 1819), 128–29.

²⁵ Timothy Dwight, *Theology Explained and Defended in a Series of Sermons* 12th ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1849), 1.116. Emphasis in original.

that unity of God. As soon as that unity of God is denied or weakened, the door is open to polytheism.²⁶

Berkhof makes the same point: “THE UNITAS SINGULARITATIS. This attribute stresses both the oneness and the unicity of God, the fact that He is numerically one and that as such He is unique. It implies that there is but one Divine Being, that from the nature of the case there can be but one, and that all other beings exist of and through and unto Him.”²⁷

Robert Duncan Culver (1916–2015), theologian, author, preacher, pastor, and teacher, gave five arguments for the belief in one God, two of which are relevant here:

2. *The coherence of the material universe into a single system of cause and effect* suggests rather forcefully that there is a *single* all-wise, all-powerful, everywhere-present, personal power behind it. The more science probes the minute and infinitesimally small, the more it appears that all matter and energy are aspects of a cosmic system. The same system of causes and effects seems to prevail in the farthest reaches of space. We, then, live truly in a universe not a ‘pluriverse’ or ‘multiverse’. People can rationally formulate laws of cause and effect which are valid everywhere. This makes it more reasonable to believe in one ‘prime mover’ or ‘first cause’ rather than several.

3. *The coherence of all authentic abstract truths* in a single system is further evidence that the God of creation is one. These abstract data exist quite apart from the people who discover them. In the small business houses of all China, people figure the bills of customers on a frame of parallel spokes on which wooden rings are moved, called an abacus. The nearby grocery has replaced the mechanical cash register with a computerized machine. Our paint merchant uses a hand-held electric calculator. My mother uses pencilled figures on paper to add up her bills. (I let my wife figure them out!) The data and results of all mathematics, however, (4 multiplied by 3; 10 plus 2; 20 minus 8; 72 divided by 6: all yield the number 12) are invariable and universal.

The same is true of formal logic as taught in the schools of philosophy, whether the classical system of Aristotle’s or modern symbolic logic. These are true laws of reality. They can be discovered and formulated but never invented. Deduction and induction are nothing but aspects of one all-inclusive system of abstract truth. Abstract truth underlying or accompanying all other truths is a universal network, existing in perfection. This system sets bounds and binds us all. There is no rational existence as mankind without submitting to it. We call people crazy who do not. If this system of universal abstract truth is attributable to the

²⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei: Onderwijzing in de Christelijke Religie naar Gereformeerde Belijdenis Door* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909), 167–68. “Het Goddelijk Wezen is één; er is maar één Wezen, dat God is en God heeten mag. In schepping en herschepping, in natuur en genade, in kerk en wereld, in staat en maatschappij, overal en altijd hebben wij het met den éénen, zelfden, levenden, waarachtigen God te doen. Aan die eenheid Gods hangt de eenheid der wereld, de eenheid der menschheid, de eenheid van de waarheid, van de deugd, van het recht en de schoonheid. Zoodra die eenheid Gods ontkend of verzwakt wordt, staat de deur voor het veelgodendom open.”

²⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 61.

mind(s) that created us, not to the rational discoverers of it, is it not rational, within the system of rational truth, to attribute it to One rather than to many?²⁸

The overwhelming testimony of the Christian church, its ministers, apologists, and theologians, throughout its history is that there is only one God. What this shows is that Heiser is simply wrong that there are “other divine beings.”²⁹ As Bavinck put it, as soon as the unity of God is weakened, “the door is open to polytheism.” Heiser’s view has opened the door to a Christian polytheism, a door through which he attempts to lead Christians.

Demonstrated by Rational Argument

The attributes of God — simplicity, immutability, eternity — demonstrate that there can be only one God:

Simplicity: God is absolutely simple. He is not composed of parts. By virtue of having been created, every creature is composed of its existence and its nature. It is possible to think of the nature of an extinct animal. One can often extrapolate from the remains of an extinct animal the kind of animal it was, that is, its nature, even though the animal no longer exists. I can think of the tree that stood outside my window that is now gone because of disease. I can think of its nature even though it no longer exists outside my window. In all created beings, the being’s existence is distinct from its nature, so every created being is composed of at least these two parts, its existence and its nature. It has been shown that anything that is composed of parts must be composed by some composer. But God was not composed by some composer. Every composed being requires a cause. But God is not caused. It follows necessarily that only God is absolutely simple. Since only God is absolutely simple, it necessarily follows that there is only one God.

Immutability: God is immutable. He cannot change or be changed. Immutability belongs only to God. Immutability follows necessarily from simplicity. Since God is absolutely simple, He cannot lose some part because He is not composed of parts. Since God is not composed of parts, He does not have the potential either to lose something or to gain something. Also, every creature came to be by God’s creative act. Before a creature came to be, that creature was possible. As Aquinas puts it, “For all creatures, before they were, were not able to exist by any created power, since no created thing is eternal: but by divine power alone, inasmuch as God was able to bring them into being.”³⁰ Since every creature came into existence by God’s creative act, then no creature is eternal. Since no creature is eternal, every creature is therefore temporal. But, by virtue of being temporal, every creature has the potential to change. Therefore, every creature is mutable. It follows necessarily that only God is immutable. Since only God is immutable, it necessarily follows that there is only one God.

²⁸ Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 78.

²⁹ Chapters 5 and 6 will concern Heiser’s polytheism.

³⁰ Aquinas, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.9.2. “Omnes enim creaturae, anetquam essent, non erant possibiles esse per aliquam potentiam creatam, cum nullum creatum sit aeternum: sed per solam potentiam divinam, inquantum Deus poterat eas in esse producere.”

Eternity: God is eternal. “Eternality means nontemporality or timelessness.”³¹ Eternity follows necessarily from immutability. Since God is immutable, He cannot change. But to begin to exist or to cease to exist would necessarily involve change. Since all creatures came into existence by the power of God, no creature is eternal. There cannot be an infinite regress of temporal beings. There must be some eternal being who caused temporal beings. It follows necessarily that only God is eternal. Since only God is eternal, it necessarily follows that there is only one God.

Essence: God’s essence is His existence. Since God is simple, immutable, and eternal, it follows that God exists necessarily. That is, God cannot not exist. Since God’s existence is necessary, it follows that God’s essence is His existence. If the existence of anything is different from its essence, then that existence must have been caused by something external to the thing, since a thing cannot cause its own existence. But God is not caused by anything external to Himself. It follows necessarily that in God alone His essence is His existence. Since only in God is essence and existence the same, it necessarily follows that there is only one God.

It follows from the above that there can be only one God. For there to be two gods, they would differ by some difference. But as we have shown, the essence of a Divine Being is His existence. So, two Divine Beings cannot differ by their being, since this is the very aspect in which they must be the same. But, they cannot differ by non-being, since non-being is nothing, and to differ by nothing is not to differ. They cannot differ by simplicity, immutability, or eternality, since two divine beings must necessarily be simple, immutable, and eternal. As Aquinas put it, “If, therefore, there were several gods, it would be necessary to separate them. Something, then, would suit the one, but not the other. And if this were a privation, he would not be absolutely perfect: but if this were perfection, one of them would be lacking. It is therefore impossible for there to be more Gods.”³² Therefore, there cannot be two Divine Beings. There can be only one Divine Being, God.

Now it is certainly true that anyone is free to decide that he does not believe that God is either eternal, or simple, or immutable, or even to deny all three of these. However, there are some things that a person is not free to reject.

1) A person is not free to reject the fact that belief that God is eternal, simple, and immutable has been held by the church throughout its history as the orthodox position. This is not to say that there have been no controversies and disagreements over these attributes. Notwithstanding these episodes, this has nevertheless been the orthodox position of the Christian church.

2) A person is not free to claim that the above argument is simply the imposition of Aristotelian or some other logic upon God. To deny that one can use logic to talk about God is to use logic to talk about God. The rules that govern rational thought are derived from the very nature of God, as Norman Geisler explains:

If logic is the basis of all thought, it is the basis of all thought about God (theology). Some object that this makes God subject to logic. But God is sovereign and not subject to anything beyond himself. So, how can thought about God be subject to logic?

³¹ Geisler, *God, Creation*, 94.

³² Aquinas, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.11.3. “Si ergo essent plures dii, oporteret eos differre. Aliquid ergo conveniret uni, quod non alteri. Et si hoc esset privatio, non esset simpliciter perfectus: si autem hoc esset perfectio, alteri eorum deesset. Impossibile set ergo esse plures Deos.”

In one sense God is not subject to logic; rather, our *statements* about God are subservient to logic. All rational statements must be logical. Since theology purports to make rational statements, theological statements are subject to rules of rational thought, as are any other statements.

In another sense, God indeed is subject to logic, but not because there is something more ultimate than he. Since logic represents the principles of rational thought and since God is a rational Being, God is subject to his own rational nature. Insofar as logic manifests reason it flows from the very nature of God, and God is subject to his own nature. Indeed, he cannot act contrary to it, ethically or logically. For example, “It is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). Likewise, it is impossible for God to contradict himself. Both violate his basic nature.

God is not only subject to his own rational self-consistency; he also is subject to logic which is derived from it. For we could not even begin to think about or talk about God without the law of noncontradiction. In this sense, logic is prior to God in that we need to use logic before we can even think about him rationally. Logic is prior to God in the *order of knowing*, but God is prior to logic in the *order of being*. Logic is prior to God epistemologically, but God is prior to logic ontologically.

To object that this makes God subject to our logic sets up a faulty dichotomy. Logic is logic; it is not “our” logic as opposed to “his.” Ours is based on his. God’s rational nature is the basis of our rational nature. He made it that way so we could understand something about him. The law of noncontradiction applies to God’s thoughts as well as to ours. People did not invent it; they discovered it.³³

In order to avoid misunderstanding and misrepresentation, let me make a clarification. When Geisler says “Logic is prior to God in the *order of knowing*,” he is saying that, for us, logic precedes our knowing anything about God, because it is logic that governs our rational thought about the world and about God. We must have the capacity for rational thought, including logical thought, in order to come to a knowledge of God. So for us, logic and rational thought is prior to our knowledge of God. When he says, “God is prior to logic in the *order of being*,” he is saying our logical thinking comes from God who made us in His image as thinking beings. God existed before He created us and gave us the capacity for logical thought.

For an individual to claim that there are “other gods,” as Heiser does, is to reject the testimony of the history of theology. Referring to the importance of historical theology and church tradition, Kenneth S. Kantzer (1917–2002), a professor of biblical and systematic theology and academic dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, said, “While it is not infallible, it must be acknowledged as God’s guidance of his people in accordance with his promise to the church of all ages. To disregard it would display the sheerest egotism as though we were to say, I want to do this all by myself. I don’t need any help from anyone.”³⁴ Gregg R. Allison describes two benefits of historical theology:

³³ Norman L. Geisler, “Logic,” *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 427–28.

³⁴ Kenneth S. Kantzer, “A Systematic Biblical Dogmatics: What Is it and How Is it to Be Done?” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 466.

One benefit that historical theology offers the church today is helping it *distinguish orthodoxy from heresy*. . . . Expressed another way, historical theology helps the church recognize sound doctrine and distinguish it from false doctrine A study of historical theology that rehearses the development of doctrine helps churches today to identify and embrace orthodoxy and to reject and correct heresy.

A second benefit of historical theology is that it *provides sound biblical interpretations and theological formulations*. In some cases, the immense effort and careful study exercised by the church in the past has resulted in such excellent biblical and theological understanding that the majority of the groundwork has been laid for the church as it engages in the study of theology today.³⁵

Why Does It Matter?

The holiness of God means that God is separate and distinct from all that He has created. That there can be only one God has been the commitment of the Christian church throughout its history. That there can be only one God has been demonstrated by rational argument. Since there can be only one God, any author who claims that there is more than one God must be wrong. Heiser frequently refers to the *elohim* as “other gods.” It matters not whether one uses the word *elohim* or the expression “other gods.” To claim that there is more than one God is not only irrational; it is simply false. Any author who interprets the Bible in such a way as to conclude that there are “other gods” is misinterpreting and misrepresenting the truth.

³⁵ Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 24–25.

CHAPTER 5

MONOTHEISM

Introduction

According to Mark Smith,

Almost all, if not all, students of the Bible have been long exposed directly or indirectly to either Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, traditions that have anchored their identity in the belief in only a single deity, however differently these three religions may define this deity. This belief, labeled ‘monotheism’ in the modern era, separates modern scholars from the ‘polytheistic’ religions of the ancient Middle East that they study.¹

Monotheism is the belief that there is only one God. This chapter will investigate Heiser’s attempt to redefine monotheism, and it will show that Heiser’s efforts fail.

Heiser’s View of Monotheism

In his paper “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism,” Heiser argues,

“Monotheism” as a term was coined in the 17th century not as an antonym to “polytheism,” but to “atheism.” A monotheist, then, was a person who believed there was a God, not someone who believed there was only one spiritual entity that could or should be named by the letters G-O-D. This understanding of the term has been lost in contemporary discourse, and so it would be pointless to call for its re-introduction.²

As interesting as this may be, it is totally irrelevant. Since the term is an English word, it is certainly true that it was coined at some point in history. The point is the referent of the term and the meaning of the term, not when the term itself was coined. However, Heiser has got his facts wrong. According to OED, the term ‘monotheism,’ used in 1660, meant, “The doctrine or belief that there is only one God (as opposed to many, as in polytheism).”³ The first recorded instance of the use of

¹ Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 10.

² Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18.1 (2008), 27.

³ OED, s.v. “monotheism.”

the term ‘monotheism’ was by Henry More (1614–1687), an English philosopher of the Cambridge Platonist school. More used the term in opposition to both atheism and polytheism: “A venerable Riddle under which there lyes not one grane of Truth, unless there be nothing but *modified matter* in Being. But thus to make the *World God*, is to make no God at all, and therefore this Kinde of *Monotheisme* of the Heathen is as rank *Atheisme* as the *Polytheisme* was proved to be before.”⁴ This quote is from Book III, Chapter II which is titled, “The Pagans Evasion of Polytheism.”

More equated Polytheism with Atheism: “The Crime they [the Pagans] are accused of here is *Polytheism*, which necessarily includes in it *Atheism*. For to say There are more Gods then one, is to assert There is none at all; the notion of God, in the strictest sense thereof, being incompatible to any more then One. Wherefore the Heathen being *Polytheists* in profession, by undeniable consequence are found *Atheists*.”⁵

In his book published in 1723, Henry Rowlands (1655–1723), a Welsh divine, used the word ‘monotheism’ in opposition to the polytheism of the Druids:

And partly also from *Cabalistic Traditions*, as in that of the Conflagration of the World; the Præ-existence of Souls, and Transmigration of them from one Vehicle to another; the propitiation of Sacrifice, and many more Particulars of that sort, which they strongly profess’d and taught; tho’ indeed as to that one, of the Unity of the Godhead, the Stream of Idolatry towards the latter end of their Time bore strong upon the, and deflected them from their profess’d *Monotheism*, to give Divine worship to *Medioxumate* Gods; such as *Taranis*, or *Jupiter*; *Hesus*, or *Mars*; . . .⁶

It is well known that a rigorous monotheism was introduced by Pharaoh Akhenaten in the 14th century B.C., as Cyril Aldred explains:

But Akhenaten’s principal claim to fame has been his substitution of an abstract and monotheistic religion for the many cults of ancient Egypt. This was the worship of the Aten, a heavenly father and kingly god, manifest in the sunlight. In imposing this doctrine upon his subjects, Akhenaten swept away much of the obscure imagery and esoteric symbolism of the old religion and replaced them by an easily recognizable and immediately attractive iconography centered around the public and domestic activities of the royal family (Figs. 2, 3; Nos. 16, 130). . . . The plural form of “god” was also avoided. The precise moment at which these developments took place is not known for certain, but thus far no one has found it necessary to question the view that they occurred in Year 9.32 They show that Akhenaten’s

⁴ Henry More, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (London: F. Flesher, 1660), III.II.62. Emphasis in original.

⁵ More, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness*, 57. Emphasis in original.

⁶ Henry Rowlands, *Mona Antiqua Restaurata. An Archaeological Discourse on the Antiquities, Natural and Historical, of the Isle of Anglesey, the Antient Seat of the British Druids* (Dublin: Aaron Rhames, 1723), 62–63. Emphasis in original.

religious ideas were moving toward a more uncompromising monotheism and an intolerance of other gods than the Aten.⁷

In her article “Monotheism,” Ilaria Ramelli discusses how monotheism, which she defines as the belief in only one God, as opposed to polytheism, was decisively affirmed by ancient Christian apologists:

As opposed to polytheism, monotheism affirms only one God to the exclusion of every other, a teaching that one finds in Judaism, while henotheism admits belief in one God as well, but reconciles this belief with the existence of other deities of lower rank, as found in a variety of classical pagan philosophies. . . . However, engagement with Greek philosophy continued with apologetics, where we find monotheism decisively affirmed, alongside the more inclusive henotheism of pagan philosophy. The terms ἐνότης and ἑνωσις are already used in the Apostolic Fathers, esp. in Ignatius of Antioch, as expressions of monotheism, together with the verb ἐνοῦν, and are found in the apologists, particularly in Athenagoras, to indicate the inseparability of the three beings that form the unique divine nature (*Suppl.*12). And in polemics with the pagans, Tertullian repeatedly insists in the *Apologeticum* upon the absolute uniqueness of God, which excludes every other divinity, even inferior ones (17,1; 18,2; 23,11; 24,1), as does Minucius Felix, *Oct.*10,3, who defines the Christian God as “unique and solitary.”⁸

In the previous quote, Ramelli refers to Minucius Felix. Marcus Minucius Felix (c. 250 A.D.), one of the earliest of the Latin apologists for Christianity, is known only by the *Octavius*, composed some time between 170–250 A.D. It is a dialogue on Christianity between the pagan Caecilius Natalis and the Christian Octavius Januarius. In this dialogue Octavius defends the monotheism of Christianity, that there is only one God.

7. See the rest: one king over the bees, one leader over the flocks, one ruler over the herds. As for heaven, could you believe that there the supreme power is shared, that the absolute majesty of that real and divine realm is sundered, in face of the plain fact that there does exist a God who is father of all, who has neither beginning nor end, who blesses all with birth and Himself with eternity, who before the world was, was to Himself the world? He it is who by His word orders, by His reason disposes, and by His might perfects each and every thing that exists. 8. This God cannot be seen; He is too bright for sight. He cannot be grasped; He is too pure for touch. He cannot be measured; He is too great for our senses—a boundless infinity, sharing with Himself alone the knowledge of His vastness. But the understanding we have is too limited to comprehend Him and that is why we measure Him worthily when we say that He

⁷ Cyril Aldred, *Akhenaten and Nefertiti: A Studio Book* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum in Association with The Viking Press, 1973), 11, 24.

⁸ Ilaria Ramelli, “Monotheism,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014), 2.829–30.

is immeasurable. In my honest opinion, if a man thinks that he knows the magnitude of God, he diminishes it; if he does not want to diminish it, he does not pretend to know it.⁹

It is totally irrelevant whether the term ‘monotheism’ is “modern.” In fact, Heiser frequently uses the term ‘divine,’ yet it was apparently coined in c.1374 by Geoffrey Chaucer (see **Figure 2**).¹⁰

Figure 2: Chaucer Coins the Term ‘Divine’

pou þat art gideresse of verray lyȝte þe þinges þat pou hast seid [me] hider to ben to me so clere and so shewyng by þe deuyne lokyng of hem and by þi resouns þat þei ne mowe nat ben ouercomen.	All your discourses, O my conductress to the true light! have been very clear and unanswerable, both by the divine [<i>deuyne</i>] testimony which they carry along with them, and by thy irrefragable arguments.
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In one place Heiser provides a definition of monotheism that places his position among scholarly debate: “Monotheism is in turn defined as the exclusion of other gods; that is, [it] differs from those views that accept a plurality of divine beings.”¹¹ He does not make it clear in this text whether he agrees with this definition. In view of his earlier assertion, it seems very unlikely that he agrees with this definition. It seems clear from his earlier assertion that, “A monotheist, then, was a person who believed there was a God, not someone who believed there was only one spiritual entity that could or should be named by the letters G-O-D.” Heiser has misrepresented the meaning of the term. Heiser wants to redefine the term ‘monotheism’ so that he can assert the existence of “other gods” and “other divine beings” and still claim to be a monotheist.

Monotheism and Other Divine Beings

Richard Bauckham responds to an argument by William Horbury concerning Israelite monotheism. According to Horbury,

It is argued overall that the interpretation of Judaism as a rigorous monotheism, “exclusive” in the sense that the existence of other divine beings is denied, does less than justice to the importance of mystical and messianic tendencies in the Herodian age—for these were often

⁹ M. Minucii Felicis, *Octavius* (Lipsiae: In Aedibus B. G. Teubneri, 1886), 18.7–8.25–26. “7. uide cetera: rex unus apibus, dux unus in gregibus, in armentis rector unus. tu in caelo summam potestatem diuidi credas et scindi ueri illius ac diuini imperii totam maiestatem? . . . cum palam sit parentem omnium deum nec principium habere nec terminum, qui natiuitatem omnibus praestet, sibi perpetuitatem, qui ante mundum fuerit sibi ipse pro mundo: qui uniuersa, quaecumque sunt, uerbo iubet, ratione dispensat, uirtute consummat. 8. hic non uideri potest: uisu clarior est; nec comprehendi [potest]: tactu purior est; nec aestimari: sensibus maior est, infinitus, inmensus et soli sibi tantus, quantus est, notus. nobis uero ad intellectum pectus angustum est, et ideo sic eum digne aestimamus, dum inaestimabilem dicimus. eloquar quemadmodum sentio: magnitudinem dei qui se putat nosse, minuit; qui non uult minuire, non nouit.”

¹⁰ Geoffrey Chaucer, “Incipit Liber Quartus. Hec cum Philosophia Dignitate Uultus,” in *Chaucer’s Translation of Boethius’s “De Consolatione Philosophiae.”* ed. Richard Morris (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 3084.

¹¹ Michael S. Heiser, *The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004), 10

bound up with an “inclusive” monotheism, whereby the supreme deity was envisaged above but in association with other spirits and powers.¹²

Bauckham’s response is pertinent to the claims and arguments of Heiser:

The problem here is the meaning of “other divine beings,” a term that Horbury apparently equates with “other spirits and powers.” If such a meaning supposed that “rigorous” or “exclusive” monotheism must deny the existence of any supernatural or heavenly beings besides God, then clearly such monotheism never existed until the modern period. Traditional monotheism in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions has always accepted the existence of vast numbers of supernatural beings: angels who serve and worship God, demons who oppose God within an overall sovereignty of God above all. But such beings have been considered creatures, created by and subject to God, no more a qualification of monotheism than the existence of earthly creatures is. With this view of their nature, we can properly and, in my view, still usefully speak of “rigorous” or “exclusive” monotheism.¹³

Heiser has committed the Red Herring fallacy. Heiser’s argument about the word ‘monotheism’ commits this fallacy. The Red Herring fallacy is committed when someone attempts to divert attention away from the issue by some tactic. “The strange name of this fallacy comes from fox hunting, where a herring, cooked to a brownish red color, is dragged across the trail of the fox in order to pull the hunting dogs temporarily off the scent.”¹⁴ The belief that there is only one God was a belief held by the earliest Christian writers regardless of the specific term used, and regardless of when the English word ‘monotheism’ was coined.

Heiser goes on to argue, “A monotheist, then, was a person who believed there was a God, not someone who believed there was only one spiritual entity that could or should be named by the letters G-O-D.”¹⁵ This is patently false. Michael Frede explains that in the Roman Empire in late antiquity, many were converted to Christianity and the belief that there is only one God:

A fact of crucial importance for the history which many of us share is that in late antiquity a large part of the population of the Roman Empire, perhaps even the majority, but in any case the dominant part of the population, converted to Christianity, and Christianity became the official religion of the Empire. Part of becoming a Christian, put in modern terms, is to become a monotheist, that is, roughly speaking, a person who believes in just one god, namely in God with a capital ‘G’, unless, of course, one already was a monotheist. But at least the vast

¹² William Horbury, “Jewish and Christian Monotheism in the Herodian Age,” in *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism*, ed. Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Wendy E. S. North (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 17.

¹³ Richard Bauckham, “The ‘Most High’ God and the Nature of Early Jewish Monotheism,” in *Israel’s God and Rebecca’s Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Honor of Larry W. Hurtado and Alan E. Segal*, ed. Capes, David B., April D. DeConick, Helen K. Bond, and Troy Miller (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 40.

¹⁴ T. Edward Damer, *Attacking Faulty Reasoning*, 2d ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1987), 38.

¹⁵ Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 27.

majority of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire had been, again in modern terms, polytheists, that is, again roughly speaking, persons who believe in a plurality of gods.¹⁶

Antisthenes (c.446–c.366 B.C.) was a follower and companion of Socrates. According to Frede, “We have two sets of testimony concerning his [Antisthenes’] views about God and the gods (frgs. 39a–e and 40a–d Decleva Caizzi). Within the first set we can distinguish two subgroups. There are, first, the testimonies of Philodemus (*De pietate* 7) . . . Philodemus says that Antisthenes in his work *Physicus* claims that by convention (κατὰ νόμον) there are many gods, but that by nature (κατὰ φύσιν) there is just one.”¹⁷

As we have argued above, anything that is composed is necessarily temporal. This follows since anything that is composed must have come to be composed by some composer. If YHWH and the “other gods” are composed, then there must have been a point at which they were not composed since it was necessary for them to become composed. But if there was a point at which they were composed, then it necessarily follows that before they were composed they did not exist. If there was a point at which YHWH was composed by some composer, then YHWH is not eternal.

That God is eternal is important in evaluating Heiser’s argument. In a footnote, Heiser quotes a statement from the Sibylline Oracles that God is “self-generated [and] unbegotten.”¹⁸ It is, of course, absurd to claim that God is “self generated.” In order for God, or any being, to be self-generated it would of necessity be ungenerated and generated in the same sense, which is contradictory. No being can be “self-generated” because no being can generate itself. Since God cannot be self-generated, it follows that He is either generated or ungenerated. But if God is generated, then there must be some generator that generated God, and there must have been a point at which God was not generated, which means God cannot be eternal. Also, if there is some generator that generated God, then that generator was either generated or ungenerated. But this cannot go on to infinity. Therefore there must ultimately be an ungenerated Generator, and this is God.

Heiser proposes a distinction that supposedly makes the difference:

But on what grounds can this description be derived? The elements of the text that allow this approach have been copiously documented in the scholarly literature. As Isa 43:10 and 44:6–8 affirm, the canonical writers assumed that their God was uncreated and always existed and that the other gods were subsequent. This alone points to intrinsic superiority to and distinction from all the other gods. The other gods were not, chronologically speaking, co-existent. Moreover, the pre-existent and uncreated Yahweh created all the other members of the host of heaven (Neh 9:6, Ps 148:1–5). Their life derives from him, not vice versa. Rather than socio-political factors, the canonical writer believed the God of Israel alone was sovereign.¹⁹

¹⁶ Michael Frede, “The Case for Pagan Monotheism in Greek and Graeco-roman Antiquity,” in *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman*, ed. Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 53.

¹⁷ Frede, “The Case for Pagan Monotheism,” 62.

¹⁸ Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 29.n.62.

¹⁹ Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 29.

Heiser argues that because the text declares that God was “uncreated and always existed” that this is the difference that makes a distinction between God and the “other gods.” He also says that the “other gods” “were not, chronologically speaking, co-existent” with God, and that “Yahweh created all the other members of the host of heaven.” It is important to recognize that Heiser refers to “all the other members of the host of heaven,” making God one of the gang. Being “uncreated” and having “always existed” is not sufficient to put God outside the group of “the other members of the host of heaven.” In *Enuma Elish*, Table 1 begins with Apsû and Tiâmat are not created and already exist, and they commingle to give birth to the other gods.

1. When above the heaven had not (yet) been named,
2. (And) below the earth had not (yet) been called by a name;
3. (When) Apsû primeval, their begetter,
4. Mummu, (and) Tiâmat, she who gave birth to them all,
5. (Still) mingled their waters together.²⁰

Being uncreated and having always existed is not sufficient to make a distinction between Apsû and Tiâmat. Both were Mesopotamian gods. Neither is it sufficient to make a distinction between God and “the other members of the host of heaven.” Heiser’s error is to think of God as having “always existed.” This indicates that, for Heiser, God exists in an infinite duration. However, as we have shown, God’s existence cannot be an infinite duration. Carl F. H. Henry points out, “The God of Christian orthodoxy is timelessly eternal as mainstream theologians like Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, the Protestant Reformers, and in fact, most Christian theologians affirm.”²¹

Since the “other gods” were created by God, these “other gods” must be temporal, changeable, and composed. YHWH, being uncreated, is eternal, immutable, and simple. We have already shown that God is simple, immutable, and eternal. It follows that God is not like the “other gods.” It follows that since God is eternal, immutable, and simple, God is not one of the members of a “divine council,” nor is God one of the gods. This certainly demonstrates there is no God besides God, and therefore, notwithstanding the use of the word אֱלֹהִים, God is the only eternal, immutable, simple God. Hence, there is only one God. This is monotheism.

Additionally, God declares that there are no “other gods”:

- ¹⁰ “You are My witnesses,” declares YHWH, “And My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no god [אֱלֹהִים, ^{ʿēl}] formed, and there will be none after Me. ¹¹ “I, even I, am YHWH, and there is no savior besides Me. ¹² “It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed, and there was no strange god among you; So you are My witnesses,” declares YHWH, “And I am God. ¹³ “Even from

²⁰ Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation*, 2d ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 18.

²¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God Who Stands and Stays*, vol. 5, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1999), 239.

eternity I am He, and there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?” (Isa. 43:10–13).²²

God declares, “Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me.” If there were no gods before YHWH, then “other gods” did not exist before YHWH. Also, if there will be no god after YHWH, then “other gods” were never created, so there cannot be any “other gods.” Paul declared, “Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one” (1 Cor. 8:4).²³ And again, “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5).²⁴

Why Does It Matter?

It matters because monotheism, the belief that there is only one God, has been the belief of the Christian church from its earliest history. Any author who claims that there are many gods, even though he or she might assert that there is one god who is the highest and most powerful, asserts a belief that is contrary to Christian doctrine. Heiser wants to redefine monotheism in order to allow for the existence of “other gods” who exist in a pantheon, with the God of Israel at the top. Heiser’s effort to redefine the term is ill conceived and must fail. Heiser’s claim that there are “other divine beings,” even though he claims that they are created by God, issues in polytheism and henotheism. It is polytheism and henotheism that we must next consider.

¹⁰ אֲתָם עָדִי נִאֲמְדִּיהֶנָּה וְעַבְדִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּחֶרְתִּי לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּ וְתִאֱמִינוּ לִי וְתִבְיִנוּ כִּי־אֲנִי הוּא לִפְנֵי לֹא־נִוְצָר אֵל וְאַחֲרֵי לֹא יִהְיֶה: ¹¹ אֲנֹכִי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה וְאֵין מִבְּלַעֲדִי מוֹשִׁיעַ: ¹² אֲנֹכִי הַגִּדְתִּי וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי וְהִשְׁמַעְתִּי וְאֵין בְּכֶם זֶר וְאַתָּם עָדִי נִאֲמְדִּיהֶנָּה וְאֲנִי־אֵל: ¹³ גִּדְמִיּוֹם אֲנִי הוּא וְאֵין מִיָּדִי מַצִּיל אֲפַעֵל וּמִי יִשְׁכַּבְנָה: (Isa. 43:10–13)

²² Περὶ τῆς βρώσεως οὖν τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων οἶδαμεν ὅτι οὐδὲν εἴδωλον ἐν κόσμῳ, καὶ ὅτι οὐδεὶς θεὸς εἰ μὴ εἷς (1 Cor. 8:4).

²³ εἷς γὰρ θεός, εἷς καὶ μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων ἄνθρωπος Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς (1 Tim. 2:5).

CHAPTER 6

POLYTHEISM AND HENOTHEISM

Introduction

Heiser claims that there are “other gods” who were created by the God of Israel. He claims that these “other gods” serve the God of Israel and, with God, form a “divine council.” Heiser objects to the claim that his view is polytheistic. As we have seen above, one way he attempts to dodge the charge of polytheism is to redefine monotheism. This chapter will investigate polytheism and henotheism and relate this information to the claims of Heiser.

Polytheism

Although the word ‘polytheism’ is defined in slightly different ways, ultimately it means the belief in more than one god. The difference in definitions generally results from different meanings of the word ‘god.’ According to Kenneth A. Mathews, “Polytheism is the belief in or worship of many deities.”¹ David Fletcher defines polytheism as, “The belief in a multitude of distinct and separate deities. . . . Polytheism is distinguished from theism, also called monotheism, on the basis of polytheism’s claim that divinity, while personal and distinguished from the universe, is many rather than one.”² According to Paul Enns, “The term *polytheism* comes from the Greek word *poly*, meaning ‘many,’ and *theos*, meaning ‘God’; hence, it involves a belief in many gods, or in a plurality of gods.” The first recorded use of the English word ‘polytheism’ was in 1613 by Samuel Purchas:

For euen alreadie it is one good type of an Atheist and Infidel to become a Proselyte, although with some soye: and againe, the Iesuites there cannot play the States-men, as in these parts, yea (themselves in their relations being witnesses) they rather take the Euangelicall course of those, which here they count heretikes, & by laying upon mens sinne through the fall, and diuine iustice, onely by Christ satisfied, doe beat downe infidelitie with diligent Catechisings: although vpon that golden foundation they build afterward thror own *Hay and Stubble*, with

¹ Kenneth A. Mathews, “Polytheism in Biblical Times,” in *Christian Worldview Handbook*, ed. David S. Dockery & Trevin K. Wax (Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Reference, 2019), s.v. “Polytheism in Biblical Times.”

² David B. Fletcher, “Polytheism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 861.

their racke of *Confession*, and rabble of *Ceremonies*, and (the most dangerous to new Conuerts) an exchanged Polytheisme in worshipping of Saints, Images, and the *Host*.³

Purchas equated the worship of saints, images, and the host with polytheism. Heiser claims that these “other gods” are not to be worshiped, but that we are commanded to worship only YHWH. Nevertheless, Heiser claims that God is part of a pantheon of “other gods.” According to OED, “A pantheon is the particular set of all gods of any individual polytheistic religion, mythology, or tradition.”⁴ In another place, Heiser asserts, “The Gods Are Real. . . The Bible says God has a task force of divine beings who carry out his decisions.”⁵ As we observed above, Heiser claimed, “*The God of the Old Testament was part of an assembly—a pantheon—of other gods.*”⁶ If the word ‘polytheism’ refers to a group of gods, and since Heiser affirms the existence of “other gods,” then it necessarily follows that Heiser is a polytheist.

Heiser attempts to circumvent this kind of reasoning. One section of his book has the title, “Plural Elohim Does Not Mean Polytheism.”⁷ He asserts, “Biblical authors did not assign a specific set of attributes to the word *elohim*.”⁸ The reason the biblical authors did not assign a specific set of attributes to the word *elohim* is because the word is used to refer to YHWH and also to humans. YHWH and humans do not have the same set of attributes. However, the biblical authors did assign a specific set of attributes to YHWH. For example, Isa. 43:13 affirms that God is eternal: “Even from eternity I am He, and there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?” (Isa. 43:13).⁹ And the Psalmist declares, “Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God” (Ps. 90:2).¹⁰ Heiser acknowledges that the biblical authors assigned unique attributes to YHWH:

Biblical writers also assign unique qualities to Yahweh. Yahweh is all-powerful (Jer 32:17, 27; Pss 72:18; 115:3), the sovereign king over the other *elohim* (Psa 95:3; Dan 4:35; 1 Kgs 22:19), the creator of the other members of his host-council (Psa 148:1–5; Neh 9:6; cf. Job 38:7; Deut 4:19–20; 17:3; 29:25–26; 32:17; Jas 1:17) and the lone *elohim* who deserves worship from the other *elohim* (Psa 29:1). In fact, Nehemiah 9:6 explicitly declares that Yahweh is unique—there is only *one* Yahweh (“You alone are Yahweh”).¹¹

In spite of this, Heiser equates YHWH with other *elohim*. When he says, “*The God of the Old Testament was part of an assembly—a pantheon—of other gods,*”¹² one must ask, “Other than

³ Samuel Purchas, *His Pilgrimage, or The First Part of the Relations of the World, And The Religions Observed in All Ages And Places Discovered, from the Creation, vnto this Present*. London: Printed by William Stansby for Henrie Fetherstone, 1613), The First Booke.IX.42–43.

⁴ OED, s.v. “pantheon.”

⁵ *Supernatural*, 19.

⁶ *Supernatural*, 11. Emphasis in original.

⁷ *Supernatural*, 29

⁸ *Supernatural*, 30.

⁹

גִּם־מִיּוֹם אֲנִי הוּא וְאֵין מִזְדֵּי מַצִּיל אֶפְעֵל וּמִי יִשְׁבֶּנָה: (Isa. 43:13)

¹⁰

בְּטָרֶם הָרִים יִלְדוּ וְתַחֲוִילֵל אֶרֶץ וְתִבֵּל וּמַעֲוָלָם יַעֲדֶעוּלָם אַתָּה אֵל: (Ps. 90:2)

¹¹ *Supernatural*, 31.

¹² *Supernatural*, 31. Emphasis in original.

what?” The only thing this could mean is gods other than God. But to refer to beings as “other gods” other than God is to equate God with these “other gods” as gods. There is a pantheon of gods, and God is one of them. He just happens to be in charge.

Heiser attempts to make distinctions that are supposed to make YHWH unique:

Would any Israelite, especially a biblical writer, really believe that the deceased human dead and demons are on the same level as Yahweh? No. The usage of the term *elohim* by biblical writers tells us very clearly that the term is not about a set of attributes. Even though when we see “G-o-d” we think of a unique set of attributes, when a biblical writer wrote *elohim*, he wasn’t thinking that way. If he were, he’d never have used the term *elohim* to describe anything but Yahweh.

Consequently, there is no warrant for concluding that plural *elohim* produces a pantheon of interchangeable deities. There is no basis for concluding that the biblical writers would have viewed Yahweh as no better than another *elohim*. A biblical writer would not have presumed that Yahweh could be defeated on any given day by another *elohim*, or that another *elohim* (why not any of them?) had the same set of attributes. *That* is polytheistic thinking. It is not the biblical picture.¹³

It is not clear what Heiser means by “the same level.” No one would believe that, in one sense, a stone is on the “the same level” as a human being. However, in another sense, humans and stones *are* on the same level in that they are all created entities. There is a “level” on which both humans and stones exist as created things. God is not on a “level.” Heiser gives no criteria by which to judge that the “other gods” are not on the same level with God. What standard of measure could be used to evaluate the level of God and the level of the “other gods”? Claiming that these “other gods” are not on the same level as God is not sufficient to make an intelligible distinction between God and “other gods.” In fact, Aquinas asserted, “God is not related to creatures as though belonging to a different genus, but as transcending every genus, and as the principle of all genera.”¹⁴ God is not related to “other gods” as though belonging to different levels, but as transcending every level, and as the principle of all levels.

It is not a question of “level.” It is a question of whether YHWH is an אֱלֹהִים in some sense like other אֱלֹהִים in a pantheon,” and Heiser clearly and repeatedly affirms that He is. And it is not a matter of thinking that these אֱלֹהִים are “interchangeable.” This is another red herring. In the Babylonian pantheon of gods, Apsû and Tiāmat were not “interchangeable,” but they were both gods

Figure 3: On the Same Level?

TRANSCENDING ALL LEVELS	LEVELS
GOD	created elohim
	angels
	humans
	animals
	plants
	non-living things

¹³ *Supernatural*, 31.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.4.3.Obj.2. “AD SECUNDUM DICENDUM quod Deus non se habet ad creaturas sicut res diversorum generum: sed sicut id quod est extra omne genus, et principium omnium generum.”

in the pantheon. Being in a pantheon does not require that the gods be “interchangeable” in order equally to be gods in the pantheon. In the Babylonian pantheon, there was a hierarchy of gods, but they were all gods in the pantheon. The gods in the Babylonian pantheon were not on the same levels, but they were all on levels. God is not on a level. God is distinct from all levels.

Also, it is not a question of who can be “defeated.” This is not a characteristic that determines what a being is. There were many kings and warriors throughout history who could not be defeated, but that did not make them non-humans, or more than human, or less than human. The fact that a god cannot be defeated does not put Him outside the gods of Heiser’s pantheon. It simply makes God more powerful than “the other gods.”

Anu was the Mesopotamian sky god, regarded as the “Father of the Gods” and king of heaven. A portion of the address to Anu is given here from Jean Bottéro:

Here first is an address to *Anu*, sovereign god, father and founder of the divine dynasty. It is bilingual: the Sumerian text alternating with its Akkadian translation. It was to be recited during a celebration in honor of this very high personage. The beginning and the end are lost. (From the 2nd millennium.)

- 1 You are the one who holds the royal regalia.
Prince of the gods!
Your word is authoritative
In the council of the greatest gods!
- 5 O Lord of the shining Tiara.
Charged with a marvelous radiance,
You who ride the great Cyclones,
Princely standing on the noble royal Dais!
- 10 The heavenly gods listen
To Your sovereign words
And all the infernal gods
Only approach You with trembling!
At Your voice, all the gods bow
Like reeds in the storm!¹⁵

¹⁵ Jean Bottéro, *La plus vieille religion En Mésopotamie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 76–77. “Voici d’abord une adresse à *Anu*, dieu souverain, père et fondateur de la dynastie divine. Elle est bilingue : le texte en sumérien alternant avec sa traduction akkadienne. On devait la réciter au cours d’une célébration en l’honneur de ce très-haut personnage. Le début et la fin sont perdus. (Du II^e millénaire.)

- 1 *C’est Toi qui détiens les insignes royaux.*
Prince des dieux!
Ta parole fait autorité
Dans le concile des plus grands dieux!
- 5 *Ô Seigneur à la Tiare brillante.*
Chargée d’un éclat merveilleux,
Toi qui chevauches les grands Cyclones,
Principièrement debout sur la noble Estrade royale!
- 10 *Les dieux célestes prêtent l’oreille*

Anu is depicted here as the head of the Mesopotamian pantheon who is undefeated. Even though Anu is the sovereign god, he is still one of the gods of the pantheon. Simply being undefeated, or even being incapable of being defeated, is not sufficient to distinguish YHWH from the “other gods.”

It is not a matter of having the same attributes. In ANE literature, “Apsû personified the fresh subterranean waters and Tiāmat the salt waters.”¹⁶ One had an attribute that the other did not have, yet they were both equally gods in the Babylonian Epic of Creation. None of Heiser’s distinctions make the difference he wants them to make. For Heiser, YHWH is one of the *elohim*. But this makes all the *elohim* gods, which makes Heiser a polytheist.

Heiser argues that thinking of the “other gods” as being interchangeable, or God being no better, or being defeated, or having the same set of attributes as the “other gods” is polytheistic thinking. But that is not polytheistic thinking. Polytheistic thinking is not about whether one *elohim* can be undefeated. Polytheist thinking is not about whether the gods are interchangeable. All of these attributes can be used to distinguish one Mesopotamian god from the others in the pantheon. This is simply another red herring argument. Polytheistic thinking is thinking that there are many gods. Heiser wants his readers not to reject the “plain meaning of the Hebrew text,”¹⁷ but he wants to reject the “plain meaning” of the word ‘polytheism.’

Heiser wants to make a distinction between YHWH and “other” אֱלֹהִים, but the distinctions he attempts to make do not deal with their intrinsic constituents. As George Klubertanz explains,

In logic we learn that a distinction is composed of a genus and a difference and that things are said to be specifically different when, having a common genus, each has some attribute proper to itself by which it differs from the others (this proper attribute is called the “difference”). But in logic any common notion suffices for a genus, and any less common one for a difference. In metaphysics and the philosophy of nature we do not work with such arbitrary classifications. Rather, we try to determine as accurately as possible *what* things are according to their intrinsic constituents. When this has been done, and we find that the intrinsic constituents of one are different from those of another thing, then we say that the things differ essentially.¹⁸

An intrinsic constituent is that which makes a being the being it is, while an attribute is a quality or characteristic that a being has. Attributes grow out of the intrinsic constituents of a being. A being has a certain attribute because of the being it is. Humans have certain attributes because of they are human beings. Attributes do not make the being. The being has the attributes. As observers

À Tes paroles souveraines
Et tous les dieux infernaux
N'approchent de Toi qu'en tremblant!
À Ta voix, tous les dieux se courbent
Comme roseaux sous la tempête!”

¹⁶ Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 177.

¹⁷ *Unseen Realm*, 28.

¹⁸ George P. Klubertanz and Maurice R. Holloway, *Being and God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Being and to Natural Theology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), 83–84.

we may be able to identify a being by the attributes it exhibits. However, we may not be able to make a distinction between identical twins based on their attributes even though they are distinct beings. Talking about attributes does not necessarily make the distinction that Heiser wants to make.

Heiser says, “I still believe in the uniqueness of the God of the Bible. I still embrace the deity of Christ.”¹⁹ An aspect of Heiser’s worldview that is indicated in this assertion is that there are many gods, though the God of the Bible is unique. In fact, he asserts this in the opening statement of his chapter in *The Unseen Realm*, titled, “God’s Entourage.” He declares, “Children often ask, ‘What was there before God made the world?’ The answer most adults would give is that God was there. That’s true, but incomplete. God had company. And I’m not talking about the other members of the Trinity.”²⁰ Heiser claims that there was a “heavenly host” with God before the creation of the world. Ignoring for the moment that nowhere in Scripture is there anything said about a “heavenly host” being with God before the creation of the world, the picture Heiser paints is of a group of gods, with God at the top creating the world. This still does not distinguish YHWH from the “other gods.”

It would be an understatement to say that Heiser frequently uses the word ‘divine.’ In one 30 page article he uses the word 68 times. One of the most serious shortcomings of Heiser’s position is that he never provides a straightforward definition of the word ‘divine.’ In one text he identifies the word ‘divine’ with the word אֱלֹהִים. Heiser argues that Deuteronomy 32 assumes the existence of other gods. To support his claim, he argues, “A comparison of the MT with 4QDeut^d demonstrates this (see table, p. 10). It is significant that MT lacks the second line, an explicit reference to divine beings (אֱלֹהִים), in what should be the first bicolon.”²¹ That the text of 4QDeut^d uses the word אֱלֹהִים does not show that Deuteronomy 32 assumes the existence of other gods since the word can be used of men, angels, and idols. Heiser has simply interpreted the text according to his always-already-present view and then pretends that this comes from the text of Deuteronomy.

In this same article, Heiser asserts, “As such, אֲנִי הוּא אֱלֹהִים [Deut. 32:39] cannot be construed as an expression that inherently denies the existence of other deities.”²² It is important that Heiser lacks the second line of the text in the first bicolon:

Table #7: Deut. 32:39

עַמּוּדִי	אֱלֹהִים	וְאֵין	הוּא	אֲנִי	אֲנִי	כִּי	עַתָּה	רְאוּ
besides Me	god	and there is not	He	I	I	that	now	See

The full text of Deut. 32:29 specifically contradicts Heiser’s claim that Deuteronomy assumes the existence of other gods. Heiser’s appeal to the first few words of the text commits the fallacy of selective reporting. Heiser fails to give his reader all the facts.

In another article, Heiser asserts, “The argument [of the article] will be that the biblical usage of plural divinity terms like אֱלֹהִים or אֱלִים informs us that the writers did not assign the same

¹⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 13.

²⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 23.

²¹ Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? 9.

²² Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? 11.

attributes or qualities to all divine beings referenced by those terms. One among those divine beings (YHWH, the אֱלֹהִים of Israel) is unequivocally identified as inherently superior and distinct in comparison to all other אֱלֹהִים or אֱלִים.²³ It is important that Heiser asserts that YHWH is one אֱלֹהִים among the other אֱלֹהִים. According to Heiser, YHWH is just one of the guys!

In several places, Heiser claims that these “other gods” are created beings:

In the next chapter we’ll see other passages that tell us that the sons of God are real, divine entities created by Yahweh, the God of Israel. . . . God has created a host of nonhuman divine beings whose domain is (to human eyes) an unseen realm. And because he created them, he claims them as his sons, in the same way you claim your children as your sons and daughters because you played a part in their creation.²⁴

First, we learned that the sons of God are divine, not human. The sons of God witnessed creation long before there were people. They are intelligent nonhuman beings. The reference to the sons of God as stars also makes it clear that they are divine. While the language is metaphorical, it is also more than metaphorical. In the next chapter we’ll see other passages that tell us that the sons of God are real, divine entities created by Yahweh, the God of Israel.²⁵

But he also created the other *elohim* of the unseen realm.²⁶

Since the lesser *elohim* were also created as God’s imagers, they too must have free will.²⁷

In the biblical view of the unseen world, God has serious enemies, other gods he created who were once loyal to him but who went their own way. These rebel gods are the ones Paul describes as dark powers, the rulers.²⁸

All other *’elōhîm* were created by the lone, uncreated God of the Bible. He is the creator of the other members of his host council (Ps 148:1–5, esp. v. 5).²⁹

If Heiser is simply arguing that there are created beings who are referred to by the word אֱלֹהִים, who serve God and worship God, then his position is much ado about nothing new. The Babylonian *Creation Epic* asserts that the gods were created.

1. When on high the heavens were not named,
2. And beneath a home bore no name,
3. And Apsû primaeval, their engenderer,
4. And the ‘Form,’ Tiamat, the bearer of all of them,
5. There mingled their waters together;
6. Dark chambers were not constructed, and marsh- lands were not seen ;
7. When none of the gods [*ilāni*] had been brought into being,

²³ Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism and the Language of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 65.1 (2014), 87.n4.

²⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 25.

²⁵ *Unseen Realm*, 25.

²⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 43.

²⁷ *Unseen Realm*, 59.

²⁸ *Supernatural*, 64.

²⁹ *Angels*, 29.

8. And they were not named, and fates were not fixed,
9. Then were created the gods [*ilāni*] in the midst thereof;³⁰

Erik Hornung makes a similar observation about the creation of the Egyptian gods:

This is not the place to describe this process of the creation of the world and the emergence of the gods in detail; that would require an extensive chapter on Egyptian creation myths. But whether the Creator lets the first differentiated pair of gods emerge from his seed through masturbation or from his spiritual imagination through the creative word, whether he “forms” them in an unspecified manner (*msj*) and thus sets the life process of conception, birth, and death in motion - the Egyptian concept of God is characterized by the apparently paradoxical statement that God created the gods. This statement has been proven so many times since the Pyramid Texts that we can limit ourselves to a small selection of quotations.³¹

The fact that the gods were created did not make the Babylonians, the Egyptians, or other ancient peoples any the less polytheists. Nor does the claim that the “other gods” were created by YHWH make Heiser any less a polytheist.

At one point Heiser asserts, “God knows that none of his imagers, divine or human, can be completely trusted. The reason is straightforward. Though imagers are like God, they aren’t God. That’s a truth we know all too well from our own struggles and experiences in a fallen world.”³² Of course this statement does not assert as much as it might at first appear. We will see below that Heiser claims that God is “species unique.” So, the same assertion can be made about any being which is not another being: “This created being is like that other created being, but it is not that other being.”

Heiser also asserts, “Since the lesser *elohim* were also created as God’s imagers, they too must have free will. Both human and nonhuman imagers are less than their Maker. Only God is perfect in the possession and exercise of his attributes. Every lesser being is imperfect. The only perfect Being is God. This is why things could, and did, go wrong in Eden.”³³ Again, this sounds orthodox, but in the context of Heiser’s theology, it is not. God is distinct from the created beings because only He is perfect. However, this does not say enough. This is evident by his qualifying statement in the previous quote: “Only God is perfect in the possession and exercise of his attributes.” So, the distinction between God and the “other gods” is that God perfectly possesses and

³⁰ S. Langdon, *The Babylonian Epic of Creation* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1923), 66–67.

³¹ Erik Hornung, *Der Eine Und Die Vielen: Ägyptische Gottesvorstellungen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973), 140. “Hier ist nicht der Ort, diesen Vorgang der Wertschöpfung und der Entstehung der Götter im einzelnen zu schildern, das ergäbe ein umfangreiches Kapitel über ägyptische Schöpfungsmythen. Doch ob der Schöpfer das erste differenzierte Götterpaar durch Masturbation aus seinem Samen oder durch das Schöpferwort aus seiner geistigen Vorstellung entstehen läßt, ob er es auf eine nicht näher bezeichnete Art und Weise „formt“ (*msj*) und damit den Lebensprozeß von Zeugung, Geburt und Tod in Gang setzt — kennzeichnend ist für ägyptische Gottesvorstellung die scheinbar paradoxe Aussage, daß Gott die Götter geschaffen habe. Diese Aussage ist seit den Pyramidentexten so vielfach zu belegen, daß wir uns auf eine kleine Auswahl von Zitaten beschränken können.” The abbreviation *msj* stands for Summary Judgment Motion. Essentially it means that the facts are not in dispute.

³² *Unseen Realm*, 58.

³³ *Unseen Realm*, 59.

exercises His attributes, not because God alone is God. God is one of the *elohim*. He just happens to be better at it. It serves Heiser's purpose not to provide a straightforward definition of words like 'God' or 'divine.'

That Heiser is a polytheist is undeniable, even though he attempts to deny it. For Heiser divine = אֱלֹהִים = deities = "other gods". Consequently, divine = אֱלֹהִים = deities = "other gods" = polytheism. Whether one thinks of YHWH as unique or "species unique," there is no way of getting around the fact that Heiser holds the view that there are many אֱלֹהִים (gods), and YHWH is one of them. Like Anu and Tiamat who were uncreated yet created the other gods, for Heiser, YHWH is uncreated creator of other gods.

Heiser refers to Job 38:7 in support of his claim that the "heavenly host" was with God at the creation: "When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:7).³⁴ He claims that it is "clear on that point." The focus is on verse 7: "when the morning stars were singing together and all the sons of God shouted for joy." We can see Heiser's filter at work here. He has already assumed that there must be "other gods" (*elohim*) beside the God of creation, and he interprets the text accordingly. In a footnote Heiser asserts, "Like the cultures of the wider ancient world, Jewish thinking held that the stars were heavenly beings. The idea is found in the Old Testament, where the sons of God are metaphorically referred to as 'the stars of God' (Job 38:7)."³⁵

There is no statement in the text that the reader should take the metaphor in one way or another. Heiser takes it the way he does because he comes to the text with his assumption. Of course, this reviewer also takes the text according to his assumption. But that is precisely the point. Heiser presents his view as if it derives from the text, and it actually derives from his assumption. This is, frankly, not honest.

He says, "When God laid the foundations of the earth, the 'sons of God' were there, shouting for joy."³⁶ Heiser employs the parallelism to interpret the expression "morning stars" according to his interpretation of who the "sons of God" were. But why employ the more opaque to interpret the more transparent? Isn't the expression "morning stars" more "straightforwardly" a reference to actual stars than to divine beings? In fact, the parallelism indicates this (see **Figure 4** below). As "When sang together" is parallel to "and shouted for joy all," so "stars of morning" is parallel to "sons of God." Since nowhere in Scripture are the sons of God referred to as "stars of morning," and since "stars of morning" is more straight forward, it is better to take "sons of God" as a metaphor for "stars of morning." As the creation of God, the stars are metaphorically identified as the sons of God. This is at least as reasonable as Heiser's interpretation,

Figure 4: Parallelism of Job 38:7

בֹּקֶר	כּוֹכְבֵי	יַחַד	בְּרִנָּה
morning	stars of	together	When sang
PARALLELISM		PARALLELISM	
אֱלֹהִים	בְּנֵי	כָּל-	וַיִּרְיֶעוּ
God.	sons of	all	and shouted for joy

³⁴

³⁵ *Unseen Realm*, 31.n5.

³⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 23.

(Job 38:7) בְּרִנָּה-יַחַד כּוֹכְבֵי בֹקֶר וַיִּרְיֶעוּ כָּל-בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים:

and it makes more sense of the parallelism. Yet Heiser presents his interpretation as if this is the only possible way to understand the verse. Earlier Job uses a similar expression: “stars of its dawn [כֹּכְבֵי נִשְׁפֹּן, *kōkbê nîšpô*]” (Job 3:9). It would be very difficult to interpret this as a reference to divine beings. When God refers to the “morning stars” (כֹּכְבֵי בֹקֶר, *kōkbê bōqer*), He is making a direct assault on Job’s dirge that the stars of the dawn of his birth should be darkened. If the stars could sing, and yet we know that actual stars do not sing, then why must we assume that the “sons of God” who shout for joy could not simply be a parallelism using metaphor and hyperbole to refer to these very stars? Robert Alter makes this same observation:

Perhaps the finest illustration of this nice match of meaning and imagery between the two poems is the beautiful counterbalance between the most haunting of Job’s lines wishing for darkness and the most exquisite of God’s lines affirming light. Job, one recalls, tried to conjure up an eternal starless night: “Let its twilight stars stay dark, / let it hope for light and have none, / let it not see the eyelids of the dawn” (3:9). God, near the beginning of His first discourse, evokes the moment when creation was completed in an image that has become justly famous in its own right but that is also, it should be observed, a counterimage to 3:9: “When the morning stars sang together, / all the sons of God shouted for joy” (verse 7). That is, instead of a night with no twilight stars, with no glimmer of dawn, the morning stars of creation exult.³⁷

Alter also points out, “The predominant pattern of biblical poetry is to move from a standard term in the first verset to a more literary or highfalutin term in the second verset.”³⁸ This is the relation of parallelism in Job 38:7, that is, moving from the standard term “morning stars” to the more highfalutin expression “sons of God.” The sons of God are not “other gods.” Rather, this is a more exalted metaphor referring to the morning stars.

Heiser asserts, “The reference to the sons of God as stars also makes it clear that they are divine.”³⁹ But this might follow if one already accepts Heiser’s interpretation. There are many instances in which the terms ‘star’ or ‘stars’ are used figuratively. These terms can be used to refer to cosmic forces, human beings, to Christ, and even to actual stars in the sky. But the fact that Job uses the word ‘stars’ does not “make it clear” that this is a reference to divine beings. This conclusion comes as a result of Heiser’s presuppositions, his “filter.” Additionally, referring to them as “sons of God” (בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, *bēnê ’ēlōhîm*) does not necessarily indicate divine beings either as we have shown above. In Exod. 4:22 God refers to Israel as His firstborn son: “Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says YHWH, “Israel is My son, My firstborn.”’”⁴⁰ Also, many interpreters take the statement in Gen. 6:2 — “now the sons of God saw the daughters of that man that they were beautiful”⁴¹ — to be a reference to angels, but as we have seen, Heiser does think it is “quite correct” to take this as a reference to angels. Why not take the reference in Job to angels rather than divine

³⁷ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, Publishers, 1985), 98.

³⁸ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 13.

³⁹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 25.

⁴⁰

(Ex. 4:22) וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה בְּנִי בְכֹרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
(Gen. 6:2) וַיֵּרְאוּ בְנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־בָּנוֹת הָאָדָם כִּי טֹבֹת הֵנָּה

⁴¹

beings? Heiser does this because he already believes that there are other divine beings, and he imposes that belief upon Job's text, but then pretends that it derives from the text.

Twice Job uses the expression "sons of God" earlier in his text: "... the sons of the God [בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים, *benê hā'ēlōhîm*] came to present themselves before YHWH" (Job 1:6).⁴² This could be a reference to the angels. In fact, there is a tradition going back hundreds of years in which Job's reference to the sons of God is used to understand the "sons of God" in Genesis 6 to be a reference to angels. The Book of Enoch uses the expression οἱ ἄγγελοι υἱοὶ οὐρανοῦ (*oi aggeloi huioi ouranou*), translated "the angels, sons of heaven."⁴³ According to the fragment from 4QEn^d 1 i (Pl. VI) reproduced in J. T. Milik's work, the Aramaic text reads, עִרְיָא בְנֵי שְׁמַיָא ('*iry' bny smy'*).⁴⁴ According to HAL, עִר ('*ir*') means "waking," "wakeful one" or "angel."⁴⁵ בְנֵי is the plural construct of בָּר (*bar*) meaning "sons of." שְׁמַיָא (*smy'*) is comparable to the Hebrew שָׁמַיִם (*smym*) "heaven." Matthew Black notes that the Aramaic term עִר ('*ir*') is "a term for angelic beings, clearly archangels, peculiar to apocalyptic literature."⁴⁶ It appears in Daniel 4:13 (A10) with reference to a holy one (קַדְדִּישׁ, *qaddîš*). Black compares the Greek version of Enoch 6 (G υἱοὶ οὐρανοῦ (*huioi ouranou*), "sons of heaven") which he says follows after Gen. 6:2, בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים (*bny h'lhym*), "sons of God," and the LXX which reads οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ (*hoi huioi tou theou*), "the sons of the God," which he points out are general designations for angels.

Anyone may not agree with the conclusions of Milik or Black, but what this shows is that Heiser's interpretation is a result of his filter, and his understanding of the reference is not "straightforward." Although all of these points, both the ones presented here and the ones presented by Heiser, are controverted in the literature, Heiser nevertheless asserts that these "sons of God" were divine beings, and he does so as if his interpretation is "filterless" and indisputable. Once again this seems, frankly, not to be honest.

Heiser asserts, "Right from the start, then, God has company — other divine beings."⁴⁷ Now when Heiser says "other divine beings" we can only interpret that to mean that God was among beings of the same kind as He, albeit not on the same "level." According to Heiser, God is a divine being, and these others are divine beings also. This asserts polytheism. Yet Heiser specifically rejects the notion that his view is polytheistic. A section in chapter 4 of his book *The Unseen Realm* is titled, "Plural Elohim does not mean Polytheism."⁴⁸ He starts this section, "Many scholars believe that Psalm 82 and other passages demonstrate that the religion of ancient Israel began as a polytheistic system and then evolved into monotheism. I reject that idea, along with any other explanations that seek to hide the plain reading of the text."⁴⁹ Heiser consistently refers to these *elohim* as "divine beings," but he never gives a straightforward definition of what he means by the qualification

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(Job 1:6) נִהְיָ הַיּוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים לְהִתְיַצֵּב עַל־יְהוָה וַיִּבּוֹא גִם־הַשָּׁטָן בְּתוֹכָם:

43 Robert Henry Charles, ed., *Book of Enoch*, vol. 2 *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), §6.2.191.44 J. T. Milik, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1976), 165.

45 HAL, s.v. "עִר."

46 Matthew Black, *The Book of Enoch or I Enoch* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 106.47 *Unseen Realm*, 24.48 *Unseen Realm*, 29.49 *Unseen Realm*, 29.

“divine,” nor does he give an adequate explanation of the distinction between God as a divine being and the *elohim* as divine beings. He specifically rejects the notion that these are angels: “We might think of them as angels, but that wouldn’t be quite correct.”⁵⁰ Heiser believes that these *elohim* are created beings. As part of his interpretation of the Job passage he argues,

First, we learned that the sons of God are divine, not human. The sons of God witnessed creation long before there were people. They are intelligent nonhuman beings. The reference to the sons of God as stars also makes it clear that they are divine. While the language is metaphorical, it is also more than metaphorical. In the next chapter we’ll see other passages that tell us that the sons of God are real, divine entities created by Yahweh, the God of Israel.⁵¹

If they were created, then how can they be identified as “other” divine beings as Heiser claims, since, according to Heiser, the only beings present before creation were God and the “other divine beings”? So, God, according to Heiser, is one of the “divine beings.” Heiser attempts to distinguish between God and the “other gods” by saying, “The only truly perfect Being is God himself.”⁵² One must wonder what measure Heiser uses to measure that God is the “only truly perfect Being”? Against what standard of measure can someone measure God to see that He is “truly perfect”? What is the standard of “perfection” by which God is measured? Of course there is no standard of measure by which God can be measured, so the description “truly perfect Being” has no discernable meaning.

Heiser thinks of God as a being among beings. However, God is not “the only truly perfect being,” or even “a being.” Rather, God *is* being (*esse*). Whereas created entities *have* being, God *is* being. God does not fall into a class, or category, of “being.” Richard Howe explains:

To regard God as a deity [or as a divine being] is to talk as if God is a species (even if the only member of the species) of the genus “deity” [or “divine.”] But since God is substantial existence itself, then God cannot be a genus in as much as being cannot be a genus since, the only way to distinguish species of a genus is by its specific difference. But the specific difference (1) has to be something not prevented by the genus (as the genus “animal” cannot exclude the specific difference “rationality” otherwise humans would not be animals); and (2) has to be something outside of (i.e., not included in) the genus otherwise (for example) if rationality was part of the genus “animal” then every animal would be human. So, being cannot be a genus because there could be no specific difference to constitute any species (and consequently, any real member of the kind) since to be something outside of being (#2 above) would be non-being. But to be non-being is to be nothing, and nothing cannot be a difference.⁵³

God is not in the class of “divine” beings because God is not in a class, or category, or genus, or species. In fact, God cannot be compared to His creatures, whether those creatures are angels, or

⁵⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 23.

⁵¹ *Unseen Realm*, 25.

⁵² *Unseen Realm*, 58.

⁵³ Richard G. Howe, email message to author, 10/18/2021.

humans, or Heiser's "other gods." We have already shown this to be the case in our consideration of the Holiness of God. And, as Aquinas points out in several places, God is not in a genus.

Reply Obj. 2. God is not related to creatures as though belonging to a different genus, but as transcending every genus, and as the principle of all genera.

Reply Obj. 3. Likeness of creatures to God is not affirmed on account of agreement in form according to the formality of the same genus or species, but solely according to analogy, inasmuch as God is essential being, whereas other things are beings by participation.

Reply Obj. 4. Although it may be admitted that creatures are in some sort like God, it must nowise be admitted that God is like creatures; because, as Dionysius says (Div. Nom. ix.): "A mutual likeness may be found between things of the same order, but not between a cause and that which is caused." For, we say that a statue is like a man, but not conversely; so also a creature can be spoken of as in some sort like God; but not that God is like a creature.⁵⁴

In fact, Aquinas shows that not even the name "God" is communicable:

Since, then, this name God [*Deus*] is given to signify the divine nature as stated above (A. 8), and since the divine nature cannot be multiplied as shown above (Q. XI. A. 3), it follows that this name God [*Deus*] is incommunicable in reality, but communicable in opinion; just in the same way as this name sun would be communicable according to the opinion of those who say there are many suns. Therefore, it is written: "You served them who by nature are not gods" (Gal. iv. 8), and a gloss adds, gods not in nature, but in human opinion.⁵⁵

Heiser does assert that the *elohim* were created. But if these *elohim* were created beings, in what sense can they be identified as "other divine beings"? For Heiser to refer to the *elohim* as "other divine beings" commits the fallacy of placing God in a genus as if He belongs in a group of divine

⁵⁴ Aquinatis, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.4.3. "AD SECUNDUM DICENDUM quod Deus non se habet ad creaturas sicut res diversorum generum: sed sicut id quod est extra omne genus, et principium omnium generum.

AD TERTIUM DICENDUM quod non dicitur esse similitudo creaturae ad Deum propter communicantiam in forma secundum eandem rationem generis et speciei: sed secundum analogiam tantum; prout scilicet Deus est ens per essentiam, et alia per participationem.

AD QUARTUM DICENDUM quod, licet aliquo modo concedatur quod creatura sit similis Deo, nullo tamen modo concedendum est quod Deus sit similis creaturae: quia, ut dicit Dionysius cap. ix *de Div. Nom.*, in his quae unius ordinis sunt recipitur mutua similitudo, non autem in causa et causato: dicimus enim quod imago sit similis homini, et non e converso. Et similiter dici potest aliquo modo quod creatura sit similis Deo: non tamen quod Deus sit similis creaturae." Sancti Dionysii Areopagitae, Θεων Ονοματων/*Divinis Nominibus*, Tomus Prior, *Opera Omnia Quae Extant*, Tomus III, *Patrologiae Graecae* (Parisiis: Apud Garnier Fratres et J.-P. Migne, 1857), IX.§VI. ἅμφω ἀλλήλοις ὅμοια κατὰ προηγούμενον ὁμοίου εἶδος· ἐπὶ δὲ τοῦ αἰτίου καὶ τῶν αἰτιατῶν οὐκ ἀποδεξόμεθα τὴν ἀντιστροφὴν. "sint ambo invicem similia secundum principalem speciem similitudinis; in causa vero ad effectus nequaquam admitteremus istiusmodi reciprocationem."

⁵⁵ Aquinatis, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.13.9. "Unde, cum hoc nomen *Deus* impositum sit ad significandum naturam divinam, ut dictum est; natura autem divina multiplicabilis non est, ut supra ostensum est: sequitur quod hoc nomen *Deus* incommunicabile sit secundum opinionem, quemadmodum hoc nomen *sol* esset communicabile secundum opinionem ponentium multos soles. Et secundum hoc dicitur Gal. iv: *his qui natura non sunt dii, serviebatis*; glossa: *non sunt dii natura, sed opinione hominum.*"

beings. Ultimately Heiser does not explain what these *elohim* are other than the vague expression “divine beings.” There is no statement in Scripture that “other divine beings” were created that are not angels. Heiser imposes his interpretive grid on the text but then tries to present it as simply a matter of reading the text at “face value” or “straightforward.” Heiser can protest the charge of polytheism, but his works testify to the fact that this is precisely what he is.

Henotheism

Heiser espouses a particular kind of polytheism called henotheism. According to Heiser,

Historically, henotheism assumes all gods are species equals and the elevation of one god is due to socio-political factors—not theological nuancing. Quoting Max Müller’s seminal work on the subject, Yusa writes that henotheism was a technical term coined “to designate a peculiar form of polytheism . . . [where] each god is, ‘at the time a real divinity, supreme and absolute’ not limited by the powers of any other gods.”⁵⁶

According to OED, the earliest known use of the term ‘henotheism’ was by F. M. Müller, (1823–1900), a British philologist and Orientalist. In 1860 in the *London Times* he defined ‘henotheism’ as, “A form of faith which, although recognizing the existence (or potential existence) of several gods, makes only one god the centre of its worship.”⁵⁷ Mark Smith identifies henotheism as the acceptance of gods with one god as the head: “In short, a single assembly with Yahweh as its head is the conceptual unity of Israelite polytheism. Because of the reduction of polytheism in this paradigm as well as its structure, scholars have called this conceptualization of Israelite divinity ‘henotheism.’”⁵⁸ Heiser’s attempt to make henotheism into a socio-political system with no “theological nuancing” goes against the historical and contemporary definitions of henotheism. Of course, Heiser is compelled to do this lest his readers begin to realize that his own system reeks of henotheistic thinking.

Again, Heiser has got his facts wrong. Heiser quotes a statement from Michiko Yusa: “Müller called this idea ‘belief in single gods . . . a worship of one god after another.’”⁵⁹ Yusa says, “Müller called this ‘belief in single gods’ *henotheism* or *kathenotheism*, ‘a worship of one god after another,’” which Yusa attributes to “Müller, 1881, pp. 136–137.”⁶⁰ This quote is supposed to have come from Müller’s book, *Selected Essays on Language, Mythology and Religion*, volume 2.⁶¹ The problem is, Müller never makes such a statement in the entire book. In fact, Müller never uses the

⁵⁶ Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? 28.

⁵⁷ OED, s.v. “henotheism.”

⁵⁸ Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 78.

⁵⁹ Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? 28.

⁶⁰ Michiko Yusa, “Henotheism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 6.266.

⁶¹ F. Max Müller, *Selected Essays on Language, Mythology and Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1881), 2.136–37.

expression “one god after another.” Heiser, who refers to himself as “a biblical scholar,”⁶² simply did not do his homework.

Müller described henotheism:

If we must have a general name for the earliest form of religion among the Vedic Indians, it can be neither *monotheism* nor *polytheism*, but only *henotheism*, that is, a belief and worship of those single objects, whether semi-tangible or intangible, in which man first suspected the presence of the invisible and the infinite, each of which, as we saw, was raised into something more than finite, more than natural, more than conceivable; and thus grew in the end to be an Asura, or a living thing; a Deva, or a bright being; an Amartya, that is, not a mortal, and at last an immortal and eternal being—in fact a God, endowed with the highest qualities which the human intellect could conceive at the various stages of its own growth.

This phase of religious thought can nowhere be studied so well as in the Veda; in fact, we should hardly have known of its existence but for the Veda.⁶³

Interestingly, Müller was a representative and popularizer of the Nature-Myth School. According to Wilhelm Schmidt, “This school unanimously agreed that the figures of mythology, and hence those of religion, were personifications of natural objects, especially of the principal heavenly bodies, but also of meteorological phenomena. Max Muller, to whom we shall return later, and M (*sic*) Bréal held that all mythology consisted of sun-myths, and that its only subject was the rising, setting and activities of the sun.”⁶⁴ Schmidt goes on to point out, “Kathenotheism, a clever device for avoiding the decision between monotheism and polytheism, is an isolated phenomenon, and late even in the higher civilizations.”⁶⁵ Müller’s Nature-Myth School eventually collapsed under criticism.

Winfried Corduan gives the following account of Henotheism:

Henotheism. It would be easy to move directly from polytheism to monotheism, but usually an evolutionary scheme inserts a stage between the two. In this stage people recognize many different gods as real, but one god or goddess sticks out as distinctly higher and more important. Henotheism does not deny the existence of many gods, but the cultus focuses primarily on one of them. Henotheistic worship may have a social basis. For instance, a particular tribe, family or profession may be specifically attached to one god, whereas a similar group may be devoted to a different one. Henotheistic worship may also have a geographical basis: one god is thought to have exclusive domain over one specific region, whereas a different one is thought to rule over another area. Finally, individuals may choose to devote themselves to the worship exclusively to one god among various options.

⁶² *Unseen Realm*, 17.

⁶³ F. Max Müller, “Henotheism, Polytheism, Monotheism, and Atheism,” in *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India: the Hibbert Lectures* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1882), 266.

⁶⁴ Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories*, trans. H. J. Rose (London: Methuen & Company, 1935), 38.

⁶⁵ Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, 41.

During the time of the Old Testament, henotheism was a very common view among the pagan neighbors of Israel. The Bible does not promote that point of view since it teaches monotheism. However, the Bible reports that many people held to a henotheistic understanding. People largely believed that each particular nation and the territory that they inhabited belonged to their god, and the god would have more power to protect them within their homeland. One example of henotheism appears in the Bible in the speech of the Assyrian field commander, reported in Isaiah 37. He interpreted the conflict between the Israelites and the Assyrians as a conflict between their gods and claimed that the god of the Assyrians had already defeated the gods of other nations and would also defeat Yahweh, the God of Israel.⁶⁶

Heiser's system fits well within Corduan's description of henotheism. Heiser believes in "other gods" and "other divine beings," but he worships YHWH as the supreme god. Someone will no doubt object that Heiser says that YHWH created the "other gods" and that this does not fit henotheism. The problem with this objection is that the henotheistic system of Babylon, at least at one point in its history, held that Anu was the creator of all the gods and head of the pantheon. That is, they were produced by Anu. Anu was recognized as the head of the pantheon, the father of the "other gods," and the highest one to be worshiped. This was henotheism. So, even though Heiser claims that the "other gods" were created, this does not extricate his system from being henotheism.

Why Does It Matter?

Heiser categorically rejects the charge of polytheism, yet his own arguments object to his rejection. Heiser consistently refers to "other gods" and "other divine beings." Heiser also objects to the belief that there is only one God. Some will respond that Heiser is simply saying there are other *elohim*, not that there are "other gods" like God. This does not extricate him from the charge of polytheism. He claims that God is part of, albeit the head of, a pantheon of gods. His efforts to make a distinction between the other *elohim* and YHWH fail to make a real distinction. Heiser claims that God is "species unique" (more will be said about this below), but this does not make the distinction that he thinks it does. He puts God in the genus אֱלֹהִים with all the other אֱלֹהִים. This makes Heiser a polytheist. Because he claims to worship only YHWH, this makes him a henotheist.

Heiser admits that God is uncreated, but this does not go far enough. Even in Mesopotamian myths there was an uncreated entity. According to Bottéro, "Around the beginning of the 2nd millennium (I don't know anything for certain before), the exordium of a tale in Sumerian concerning Gilgameâ presents the first shaping of the World, from the original Spheroid, Sky-Earth, still mixed and forming a mass, like a gigantic tearing, a liminal separation, inaugurating the ordering of this enormous primitive chaos:"⁶⁷ In Mesopotamian mythology, the "Sphéroïde" existed without any explanation of its existence. It is uncreated. In the Babylonian *Epic of Creation*, Apsu existed

⁶⁶ Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2024), 39–40.

⁶⁷ Bottéro, *La plus vieille religion*, 173. "Autour du début du II^e millénaire (je ne connais d'auparavant rien de sûr), l'exorde d'un conte en sumérien concernant Gilgameâ présente la première mise en forme du Monde, à partir du Sphéroïde originel, Ciel-Terre, encore mélangés et faisant masse, comme un gigantesque *arrachement*, une *séparation* liminaire, inaugurant la mise en ordre de cet énorme chaos primitif."

and brought forth the gods. Being uncreated is not sufficient to show that God is not simply one of the *elohim*. According to Heiser, YHWH is one of the members of the pantheon. He just happens to be an uncreated member.

CHAPTER 7

HEISERIAN HERMENEUTICS: PART 1

Introduction

The problems and issues with Heiser's hermeneutics are so many and varied that it is necessary to break up a consideration of his methodology into three parts. This first part will consider Heiser's claims and arguments about filters through which one interprets the Bible, Heiser's characterization of the Bible as a mosaic, and his arguments concerning what he takes to be obstacles and protocols in interpretation. Heiser's views on these issues are foundational for understanding how Heiser arrives at his interpretations.

Filters

Heiser begins the second chapter of *Unseen Realm*, "Rules of Engagement," talking about filters. He says,

Filters are used to eliminate things in order to achieve a desired result. When we use them in cooking, the unwanted elements are dredged, strained, and discarded. When used in our cars, they prevent particles from interfering with performance. When we use them in email, they weed out what (or whom) we don't want to read. What's left is what we use – what contributes to our meal, our engine, or our sanity.¹

All of this might be true of the filters in Heiser's analogy, but this says nothing about the use of "filters" in exegesis. In each one of Heiser's examples, the filter is employed for some benefit. In cooking the filter eliminates elements that are unwanted because they would hinder the preparation and/or taste of the meal. In cars, the filter prevents particles from interfering with performance. In emails, filters are used to eliminate spam or scams. In each one of these instances filters are used for the benefit of the user. Yet Heiser assumes that filters are necessarily detrimental. According to Heiser's own illustrations, we ought to use filters to eliminate what may be detrimental to good interpretation. If Heiser was trained to use filters in a way that is detrimental to good interpretation, then he had an unfortunate education.

In another place, Heiser asserts,

¹ *Unseen Realm*, 14.

Three years have passed since Lexham Press first decided to compile some of *my Bible Study Magazine* articles for publication as a book. The result was *I Dare You Not to Bore Me with the Bible*. In the introduction to that book I made the assertion that “truly understanding much of the Bible requires seeing it in its original context, not filtering it through a familiar tradition.” I’m more committed to that proposition now than I was even then.²

The question is, Why should we not filter it through familiar tradition? Without argument or evidence, Heiser assumes that it would be detrimental to filter the Bible through familiar tradition. Why does he assume this? Because doing it would contradict his interpretations. Heiser wants to prejudice the reader against “familiar tradition” in order to lead the reader to see the Bible through his interpretation of ANE literature. As one of Heiser’s followers posted on Heiser’s website, “Latin should really have no bearing on the theology of the Bible.”³ So, for Heiser and Ronn Johnson, the theology of Latin, Christian theologians should have no bearing on the theology of the Bible, but the mythology of Ancient Near Eastern paganism should. Heiser wants his readers to reject the filter of “familiar tradition” and adopt the filter of ANE literature.

Heiser claims that he is not rejecting Christian tradition: “Lest I be misunderstood, I’m not arguing that we should ignore our Christian forefathers. I’m also not saying that we’re smarter. They were prodigious intellects. The problem isn’t their brain power—it’s that they were simply too removed from the world of the biblical writers and had little chance of bridging that gap.”⁴ But isn’t Heiser even farther removed from the world of the biblical writers? Of course what he means is that they did not have the benefit of the enormous amount of ANE literature that has been recovered in recent years. This material, according to Heiser, informs us about the historical and cultural context in which the biblical authors lived and wrote. The problem with this is, ANE literature must also be interpreted, and Heiser’s interpretation is not the only one available.

Heiser asserts,

We view the Bible through the lens of what we know and what’s familiar. Psalm 82 broke my filter. More importantly, it alerted me to the fact that I’d been using one. Our traditions, however honorable, are not intrinsic to the Bible. They are systems we invent to organize the Bible. They are artificial. They are *filters*.

Once I’d been awakened to this, it struck me as faithless to use a filter. But throwing away my filters cost me the systems with which I’d ordered Scripture and doctrine in my mind. I was left with lots of fragments. It didn’t feel like it at the time, but that was the best thing that could have happened.⁵

² *Unfiltered*, 1. Interestingly, the quote Heiser says is in the introduction to *I Dare You Not to Bore Me With the Bible*, actually does not appear in that book, at least not in the version that is available in Logos.

³ Posted by Ronn Johnson | Sep 14, 2016 | Biblical Theology & Doctrine, Divine council, Doctrine of God, NakedBible, Satan and demons, Soteriology. <https://drmsb.com/does-believing-in-plural-deities-make-any-difference/>. accessed 7/8/2024.

⁴ *Unfiltered*, 13.

⁵ *Unseen Realm*, 15.

Heiser seems to think that interpreting the Bible through “familiar tradition” is using a filter, but interpreting the Bible through ANE literature is not. He does not seem to understand that an interpreter cannot be “filterless.” He does not seem to grasp the fact that he has simply replaced one filter with another. To claim to be ‘filterless’ is itself a filter. To claim to be presuppositionless is itself a presupposition. Heiser points out that his book grew out of his dissertation,⁶ and it is in the initial statement of his dissertation that his new filter is stated. Heiser asserts, “Biblical scholarship has reached a consensus with respect to the presence of a divine assembly of gods in Israel’s faith. Prior to the sixth century B.C.E., Israelite religion underwent an evolution from an initial polytheism to a firm monolatry, where the other gods of the divine council were tolerated but not worshipped.”⁷

Heiser almost immediately rejects this view.

This dissertation calls the consensus view of the development of monotheism in Israel into question by demonstrating that belief in a divine council survived the exile. As a result, this dissertation posits that the survival of Israel’s pre-exilic divine council has greater explanatory power than the consensus view of the development of monotheism with respect to divine plurality in late canonical and non-canonical Second Temple period texts.⁸

The consensus view is the result of the application of critical principles to the biblical text, and these conclusions have been much debated, and much evidence has been presented to the contrary. Whether it is true or not is not the point here. Rather, by rejecting the consensus view, Heiser expresses one aspect of his own filter by which he interprets the text. Rather than being ‘filterless,’ Heiser has simply employed his own filter rather than theirs.

He says, “The facts of the Bible are just pieces — bits of scattered data. Our tendency is to impose order, and to do that we apply a filter.”⁹ Revealingly, he does not provide any justification for this assertion. Why should anyone think that the facts of the Bible are just pieces of scattered data? Here Heiser is using his filter. He is interpreting the data with his worldview, his set of presuppositions, his filter. He asserts, “The Bible is really a theological and literary mosaic.”¹⁰ But isn’t it a filter to say that the Bible is a theological and literary mosaic? There are no statements in the Bible that assert that it is a theological and literary mosaic, and many interpreters through history have not understood the Bible to be a theological and literary mosaic. To see the biblical text as a mosaic is nothing less than a filter.

Mosaic

He refers to a “pattern” in a mosaic. He says, “Yes, the individual pieces are essential; without them there would be no mosaic. But the meaning of all the pieces is found in the *completed* mosaic. And a mosaic isn’t imposed *on* the pieces; it derives *from* them.”¹¹ But Heiser seems not to

⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 13.

⁷ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, iv.

⁸ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, v.

⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 15.

¹⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 15.

¹¹ *Unseen Realm*, 15. Emphasis in original.

understand the hermeneutical spiral.¹² If the pieces have meaning only in the completed whole, then what do they contribute to the whole? Unless the individual pieces have meanings, the whole has no meaning since the whole must be composed of the meanings of the individual pieces. Likewise, the individual pieces have some meaning as they fit into the whole. If the individual pieces have no meaning apart from the whole, then how can an interpreter decide where an individual piece should go in the mosaic?

However, Heiser has committed a common logical fallacy. Not being conversant either in philosophy or logic, his faulty reasoning may be excusable. Let me illustrate. If all the individual pieces of a mosaic are triangular, is the resulting mosaic necessarily a triangle? Of course not. To think that because each piece of a mosaic is triangular that therefore the whole mosaic must be a triangle is the fallacy of composition. A mass of triangular pieces can be so arranged as to produce a complete square, or rectangle, or polygon, or even a triangle. However, if every one of the pieces of a mosaic are completely green in color, is the entire mosaic green? Of course. To think that even though every piece of a mosaic is green, and yet the whole mosaic cannot be green is the other side of this fallacy. But this does not seem to be Heiser's fallacy.

Rather, Heiser's fallacy is the fallacy of division. Someone commits the fallacy of division when he assumes that what is true of the whole is necessarily true of a part. There are two kinds of fallacy of division. First, one argues that what is true of the whole is true of all of the parts. An example of this kind would be to argue that because a machine is heavy, or complicated, or valuable, that each of its parts must be heavy, or complicated, or valuable. The second instance is to argue from the attributes of a collection of elements to the attributes of each of the elements. An example of this kind is to argue that because students in a particular school study philosophy, theology, hermeneutics, Greek, Hebrew, Missions, Evangelism, and Preaching, that every student in the school studies philosophy, theology, hermeneutics, Greek, Hebrew, Missions, Evangelism, and Preaching. It is this second kind of fallacy of division that Heiser has committed.

We can see that Heiser has committed this fallacy in the quote from his dissertation. Even if it were the case that prior to the sixth century B.C.E., Israelite religion underwent an evolution from an initial polytheism to a firm monolatry, where the "other gods" of the divine council were

Figure 5: Square Mosaic

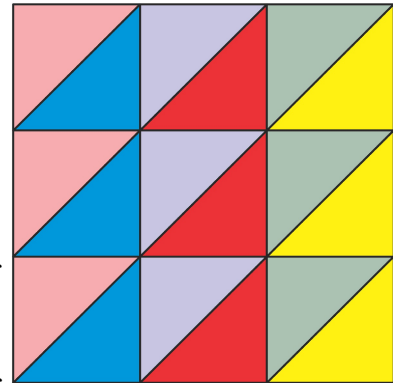
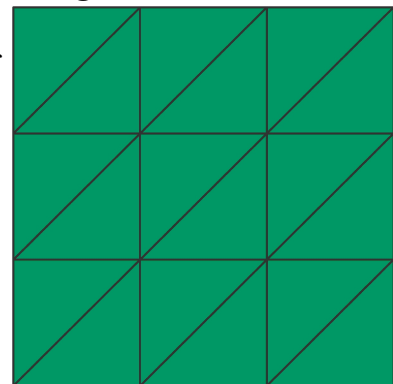


Figure 6: Green Mosaic



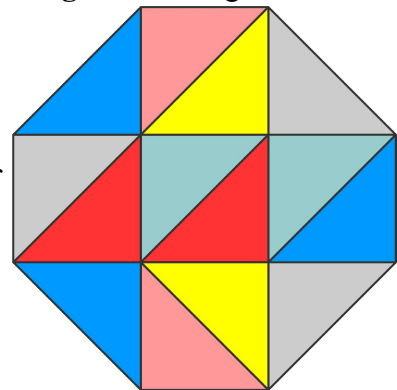
¹² The notion of a hermeneutic spiral is an adaptation of the traditional view of the hermeneutics circle. The hermeneutic circle identifies the process by which one interprets a text. According to this view, an interpreter goes to the text to understand it, and the text then impacts the view of the interpreter. So, there is a circle of going to the text, being changed by the text, going back to the text with a new view, and being impacted again by the text. This sets up this circle of going to and taking from the text. The adaptation of the spiral is that this circle actually moves the interpreter forward in understanding, creating a spiral toward greater understanding rather than merely a circle the does not depict the actual development of understanding.

tolerated but not worshiped, it does not necessarily follow that Psalm 82 reflects this view. Yet Heiser simply assumes that it must. But this is the fallacy of division. An attribute of the whole of ANE literature must be an attribute of the part, namely, Psalm 82. Of course Heiser would want to marshal his evidence in support of his assertion, but, again, this is the point. By marshaling his evidence in support of his assertion he would be attempting to justify his filter. Heiser says, “Once I’d been awakened to this, it struck me as faithless to use a filter.”¹³ Additionally, Heiser speaks as if his hypothesis about ancient Israelite religion is an established fact. However, the question of whether Israelite religion was ever polytheistic, a topic considered below, is a debated issue with no definitive conclusions that have been largely accepted by scholars. Heiser reads into the text an assumption and then uses his eisegesis as evidence for his conclusion. This is circular.

Heiser asserts, “And a mosaic isn’t imposed *on* the pieces; it derives *from* them.”¹⁴ But this assertion contradicts his earlier statement that the meaning is “found in the *completed* mosaic.” If the meaning of the pieces is “found” in the completed mosaic, then the meaning of the completed mosaic gives the pieces their meaning. But this is a case of imposing the meaning of the completed mosaic on the pieces. Heiser’s assertion is simply not true. A mosaic is a picture or pattern or design produced by arranging together small pieces. But the small pieces do not arrange themselves. The mosaic must be arranged by some arranger. And mosaics can be arranged in different ways. The same triangles from the mosaic arranged in a square can be rearranged in an octagon. The arrangement of the pieces into a mosaic is imposed upon the pieces by the pattern in the mind of the one who arranges the pieces. Since mosaics can be arranged in different ways, why should anyone think that Heiser’s mosaic is the arrangement that anyone should accept? It is Heiser’s filter that arranges the pieces of the mosaic into the whole that he wants.

Another thing about mosaics is that some mosaics cannot be arranged in certain patterns. For example, the mosaic of triangles cannot be arranged to form a circle. No matter how many straight sides a mosaic piece has, and no matter how the mosaic appears, it will never form a circle. A chiliagon may appear to be a circle, but it is actually a 1000 sided figure. Heiser asserts, “My passion is to persuade you to remove your filter and begin to look at the pieces of Scripture as part of a mosaic so that this ‘big picture’ can begin to take focus.”¹⁵ But why should anyone remove his filter only to replace it with Heiser’s filter, especially since Heiser has given no justification for his arrangement? Contrary to Heiser’s claim, he has imposed an arrangement upon the pieces and presents this as if it is *the* mosaic that gives meaning to the pieces. For Heiser to think that he can interpret the Bible without a filter or that he has *the* mosaic that everyone should accept is, frankly, not honest. Heiser’s filter is his blanket acceptance of ANE myth as the grid through which everyone should interpret the OT. Ultimately, Heiser’s analogy of the Bible as a mosaic is simply false and does not capture the complexity of exegesis.

Figure 7: Octagon Mosaic



¹³ *Unseen Realm*, 15.

¹⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 15.

¹⁵ *Unseen Realm*, 15.

Obstacles and Protocols

Heiser sets out what he calls “serious obstacles.” The first is, “1. *We’ve been trained to think that the history of Christianity is the true context of the Bible.*”¹⁶ Although I have attended seminary, having earned a Ph.D. in philosophy of religion, and having taught in a seminary for more than 30 years, I was never taught that the history of Christianity was the true context of the Bible. But Heiser exhibits a habit of equivocating on the use of his terms. This is a tactic that he will frequently use. He says, “. . . Christian history is *not* the context of the biblical writers.”¹⁷ However, he goes on to say, “The proper context for interpreting the Bible is not Augustine or any other church father.”¹⁸ Here he has equivocated on the word ‘context.’ He first refers to the context of the biblical writers, then he talks about the context of interpretation. Of course, the historical, political, and cultural context of the biblical writers was certainly not the context of subsequent Christian history. However, it does not follow that the proper context of interpretation is not among any of the church fathers. In fact, there is a sense in which the context of Christian history is in fact the context of the biblical writers. Throughout history, orthodox Christians have believed that salvation is by grace through faith. Throughout history, orthodox Christians have believed and taught that Jesus is God in the flesh and that He was raised from the dead. And there are many other doctrinal beliefs that have been held by orthodox Christians forming the context of Christian history of theology. Orthodox Christians have believed that these doctrines are the context of the Bible to which they, as Christians, subscribe. In a sense, Christian history *is* the context of the biblical writers.

Heiser has actually created a problem for himself. If the proper context of interpretation is not, as he says, “. . . *the modern world at all, or any period of its history,*” then does not this disqualify Heiser’s own interpretations? Isn’t he a part of “the modern world” or a part of the “period of its history”? And if he can get outside of his own modern world context to interpret the Bible, why could not Augustine or other church fathers get outside of their own historical context to interpret the Bible? Heiser wants to prejudice the reader against appealing to interpreters from church history that may contradict his views.

It is difficult not to notice the arrogance of Heiser’s assertions. Heiser believes that the proper context of interpretation is not the history of the Christian church, or any of those throughout the history of Christianity who have engaged in interpretation, yet he thinks his interpretation is superior and that he is capable of passing judgment on all the biblical interpreters throughout Christian history. If it is the case, as he says, “Every other context is alien to the biblical writers and, therefore, to the Bible,”¹⁹ then why should anyone think that his interpretation is somehow exempt from these obstacles? Heiser seems to think that his own view is superior to all the hundreds of thousands of interpreters throughout the history of Christianity.

It is also curious that Heiser seems to ignore contemporary biblical scholarship. As Meir Sternberg points out,

¹⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 16. (Emphasis in original).

¹⁷ *Unseen Realm*, 16.

¹⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 16.

¹⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 16.

When all is said and done, the independent knowledge we possess of the “real world” behind the Bible remains absurdly meager, almost nonexistent when compared with the plenty available to, say, Joyceans or even Shakespearians. For better or worse, most of our information is culled from the Bible itself, and culling information entails a process of interpretation, where source abjectly waits on discourse. There is no escaping this necessity — though, again, many would like to and may even pretend they do. Source-oriented critics often imply that they deal in hard facts and consign “aesthetic” analysis to its fate at the none too reliable hands of the literary coterie. If seriously entertained, this is a delusion, bearing the name of positivism with none of its excuses and facilities. There is simply nothing here to be positive about — no, or almost no, facts concerning the sources of the Bible apart from those we ourselves make by inference from the Bible as source. The movement from text to reality cannot but pass through interpretation.²⁰

Contemporary scholarship has demonstrated that, due to the paucity of knowledge of the “real world” behind the Bible, our information comes from our interpretation of the biblical text. This applies to Heiser as well as to any other interpreter. Yet Heiser wants his readers to think that he has the “face value” and “straightforward” interpretation to which all Christians should subscribe regardless of what others may think.

But Heiser has another tactic in his arsenal. It is called poisoning the well. As A. J. Hoover explains, “You commit this error [of poisoning the well] when you discredit a source of evidence in advance, when you define the case so that contrary evidence is automatically precluded.”²¹ Without argument or evidence, Heiser attacks interpreters throughout the history of Christianity in order to poison his reader from accepting their interpretations. Basically Heiser is saying, “When you read or hear an interpretation contrary to the one I am giving you, then just consider the source.”

As we have seen above, Heiser asserts, “I’m not arguing that we should ignore our Christian forefathers. I’m simply saying that we should give their words and their thought the proper perspective and priority.”²² But who decides what is “proper perspective and priority”? Does Heiser think that he has this “proper perspective and priority”? Should we not also give Heiser’s interpretations proper perspective and priority? Why should anyone think that Heiser’s interpretations are better than the theologians of church history? Heiser thinks that the creeds are important “albeit carefully selected.” And who decides what constitutes a careful selection? Heiser? Of course that is what he means! Heiser expects the reader to accept his decision about what constitutes “carefully selected, theological ideas.”

Earlier we pointed out that Heiser commits the fallacy of division. Here he is doing it again. Referring to the historical context in which the biblical writers lived and wrote, Heiser asserts, “To understand how the biblical writers thought, we need to tap into the intellectual output of that world.”²³ First of all, the only access a reader has to the thoughts of another is what that other says or writes. It is not possible for one person to enter the mind of another person, living or dead.

²⁰ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), 16.

²¹ A. J. Hoover, *Don’t You Believe It!* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 63.

²² *Unseen Realm*, 16.

²³ *Unseen Realm*, 16.

Secondly, just because the biblical authors lived and wrote in a particular historical context does not mean that they necessarily thought the same way as the people in that historical context. Heiser's own musings are an example of this fact. Just because Heiser lives in this modern context does not mean he thinks like others who live in this context. It is certainly helpful and even perhaps enlightening to understand the historical context in which the biblical authors lived and wrote, but this fact alone does not necessarily tell us what the biblical authors thought. The only access we have to what the biblical authors thought is what they wrote. To take extra-biblical works as if this tells us what the biblical authors thought is to impose one's interpretation of these extra-biblical works upon the biblical text. This is eisegesis at its finest.

Also, Heiser asserts, "As our understanding of the worldview of the biblical writers grows, so does our understanding of what they intended to say – and the mosaic of their thinking takes shape in our minds."²⁴ This is another basic flaw in Heiser's hermeneutic methodology. It is a variation of the intentional fallacy. The intentional fallacy is the error of basing one's *assessment* of a work on what one believes to be the intention of the author rather than basing it on the author's work itself. The intentional fallacy was initially set forth by W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley in the article "Intention" in *Dictionary of World Literature*. In it they assert, "Evidence that the work has a certain actual meaning is derived from a study of the work itself, the words in which it is written and their syntax. . . . To infer the author's intention from internal evidence presupposes that the actual and the intentional meanings coincide;"²⁵ In the chapter, "The Intentional Fallacy," Wimsatt and Beardsley expound on the intentional fallacy and pursue its implications.²⁶ The problem with using the intention to discover the meaning is that, unless an author specifically states or records his intention, the intention is always external to the text and is almost impossible to verify. Heiser's claim about intention is a variation on the intentional fallacy, that is, the error of basing one's *interpretation* of the text on what one thinks was the author's intention. The problem is, as Wimsatt and Beardsley point out, a hearer or reader has no access to an author's intention apart from what the author says or writes. An author's intention in communicating is always in the author's mind, but another person does not have direct access to an author's mind. Unless an author specifically states his intention, any claims about an author's intention will always be speculation; it will be a guess. So, basing one's interpretation on what one guesses about an author's intention is a hermeneutic fallacy. What Heiser is doing is interpreting extra-biblical works and then using his interpretations to divine the intentions of the biblical authors.²⁷ It is illegitimate to attempt to construct an author's intention by imposing on an author's text one's own interpretation of the works of others of the same period.

²⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 16.

²⁵ Monroe C. Beardsley and W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., "Intention," in *Dictionary of World Literature: Criticism - Forms - Technique*, ed. Joseph T. Shipley (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1943), 327.

²⁶ W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1954), 3–18.

²⁷ To "divine" an interpretation was part of Friedrich Schleiermacher's divinatory method of interpreting a text. It was the effort of the interpreter "to transform himself, so to speak, into the author . . . to gain an immediate comprehension of the author as an individual." Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1974), 105. "Die divinatorische ist die, welche, indem man sich selbst gleichsam in den anderen verwandelt, das Individuelle unmittelbar aufzufassen sucht."

Heiser's second obstacle is, "2. *We've been desensitized to the vitality and theological importance of the unseen world.*"²⁸ Of course what he is saying is that we have been "desensitized" to *his* view of the unseen world. Notice that he simply assumes that his understanding of the unseen world is necessarily correct and that the rest of us have simply been desensitized to it. And notice how he paints the picture: "We find talk of the supernatural world uncomfortable." I do not know of anyone who thinks this way. In fact, Heiser's assertion flies in the face of the countless books and articles that have been written about the supernatural world. Indeed, everything that has ever been written about God by Jews and Christians constitutes talking about the supernatural world. Of course what Heiser is saying is that we find talk about *his* interpretation of the supernatural world uncomfortable. Here again he is poisoning the well. Without argument or evidence he wants his reader to think that anyone who objects to his understanding of the supernatural world has necessarily been "desensitized." Heiser precludes contrary views by disparaging them: "Oh! You don't agree with my interpretation? That's just because you have been desensitized!"

Of course it is to be expected that Heiser, at some point, would bring out the whipping boy of rationalism, a favorite of progressives and post-modernists. He says, "The believing church is bending under the weight of its own rationalism, a modern worldview that would be foreign to the biblical writers."²⁹ It is painfully obvious that Heiser does not understand what rationalism is, but it is a quick way of earning brownie points among sympathetic readers. Rationalism was not and is not a "worldview." There are many conflicting and contradictory claims that can be and have been identified as rationalism. Rationalism was the conviction that unaided human reason alone is the measure of truth. There has been a variety of individuals who have been classified as rationalists: René Descartes (1596–1650) claimed to be a Christian and even employed arguments for the existence of God, but he has been classified as a rationalist. Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) was a pantheist who did not believe in the Jewish or Christian God, but he has been classified as a rationalist. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is renown for having attempted a fusion of empiricism and rationalism. He attempted to debunk all cosmological arguments for the existence of God. There is no doubt that contemporary rationalism has influenced the Christian church, but to claim that the believing church is "bending under the weight of its own rationalism" is an exaggeration designed, once again, to poison the well against anyone who would disagree with Heiser's view: "Oh! You don't agree with my interpretation? That's because you are bending under the weight of your rationalism!"

Heiser poses the following scenario:

If your background, like mine, is in the evangelical, noncharismatic branch of Protestantism, perhaps you consider yourself an exception to the patterns I've identified, or think that I've overstated the situation. But what would you think if a Christian friend confided to you that he believed he had been helped by a guardian angel, or that he had audibly heard a disembodied voice warning him of some danger? What if your friend claimed to have

²⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 16. (Emphasis in original).

²⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 17

witnessed demonic possession, or was convinced that God had directed her life through a dream that included an appearance of Jesus?³⁰

Heiser has another tactic displayed in the above argument. It is called a Red-Herring argument. A Red-Herring argument is the distracting of one's audience from the real issue by appeal to irrelevant matters. This derives from the practice of dragging a red herring over the path of the prey so that the scent would distract the hounds from the chase. This kind of scenario is totally irrelevant to the question of Heiser's interpretation. Whether someone would balk at a Christian friend's claim does not say anything about whether Heiser's understanding of the supernatural realm is right or wrong. The problem is that experiences do not come with tags that tell you how they should be interpreted. The question is not whether any individual has had such experiences. The issue is the person's interpretation of the experience. Evaluating the interpretations of such experiences requires that one measure the interpretation against what the Bible says. We cannot interpret the Bible on the basis of the experiences we have. That is getting the cart before the horse.

It is amazing that somehow Heiser knows how "Most of us noncharismatics" would respond. It is extremely unlikely that Heiser has canvassed "most" noncharismatics. Why would he put it this way? Once again, to poison the well against anyone who would take exception to his interpretation. "Oh! You don't agree with my interpretation? Well, you are just like most noncharismatics whose initial impulse is to doubt!" That's why Heiser portrays the search for "other possible explanations" as somehow wrong. Should we not always seek other possible explanations? Did not Heiser do this when he read Psalm 82? Did he not seek some other explanations than the explanations given by interpreters and theologians?

Heiser claims that our effort to seek other possible explanations is because "our modern inclination is to insist on evidence."³¹ Of course the inclination to insist on evidence is not a "modern inclination." People have been insisting on evidence since there were claims that people made for which they needed evidence. That's pretty much the history of thought. Again Heiser wants to preclude the effort of the reader to consider other possible explanations and insist on evidence. "Oh! You don't agree with my interpretation? Well, that's just your modern inclination to insist on evidence!" In fact, Heiser appeals to what "Most of us noncharismatics" would think as if this is evidence that we have misunderstood the Bible.

We have already seen that Heiser claims, ". . . but the truth is that our modern evangelical subculture has trained us to think that our theology *precludes* any experience of the unseen world."³² Again Heiser has some remarkable access to everyone in "our modern evangelical subculture" such that he is able to divine how we all have been trained to think. Of course what Heiser is saying is that we have been trained to preclude *his* interpretation of the unseen world, and anyone who precludes *his* interpretation of the unseen world has just been trained to do this. It can't be the case that someone actually has studied and believes that she has a sound basis for precluding Heiser's view. As far as Heiser is concerned, it can only be that she has been trained to preclude. "Oh! You don't agree with my view? That's just because you have been trained to preclude it."

³⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 17.

³¹ *Unseen Realm*, 18.

³² *Unseen Realm*, 18.

Heiser's third obstacle is, "3. *We assume that a lot of things in the Bible are too odd or peripheral to matter.*"³³ Again, I am not aware of anyone who thinks this. Heiser recounts an experience while visiting a local church. The pastor was preaching through 1 Peter, but when he reached the text of 1 Pet. 3:14–22, according to Heiser, the pastor announced, "We're going to skip this section of 1 Peter since it's just too strange."³⁴ As a result of this announcement, Heiser did not visit the church again. So, rather than go to the pastor to ask him about his announcement, Heiser summarily passes judgment on the pastor. There may have been a legitimate reason for the pastor to skip that portion of the text, and the pastor's characterization of the text as "just too strange" may have been an unfortunate blunder on the pastor's part, but Heiser does not bother to find out whether the pastor had a legitimate reason. Heiser simply assumes that his own judgment is absolutely correct, and he assumes that the only reason the pastor would do this is because the pastor thinks that the passage is too odd or peripheral to matter. Again, none of this shows whether Heiser's view of the supernatural realm is correct. It is another a red-herring.

Heiser takes the same approach later in this section: "The odds are very high that you've never heard that Psalm 82 plays a pivotal role in biblical theology (including New Testament theology). I've been a Christian for over thirty years and I've never heard a sermon on it."³⁵ Heiser doesn't consider that perhaps the reason we have never heard that Psalm 82 plays a pivotal role in biblical theology is because no one believes that it does. It is probably beyond our present technology to recover every instance in the history of Judaism and Christianity in which someone taught or preached on Psalm 82. Of the multitude of Jews and Christians who have lived and taught, Heiser's experience is quite minute. That Heiser has never heard a sermon on the topic is not impressive. Also, the fact that Heiser has never heard a sermon on it says nothing about whether his interpretation is correct. And it is illegitimate to condemn an interpretation that you have never heard.

Why Does It Matter?

Heiser believes that it is possible to interpret the text without any filters. One of his publications has the title, *The Bible Unfiltered*. The fact that Heiser appeals to ANE literature as an interpretive grid through which to interpret the Bible shows that he employs filters. He wants to filter out what he believes to be the detrimental or misleading assertions of other scholars. Heiser employs various tactics to filter out any view that is contrary to his own. The biggest obstacles to interpretation, according to Heiser, are that everyone else has been trained or desensitized to hold a view contrary to his own. Before presenting any actual support for his position, Heiser employs fallacious reasoning and red-herring arguments and other fallacies to preclude the reader from questioning his views. He constructs hypothetical scenarios that have nothing to do with his view about the supernatural realm but serve to attempt to "win over the crowd" and create an attitude to preclude any contrary views.

³³ *Unseen Realm*, 18.(Emphasis in original).

³⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 18.

³⁵ *Unseen Realm*, 19.

CHAPTER 8

HEISERIAN HERMENEUTICS: PART 2

Introduction

Part 2 of an examination of Heiser’s hermeneutic method will examine several examples of Heiser’s use of eisegesis. The term ‘eisegesis’ means “to lead into” and refers to the practice of reading into the text one’s own assumptions and presuppositions in order to make the text support one’s view. It is the opposite of ‘exegesis,’ which refers to bringing out of the text what it actually says. It seems remarkable how easily Heiser reads into the text what it does not say, and how often he neglects to deal with aspects of the text that do not agree with his view. The following are only some instances of this practice. No doubt some will cry “out of context!” So I have included with each quote a brief statement about the context from which the quote is taken.

Eisegesis

- 1) “There it was, plain as day: *The God of the Old Testament was part of an assembly—a pantheon—of other gods.*”¹

Context: This quote comes in the first chapter of *Unseen Realm* where Heiser is recounting his “watershed moment” stemming from his re-reading of Psalm 82.

Problem: Nowhere in the text does it say that God was a “part” of an assembly. Nowhere in the text is there any reference to a “pantheon.” The text does not say “other gods.” Heiser is not reading this out of the text. He is imposing his always-already-present view upon the text.

- 2) “The word *elohim* is a ‘place of residence’ term. Our home is the world of embodiment; *elohim* by nature inhabit the spiritual world.”²

Context: This quote comes in chapter 4 of *The Unseen Realm* in the section titled “Divine Beings are Not Human.” He is discussing the use of the word ‘*elohim*’ as it is used in Psalm 82.

Problem 1: Nowhere in the Bible is the word *elohim* used to refer to a place of residence. The standard Hebrew lexicon does not list this as one of the possible uses of the word. In fact, there are undisputed instances in which the word *elohim* is used of human beings, whose “place of residence” is earth. The word *elohim* does not indicate, imply, or specify any place of residence.

Problem 2: Many commentators refer to Exod. 22:8 as an instance in which אֱלֹהִים (*’elōhîm*) refers to human judges. Heiser objects to this: “First, these judges (if אֱלֹהִים, *ha’elohim*; and אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*; are plural and referring to people) give decisions for the nation of Israel—not the nations of

¹ *Unseen Realm*, 11.

² *Unseen Realm*, 29.

the world as is the case in Psa 82 and Deut 32.”³ Heiser’s objection amounts to a rejection of this view because it does not fit his interpretations of Psalm 82 and Deuteronomy 32. Basically, Heiser is saying, “Your interpretation must be wrong because it does not agree with my interpretation.”

- 3) “Eden was *God’s* home on earth. It was his residence.”⁴

Context: This statement occurs in chapter 6 of *Unseen Realm* in which Heiser proposes to discuss Eden to reinforce his notion that there were two household-families of god.

Problem: Nowhere in the text does it say that Eden was God’s home on earth or His residence. Heiser says, “Ancient readers couldn’t miss it.” Of course, ancient readers could not miss it because it wasn’t there to be missed. The ancient readers would have known better. Also, how does Heiser know that ancient readers could not have missed it? It is important that Heiser does not refer to any ancient reader.

- 4) “Adam and Eve lived in the garden.”⁵

Context: This statement occurs in Heiser’s discussion that Eden was not coextensive with earth.

Problem: Nowhere does the text say that Adam and Eve lived in the garden. The garden was not coextensive with Eden any more than Eden was coextensive with earth. The text states, “YHWH God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden [בְּעֵדֶן, *bē‘ēden*]; and there He placed the man whom He had formed” (Gen. 2:8).⁶ The garden was a place *in* Eden. In fact, Gen. 2:8 does not say that God placed the man in the garden. The text states that God planted a garden in Eden, and there, in Eden, he placed the man. In Gen. 2:15 the text states, “Then YHWH God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.”⁷ If Adam and Eve lived in the garden, why would it be necessary to take the man and put him into the garden? Heiser simply ignores the text in order to make it support his view.

- 5) “The council debated the matter until one of the spiritual beings came forward with a proposition (1 Kgs. 22:21–22).”⁸

Context: This statement comes as a comment on the 1 Kings passage.

Problem: Nowhere in the text does it say “the council debated the matter.” The text simply states, “And one said this while another said that” (1 Kgs. 22:20).⁹ There is no sense here of “debating” the matter. God said, “Who will entice Ahab,” and one being said this and another said that. The word translated “said” (וַיֹּאמֶר, *wayyōmer*) is the same word used with reference to the beings and to God. Are we to suppose that God “debated”? Did God debate who will entice Ahab? Again Heiser reads into the text that there was some debate, but the text says nothing of the sort.

³ Michael S. Heiser, “Divine Council,” *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry, et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), s.v. “Divine Council.”

⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 44.

⁵ *Unseen Realm*, 51.

⁶

(Gen. 2:8) וַיִּטַע יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים גֶּן-בְּעֵדֶן מִקְדָּם וַיִּשֶׂם שָׁם אֶת-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצָר:

⁷

(Gen. 2:15) וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגִן-עֵדֶן לַעֲבֹדָה וּלְשִׁמְרָה:

⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 53.

⁹

(1 Kgs. 22:20) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה מִי יִפְתֶּה אֶת-אֲחָאָב וַיִּפֹּל בְּרִמְתָּ גִלְעָד וַיֹּאמֶר זֶה בָּכָה וְזֶה אָמַר בָּכָה:

- 6) “Eden was both the divine abode and the nerve center for God’s plan for Earth.”¹⁰

Context: This statement occurs at the beginning of chapter 8 which is a treatment of the fall.

Problem: Nowhere in the text of the Bible do we find any statement that Eden was either God’s “divine abode” or “the nerve center.” This is simply a fabrication constructed to support his interpretation.

- 7) “I use the phrase ‘the *satan*’ deliberately. The Hebrew (*satan*) means something like ‘adversary,’ ‘prosecutor,’ or ‘challenger.’ It speaks of an official legal function within a ruling body—in this case, Yahweh’s council. When Yahweh asks the *satan* where he has been, we learn that his job involves investigating what is happening on earth (Job 1:7). He is, so to speak, Yahweh’s eyes and ears on the ground, reporting what he has seen and heard.”¹¹

Context: This passage is in the context of the discussion of “The Backdrop” of the fall.

Problem: Nowhere in the Bible is it said that “the Satan” is “Yahweh’s eyes and ears on the ground, reporting what he has seen and heard.” If the Satan is the adversary, prosecutor, or challenger, then how does this make him God’s “eyes and ears”? In another place Heiser asserts, “Israelite council talk includes all spiritual beings loyal to Yahweh.”¹² But the Satan is not “loyal to Yahweh,” so how can he be part of God’s council?

- 8) “Eden was his abode; he was accompanied by a supernatural host; one member of that divine entourage was not pleased by God’s decisions to create humanity and give them dominion.”¹³

Context: This statement occurs in a discussion of the context of Genesis 3.

Problem: Nowhere in Scripture is there any statement that one member of the supposed divine entourage was not pleased by God’s decisions to create humanity and give them dominion.

- 9) “The chapter [Ezekiel 28] begins with God chastising the prince of Tyre (Ezek 28:1–8). God accuses this prince of extraordinary arrogance. In verse 2 the prince considers himself a god (*el*), who sits in the seat of the gods (*moshab elohim*), a term associated with the divine council.”¹⁴

Context: This passage occurs in a discussion of Ezekiel 28.

Problem: The last expression in Ezek. 28:6 is כְּלֵב אֱלֹהִים (*kēlēb ’ēlōhîm*). The same word אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) is used here that is used earlier in verse 2 that Heiser translates “gods”: “Son of man, say to the leader of Tyre, ‘Thus says the Lord YHWH, because your heart is lifted up and you have said, ‘I am a אֵל [*’ēl*], I sit in the seat of אֱלֹהִים [*’ēlōhîm*] in the heart of the seas’; Yet you are a man and not אֵל [*’ēl*], although you make your heart like the heart of אֱלֹהִים [*’ēlōhîm*].”

¹⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 56.

¹¹ *Unseen Realm*, 56–57.

¹² Michael S. Heiser, “The Divine Council in the Pentateuch” (Conference Paper, Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, 2017), n.p.

¹³ *Unseen Realm*, 74.

¹⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 75–76.

(Ezek. 28:2).¹⁵ Now, should we understand this as “heart of gods,” since there is no definite article before אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*)? Heiser argues, “God proceeds to acknowledge the great intelligence of this prince, but reminds him that he is no god, and certainly not the Most High (Ezek. 28:2–6).”¹⁶ Nowhere in verses 2–6 does the text say that the prince of Tyer is not “the Most High.” Verse six says, “Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH, ‘Because you have made your heart like the heart of God.’”¹⁷ Notice the final phrase of verse 6: כְּלֵב אֱלֹהִים (*kēlēb ’ēlōhîm*, “like the heart of God”). This is exactly the same phrase at the end of verse 2. So, if these two phrases are referring to the Most High God, then both instances of the word אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) should be taken as “God” not “gods.” But if both of these should be taken as a references to the Most High God, then why should we take the same word in verse 2, “the seat of אֱלֹהִים [*’ēlōhîm*],” as “gods” and not “God.” Heiser simply renders the text in such a way that it appears to support his view. This is, frankly, not honest.

- 10) “Many scholars argue that the Edenic figure in view [in Ezekiel 28] is Adam. That perspective is workable with parts of the description, but not all of them. The more coherent alternative is the serpent—more pointedly, a divine being who has forgotten his place in the pecking order.”¹⁸

Context: This passages is from the further discussion of Ezekiel 28 and is an argument against the interpretation that the individual referred to is Adam.

Problem: Heiser gives his translation of Ezek. 28:14–17, but he translates some aspects of the text so as not to reflect the actual Hebrew text. First he translates verse 14: “You were an anointed guardian cherub, and I placed you on God’s holy mountain; you walked in the midst of stones of fire.”¹⁹ The text actually says “You were the anointed cherub who covers, and I placed you there. You were on the holy mountain of God; you walked in the midst of the stones of fire” (Ezek. 28:14).²⁰ First, there is no word in the text corresponding to the word ‘guardian’ that Heiser includes. The expression is simply כְּרוּב מְמַשֵּׁחַ (*kerûb mimšah* “anointed cherub”). In fact, there is no place in the OT that refers to a “guardian cherub.” In another place Heiser uses an analogy concerning “guardians”:

Perhaps a modern analogy of government in the United States will help make the point. We can speak of the federal legislature, by which we mean that branch of government responsible for passing laws. The term “Congress” is a synonym. However, our Congress has two parts: the Senate and the House. Decision-making members of these two bodies, and hence the Congress, are elected. The two houses of Congress both have “guardian officers” (e.g., the Sergeant at Arms) and other support staff who are appointed, not elected. Though they have no decision-making power, they are nevertheless part of “Congress” in certain contexts where

¹⁵ בְּ-אֲדָם אָמַר לְנִגִּיד צֹר כַּה־אָמַר אֲדָנִי יְהוָה יֵעַן נִבְּחָה לְבָד וְתֹאמַר אֵל אֲנִי מוֹשֵׁב אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁבְּתִי בְּלֵב יָמִים וְאַתָּה אָדָם וְלֹא-אֵל וְתָתֵן לְבָד כְּלֵב אֱלֹהִים: (Ezek. 28:2)

¹⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 77.

¹⁷ לָכֵן כַּה־אָמַר אֲדָנִי יְהוָה יֵעַן תִּתֶּן אֶת-לִבְּךָ כְּלֵב אֱלֹהִים: (Ezek. 28:6)

¹⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 77.

¹⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 78.

²⁰ אֶת-כְּרוּב מְמַשֵּׁחַ הַסּוֹכֵךְ וְנִתְחַדֵּךְ בְּהָר קֹדֶשׁ אֱלֹהִים הָיִיתָ בְּתוֹךְ אֲבִנֵי-אֵשׁ הַתְּהַלֵּכֶת: (Ezek. 28:14)

that term is used. For instance, when we say “Congress is in session” we don’t mean that everyone who isn’t elected gets the day off. They have roles to play. “Congress” can therefore refer to only those elected officials who make laws, or can refer to the entire bureaucratic apparatus of the federal legislature. So, I’m a big tent guy when it comes to the divine council.²¹

Heiser does not provide any instances in which “Congress” is used “in certain contexts” to include the non-elected “guardian officers.” All officers are elected to their positions by the elected members of Congress. According to OED, a guardian is, “One who guards, protects, or preserves; a keeper, defender; ‘one to whom the care and preservation of any thing is committed.’”²² It is characteristic of Heiser’s method to make claims that he does not support with any evidence.

He goes on to argue against the notion that “the Edenic figure” was Adam: “Was Adam an ‘anointed guardian cherub’? Where do we read in Genesis 3 that Adam was filled with violence, or that his sin was propelled by the fact he was egotistically enamored of his own beauty and splendor? When was Adam cast to the ground to be exposed before kings (v. 17)?”²³ But the same questions can be asked of Heiser’s view that the “Edenic figure” is “the serpent.” Where in any part of the Bible is the serpent of Genesis 3 referred to as a cherub? Someone will say that perhaps Ezekiel 28 is the one place. However, nowhere in Ezekiel 28 is there a reference to the serpent. An additional problem is that the text states, “⁴By your wisdom and understanding you have acquired riches for yourself and have acquired gold and silver for your treasuries. ⁵By your great wisdom, by your trade you have increased your riches and your heart is lifted up because of your riches—” (Ezek. 28:4–5).²⁴ Are we to believe that the serpent was a tradesman and that he accumulated riches? Why would a “guardian cherub” accumulate gold and silver? Of course some will say, “Those verses come in the section that is about the leader of Tyre, who was merely a human being. It is the king of Tyre beginning in verse 12 that refers to the guardian cherub.” The problem with this retort is that in the section about the king of Tyre that is supposed to be about the serpent, verse 16 refers to his “trade”: “By the abundance of your trade you were internally filled with violence, and you sinned; Therefore I have cast you as profane from the mountain of God. And I have destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire” (Ezek. 28:16).²⁵ Verse 18 also refers to trade: “By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries. Therefore I have brought fire from the midst of you; It has consumed you, and I have turned you to ashes on the earth in the eyes of all who see you” (Ezek. 28:18).²⁶ Where do we read in Ezekiel or any part of Scripture that the serpent is said to be involved in trade?

Verse 16 says, וְאַבְדָּךָ (wāʾabbedkā, “I have destroyed you”). This word has a prefixed conjunction and a 2nd person, pronominal suffix. It is the 1st person, Piel verb אָבַד (ʾbd). According

²¹ Heiser, “The Divine Council in the Pentateuch.”

²² OED, s.v. “guardian.”

²³ *Unseen Realm*, 78.

²⁴ בְּחִכְמָתְךָ וּבְתְבוּנָתְךָ עָשִׂיתָ לָךְ חֵיל וַתִּשָּׂא זָהָב וְכֶסֶף בְּאַיֲצְרוּתְךָ: ⁵ בָּרַב חִכְמָתְךָ בִּרְכֻלָּתְךָ הִרְבִּיתָ חֵילְךָ וַיִּגְבַּהּ לְבָבְךָ בְּחֵילְךָ: (Ezek. 28:4–5)

²⁵ בָּרַב רְכֻלָּתְךָ מָלֵךְ תֹּכֶךְ חָמָס וַחֲטָא וְאַחֲלִלְךָ מִהָר אֱלֹהִים וְאַבְדָּךָ כְּרוֹב הַסֹּכֶךְ מִתּוֹךְ אַבְנֵי־אֵשׁ: (Ezek. 28:16)

²⁶ מִרַב עֲוֹנוֹיְךָ בַּעֲוֹל רְכֻלָּתְךָ חֲלַלְתָּ מִקְדָּשֶׁיךָ וְאַיֲצֵא־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹכְךָ חַיָּא אֲכַלְתָּךָ וְאַתָּנֶךְ לְאַפָּר עַל־הָאָרֶץ לְעֵינַי כָּל־רֹאֲיֶיךָ: (Ezek. 28:18)

to HAL, the Piel form of this verb means “to cause to perish” or “destroy.”²⁷ Where do we read in Ezekiel, or anywhere else in Scripture, that the serpent was destroyed? Verse 18 says God consumed him and turned him to ashes on the earth in the eyes of all who see him. Where do we read in Ezekiel, or anywhere else in Scripture, that the serpent was consumed by God and turned into ashes? If the serpent was consumed and turned to ashes, how is that he tested Jesus in the wilderness, or deceived the whole world? Heiser’s effort to turn this passage into a reference to the serpent in order to support his view simply cannot be supported by the text of Scripture.

- 11) “But *n-ch-sh* are also the consonants of a verb. If we changed the vowels to a verbal form (recall that Hebrew originally had no vowels), we would have *nochesh*, which means ‘the diviner.’”²⁸

Context: This passage occurs in the discussion of the *nachash* of Genesis 3.

Problem 1: It is simply false that Hebrew originally had no vowels. Every language has vowels, whether written or only oral, else the language could not be spoken. Modern Hebrew, like ancient Hebrew, does not have written marks that represent the vowel sounds, but it nevertheless has vowels. Vowels need not be represented by marks on a page in order to be present. Vowels are one of the two primary classifications of speech sounds, the other being consonants. Without both, there is no language.²⁹ Heiser’s claim is both misleading and false.

Problem 2: It is important that Heiser gives no source for *nochesh*, nor does he give a single instance of the use of *nochesh* in the OT. That is because no such word occurs in the OT, and no such word is listed in HAL. Even if such a word exists in some language somewhere, changing the vowels changes the word. Consider, for example, the letters and change of vowels in Table #8, and how these changes change the meanings of the words.

Table #8: Changing Vowels

Word		Consonants	Form	Meaning
נָחַשׁ	<i>niḥēš</i>	<i>nchsh</i>	Piel Verb	Seek or Give Omens
נָחָשׁ	<i>nāḥāš</i>	<i>nchsh</i>	Noun	Serpent, Snake
נֶחָשׁ	<i>naḥaš</i>	<i>nchsh</i>	Noun	Magic Curse, Omen
נְחֹשֶׁת	<i>nāḥûš</i>	<i>nchsh</i>	Noun	Bronze
bird		<i>brd</i>	Noun	Fowel
bread		<i>brd</i>	Noun	Food
beard		<i>brd</i>	Noun	Facial Hair

²⁷ HAL, s.v. “אָבַד.”

²⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 87.

²⁹ See for example, Morris Halle, “Phonological Features,” in *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, 2d ed. ed. William J. Frawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.314–20.

Word		Consonants	Form	Meaning
board		<i>brd</i>	Noun	Lumber
bored		<i>brd</i>	Adjective	Wearied by sameness

- 12) “The serpent (*nachash*) was an image commonly used in reference to a divine throne guardian.”³⁰

Context: This statement occurs in the same context as the previous citation.

Problem: Heiser does not provide any references where the Scripture identifies the serpent (*nachash*) as a “divine throne guardian.” In a footnote, Heiser does reference two sources he takes as support for his view. The first, is Alice Wood, *Of Wings and Wheels: A Synthetic Study of the Biblical Cherubim* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008). Michael Hundley’s review of Wood’s book is largely favorable, but he does point out problems:

Wood occasionally makes general claims without supporting evidence (e.g., on p. 39 she makes an unsupported statement about the presence of lion figures at gateways). In addition, although her translations of the cherubim formula are indeed likely, she too quickly dismisses the alternate approaches, especially the traditional approach—which resembles her primary proposal, since “dweller of the cherubim” seems to be simply a more literal way of saying “he who dwells with the cherubim.” Her proposal in Part II that the šedu and lamassu are anthropomorphically presented, in response to Dhorme’s identification of these figures with winged bulls, is problematic. While often presented anthropomorphically in an intercessory capacity, the šedu and lamassu are also presented in mixed forms as door guardians in Neo-Assyrian palaces and temples.³¹

Wood does the same thing in her book as Heiser does in his; make unsupported claims. Heiser simply assumes that Wood’s interpretations are correct.

The second reference from Heiser is, Bernard E. Batto, *In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Motifs in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2013). Heiser specifically references Batto’s claims on page 47. That material is given here:

The “serpent,” a semidivine creature with wings and feet like the seraphs of Isa 6:2, whose function was to guard sacred persons and sacred objects such as the tree of divine wisdom, recognized the fallacy in the deity’s words and advised the man and the woman that wisdom does not bring death but instead a godlike condition. Desiring to be “like gods,” the man and the woman partook of the forbidden fruit. The deleterious consequences were immediate—though not instant death, as the serpent had correctly foretold. The deity expelled the man and the woman from the garden of God, apparently in an attempt to prevent

³⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 88.

³¹ Michael Hundley, “Review of Wood, Alice, *Of Wings and Wheels: A Synthetic Study of the Biblical Cherubim*,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, Vol. 12 (2012). <https://jhsonline.org/index.php/jhs/article/view/18412>. Accessed 6/1/2024.

humankind from usurping further divine prerogatives (i.e., immortality, by eating of the tree of life), since the deity's action was consequent upon discovering that the man and the woman had indeed “become like one of us (gods)”! In further acknowledgment that the creator's plan had gone awry, he declared that the original natural bond between humankind and the humus had been strained to the breaking point and that henceforth the ground would be “cursed” because of humankind and would yield its produce only with great difficulty (Gen 3:17–19).³²

It might be reasonable to infer that the serpent had feet, since part of the curse upon the serpent is that it will go on its belly. But there is no indication anywhere in Scripture that the *nachash* had wings. Nor does the Scripture anywhere claim or imply that the serpent's function was to guard sacred persons and sacred objects such as the tree of divine wisdom. Also, Batto claims that there is a fallacy in God's words. Nor is the tree ever referred to as the “tree of divine wisdom.” Batto does the same thing Heiser does, namely, reading into the text what he needs it to say to fit his view. Batto also does not understand the consequences upon Adam and Eve because of their actions. He says, “tough not instant death, as the serpent had correctly foretold.” Batto does not even understand the Scriptures. Death was in fact instant. It was a spiritual death of separation from God. The serpent said they would not die, but they did die immediately and ultimately. The serpent was wrong. Are we to believe that the plan of the Sovereign God “had gone awry”? Since Batto does not understand either the Scripture or the power of God, why should anyone accept his claims about the serpent? Since the serpent acted against God's command that He had given to Adam and Eve, how could he be characterized as a divine throne guardian? Heiser's claim is both unsupported and contrary to the biblical text.

- 13) **The Deuteronomy 32 Worldview.** Because of the Deuteronomy 32 worldview, *geography in the Bible is cosmic*. Ground is either holy, meaning dedicated to Yahweh, or it is the domain of another god. This worldview is reflected in many places in the Bible. For instance, in the Old Testament the book of Daniel refers to foreign nations being ruled by divine “princes” (Dan. 10:13, 20–21). Another example: When David was running from King Saul, he was forced out of Israel into Philistine territory. In 1 Samuel 26:19, David cried, “They have driven me out from the LORD's land to a country where I can only worship foreign gods” (GNT). David wasn't switching gods. He also wasn't denying that God was present everywhere. But Israel was holy ground, the place that belonged to the true God. David was stuck in the domain of another god.³³

Context: This passage is in the chapter of Cosmic Geography.

Problem: Consider the translation that Heiser provides in comparison to what the text actually says: Heiser's translation: “They have driven me out from the LORD's land to a country where I can only worship foreign gods” (see **Figure 8** below).

There is no Hebrew word corresponding to the word ‘land.’ There is no Hebrew word corresponding to the word ‘country.’ There is no statement in the biblical text corresponding to

³² Bernard E. Batto, *In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Motifs in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 47.

³³ *Supernatural*, 52.

“where I can only worship foreign gods.” Heiser notes that the text he gives is from the GNT. This is the *Good News Translation in Today’s English Version*—Second Edition. The *Good News Translation* is known for taking liberties with the text. It is comparable to a paraphrase. It is not strictly a translation, as is apparent from the rendering of this verse. We have already seen that Heiser says he knows his Hebrew grammar. Why did he not translate the passage himself? If he gave an actual translation of the text it would not say what he needed it to say. Not only is the rendering inaccurate. It does not support the claim that this indicates a worldview. This is, frankly, not honest.

Figure 8: 1 Sam. 26:19

Read from Right to Left					
כִּי	גִּרְשׁוּנִי	הַיּוֹם	מִהַסְתַּפַּח	בְּנַחֲלַת	יְהוָה
For	they have driven me	today	from attachment of	the inheritance of	YHWH
לֵאמֹר	לֵךְ	עֲבַד	אֱלֹהִים	אֲחֵרִים:	
to say	go	serve	gods	other.	

Concerning the claim, “the Old Testament the book of Daniel refers to foreign nations being ruled by divine ‘princes’ (Dan. 10:13, 20–21),” the text says nothing of the kind.

“But the prince of the kingdom of Persia was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia” (Dan. 10:13).³⁴

²⁰ Then he said, “Do you understand why I came to you? But I shall now return to fight against the prince of Persia; so I am going forth, and behold, the prince of Greece is about to come. ²¹ However, I will tell you what is inscribed in the writing of truth. Yet there is no one who stands firmly with me against these forces except Michael your prince (Dan. 10:20–21).³⁵

The one speaking to Daniel referred to the prince (שָׂר, *śar*) of Persia, v. 13 and 20, and in verse 20 to the prince (שָׂר, *śar*) of Greece. The word translated “prince” has several possible uses. However, according to HAL, there is no instance in which this word indicates a ruler.³⁶ Princes were not rulers. They were functionaries who served the king. Michael is also referred to as a prince (שָׂרְכֶם, *śarkem*, “your prince”). Michael did not “rule” over Daniel’s people. Rather, like other princes, he served the King. Heiser must read into this word a meaning that serves his purpose.

³⁴ וְשָׂר מַלְכוּת פָּרַס עֹמֵד לְנִגְדִי עֲשָׂרִים וְאַחַד יוֹם וְהִנֵּה מִיכָאֵל אֶחָד הַשָּׂרִים הָרָאשִׁים בָּא לְעֹזְרִנִּי וְאָנֹכִי נֹתַרְתִּי שָׁם אֵצֶל מַלְכֵי פָּרַס: (Dan. 10:13)

²⁰ וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּדְעָתָּ לְמַדְבָּאתִי אֵלַיִךְ וְעַתָּה אָשׁוּב לְהִלָּחֵם עִם־שָׂר פָּרַס וְאָנֹכִי יוֹצֵא וְהִנֵּה שָׂר־יָוָן בָּא: ²¹ אָבֵל אֲנִיד לֵךְ אֶת־הַרְשׁוֹם בְּכֶתֶב אֱמֶת וְאֵין אֶחָד מִתְחַזֵּק עִמִּי עַל־אֱלֹהָ כִּי אִם־מִיכָאֵל שָׂרְכֶם: (Dan. 10:20–21)

³⁶ HAL, s.v. “שָׂר.”

Additionally, because the text refers to three princes, it goes beyond the statements of the text to claim that “foreign nations being ruled by divine ‘princes.’” Additionally, there is no statement in the text that the princes were “divine.”

- 14) “In fact, the authors of the Hebrew Bible (along with other ancient Near Eastern cultures) considered the disembodied human dead to be divine beings (see the use of *elohim* in 1 Sam 28:13), and represented those ‘gods’ (*elohim*)—the family’s ancestors.”³⁷

Context: This text occurs in a discussion about Exod. 21:1–6.

Problem: Where in the Bible is it taught that the authors considered disembodied human dead to be divine beings? The 1 Samuel passage recounts the calling up of a spirit for king Saul: “¹³The king said to her, ‘Do not be afraid; but what do you see?’ And the woman said to Saul, ‘I see *elohim* coming up out of the earth.’ ¹⁴He said to her, ‘What is his form?’ And she said, ‘An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped with a robe.’ And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and did homage” (1 Sam. 28:13–14).³⁸ The text states that the woman said she saw אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) coming up. Of course the subject אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) is plural, and the word translated “coming up” is (עָלִים, *’ōlîm*) is a plural verb. Heiser takes this as referring to “gods.” However, Saul asks the woman, מַה־תַּאֲרֹ (mah tā ’ērô), “what his form?” The word translated “his form” is a singular noun with a singular suffix. Saul does not ask, “What are their forms.” Saul’s question concerns a single being, not many beings. Also, the text makes clear that the woman saw a single being, not many beings. When Saul asks her to describe what she saw, she responded, “An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped with a robe.” The *elohim* had the appearance of a single old man, not many beings. When the woman gave Saul the description, the text points out, “And Saul knew that he was Samuel” וַיַּדַּע שָׁאוּל כִּי־שְׁמוּאֵל הוּא (wayyēda’ Sā’ûl kî Sēmû’el hû’), (1 Sam. 28:14). The text did not say that Saul knew *they* were Samuel, but the “he” (הוּא, *hû*), a singular personal pronoun, was Samuel. Here we have the plural form אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) with a plural verb עָלִים (*’ōlîm*) referring to a single human being, Samuel. The verb is plural in this instance because the subject is plural. It is not a reference to many “divine beings.” Heiser simply misinterprets and misrepresents the text.

- 15) “Although it is much less familiar than the burning bush episode, Exod 23:20–23 is the most crucial passage in the Old Testament for understanding the identity of the Angel of Yahweh: . . . This Angel has the authority to pardon or withhold pardon for sins, something only God can do.”³⁹

Context: This passage occurs in the chapter on the Angel of YHWH. The following translation is from the NASB:

³⁷ *Unfiltered*, 65.

³⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־תִּירָאִי כִּי מָה רָאִית וְהָאִמֶּר הָאִשָּׁה אֶל־שָׁאוּל אֱלֹהִים רָאִיתִי עָלִים מִן־הָאָרֶץ: ¹⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה־תַּאֲרֹ וְהָאִמֶּר אִישׁ זָקֵן עָלָהּ וְהוּא עֹטָה מְעִיל וַיַּדַּע שָׁאוּל כִּי־שְׁמוּאֵל הוּא וַיִּקְדֹּר אַפִּים אֶרְצָהּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ: (1 Sam. 28:13–14)

³⁹ *Unfiltered*, 68–69.

²⁰ Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. ²¹ Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him. ²² But if you truly obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. ²³ For My angel will go before you and bring you in to the land of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will completely destroy them (Exod. 23:20–23).⁴⁰

Problem 1: The expression “angel of YHWH” is not used in the passage. In fact, there is only one instance in Exodus that refers to the “angel of YHWH,” and that is in Exod. 3:2 where, in the burning bush, the angel of YHWH appears to Moses. The expression מַלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים (*mal’ak ’ēlōhîm*, “the angel of the God”) occurs in Exod. 14:19. The angel in Exodus 23 is not referred to as the “angel of YHWH.”

Problem 2: Heiser jumps to his conclusion because he thinks forgiving sins is something “only God can do.” One wonders if he has ever actually read the Gospel of John. Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, “If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained” (Jn. 20:23).⁴¹ Obviously, anyone to whom God has granted this authority has the authority to forgive sins. So, the fact that God grants this angel authority to pardon transgressions does not make this angel the Angel of YHWH. God gave to this angel the authority to pardon their transgressions.

Problem 3: Heiser assumes, without argument or evidence, that the statement “My name is in him” (שְׁמִי בְקִרְבּוֹ, *šēmî bēqirbô*) necessarily makes this angel interchangeable with YHWH. Since this is the only place in the OT where this exact expression is used, it is more than a leap to conclude that this is the Angel of YHWH on the basis of this one expression. In fact, a similar expression is used in 2 Chronicles: “He built altars in the house of YHWH of which YHWH had said, ‘My name shall be in Jerusalem בִּירוּשָׁלַם יְהוָה-שְׁמִי, *birūsālaîm yihyeh ššēmî*] forever” (2 Chron. 33:4).⁴² Are we to think that Jerusalem is the Angel of YHWH because it uses this expression?

16) “Does Deuteronomy 32.17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?”⁴³

Context: This paper was published by Logos. Heiser addresses the question stated. He juxtaposes several English translations of the verse to show their differences:

ESV “They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known”

RSV “They sacrificed to demons which were no gods, to gods they had never known”

NJPS “They sacrificed to demons, no-gods, Gods they had never known”

⁴⁰ הִנֵּה אֲנִי שֹׁלֵחַ מַלְאָךְ לְפָנֶיךָ לְשָׁמְרְךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וְלְהַבְיֹאֵךְ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הִכְנֵתִי: ²¹ הִשָּׁמֶר מִפָּנָיו וּשְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי אֶל-תִּמְרָם בּוֹ כִּי לֹא יֵשֵׁא לְפָשַׁעְכֶם כִּי שְׁמִי בְקִרְבּוֹ: ²² כִּי אִם-שְׁמַע תִּשְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי וַעֲשִׂיתָ כָּל אֲשֶׁר אֶדְבַּר וְאֵיבֹתִי אֶת-אֵיבֶיךָ וְצָרְתִּי אֶת-צָרְךָ: ²³ כִּי-יֵלֵךְ מִלְּאֲכִי לְפָנֶיךָ וְהַבְיֹאֵךְ אֶל-הָאֲמֹרִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִיטִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי וְהַיְבוּסִי: (Exod. 23:20–23)

⁴¹ ἄν τινων ἀφῆτε τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἀφέωνται αὐτοῖς· ἄν τινων κρατῆτε κεκράτηνται (Jn. 20:23).

⁴² וּבָנָה מִזְבְּחוֹת בְּבֵית יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יְהוָה בִּירוּשָׁלַם יְהוָה-שְׁמִי לְעוֹלָם: (2 Chron. 33:4)

⁴³ Michael S. Heiser, “Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?” *Bible Translator* 59.3 (2008): 137–45.

KJV “They sacrificed unto devils, not to God; to gods whom they knew not”

NIV “They sacrificed to demons, which are not God— gods they had not known”

NASB “They sacrificed to demons who were not God, To gods whom they have not known”

NRSV “They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known”⁴⁴

The Hebrew text with a word for word translation is set out below:

Table #9: Deut. 32:17

יָדְעוּם	לֹא	אֱלֹהִים	אֱלֹהֶ	לֹא	לְשָׂדִים	יִזְבְּחוּ
they knew them	not	gods	God	not	to demons	The sacrificed
	אֲבֹתֵיכֶם:	שָׁעָרוּם	לֹא	בָּאוּ	מִקָּרִב	חֲדָשִׁים
	your fathers.	respected	not	they came	from recent	new

Heiser begins his analysis:

The first three translations render אֱלֹהֶ as plural (“gods”), while the other four opt for a singular translation. It is not difficult to see that the translators that have אֱלֹהֶ as a plural (ESV, RSV, NJPS) produced a translation that denies the deity status of the שָׂדִים (“demons”). Such translations, however, are forced to juxtapose this denial with the next clause, אֱלֹהִים לֹא יָדְעוּם (“gods which they did not know”), which appears to contradict this denial. How can the demons be gods and not gods in the same verse? The other translations, which take אֱלֹהֶ as singular, do not suffer this tension. In this option, the translation would be something akin to NASB (“They sacrificed to demons who were not God, to gods whom they have not known . . .”) or the NRSV (“They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known . . .”).⁴⁵

Problem: Almost immediately Heiser has imposed his prior assumptions on the text. He argues that those translations that use the plural, “gods,” for אֱלֹהֶ (*’lh*) “are forced to juxtapose this denial with the text clause,” which Heiser translates, “gods which they did not know.” Without justification or explanation, Heiser translates the word אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) as a plural, “gods.” There are many instances in the Hebrew Bible in which אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) must be translated as a singular noun. Even Heiser recognizes this. Genesis 2:4 uses the two names together, יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים (*Yēhwāh ’ēlōhîm*). Here, אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) must be taken as a singular noun. In fact, אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) occurs in Deut. 32:3 and must be taken as a singular referring to the God of Israel: “For the name of YHWH I proclaim, attribute greatness to our God.” כִּי שֵׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא הָבוּ גִדְל לְאֱלֹהֵינוּ: The final word in this verse is a compound form. It is the construct form of אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) with a 1st person plural

⁴⁴ Heiser, “Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?” 137.

⁴⁵ Heiser, “Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?” 137–38.

pronominal suffix נִי (*nû*). Since the word must be taken to refer to the God of Israel in the same passage Heiser is discussing, and therefore must be singular, why does Heiser translate אֱלֹהִים (*ʾēlōhîm*) in verse 17 as plural? It cannot be simply because of the word אֱלֹהִים (*ʾēlōhîm*). It can only be because of Heiser's prior assumption that this must be taken as a plural. Of course, the same argument applies to those who would take it as a singular. The point is, it is not simply a matter of translation. It is a matter of prior assumptions, and yet Heiser presents this as simply a matter of translation without justifying his position. Frankly, this is not honest.

The next paragraph shows more clearly the imposition of Heiser's assumption upon the text:

A singular translation [of אֱלֹהִים (*ʾlh*)] makes it clear that Israel committed apostasy, but implies that the gods to whom the Israelites sacrificed were real but inferior to the God of Israel. The singular choice identifies the gods as demons (and vice versa); the demon-gods must be conceived of as actual entities, since it is obvious that the biblical worldview included demons. That the text calls these gods demons does not soften the theological implications, since demons (שְׂדִים) were widely conceived of as deities in the wider Semitic culture of the biblical world. For example, in the Deir 'Alla texts from Jordan, the Shaddayin are explicitly called אֱלֹהִין ("gods").⁴⁶

Heiser argues that a singular translation "implies that the gods to whom the Israelites sacrificed were real but inferior to the God of Israel." This inference does not derive from the text. There is no statement in the text that the "gods" were real but inferior to God. Because Heiser already assumes the existence of "other gods," he reads into the text his prior assumption, and then claims that it is implied from the text. This is, frankly, not honest.

Why Does It Matter?

Some may argue that these instances of eisegesis may be isolated and therefore do not indicate an overall tendency nor impact Heiser's ultimate claims about the supernatural realm. The problem with this kind of objection is that these are only a few of the instances in which Heiser reads into the text what he wants it to say. Some of the instances are blatant attempts to make the text say what he needs it to say. These are not isolated instances. There are many more instances in which Heiser imposes his prior assumptions on the biblical text in order to make it coincide with his view. These instances reveal a general tendency in dealing with the text. In fact, Heiser's tactic of eisegesis involves his interpretation of ANE mythology which he imposes on the text as an interpretative grid. These instances expose a pattern of eisegesis and should alert the reader not to take Heiser's interpretations as valid without doing the necessary analyses. Heiser's use of eisegesis is, frankly, not honest.

⁴⁶ Heiser, "Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?" 138.

CHAPTER 9

HEISERIAN HERMENEUTICS: PART 3

Introduction

Heiser's practice of eisegesis is not the only concern that the reader should have about his interpretations, although they do reveal an attempt to manipulate his readers. Part 3 of Heiserian Hermeneutics will consider some of the logical and other fallacies employed by Heiser in his interpretations of the text.

Poisoning the Well

William Paley once wrote, "The infidelity of the gentile world, and that more especially of men of rank and learning in it, is resolvable into a principle, which, in my judgment, will account for the inefficacy of any argument or any evidence whatever, viz. contempt prior to examination."¹ Poisoning the well is an informal logical fallacy by which the poisoner will preemptively present adverse information about a target in order to discredit or ridicule something that the target says. It is designed to influence the audience against the views of the target before considering the claims of the target, and is usually used in order to avoid having the deal with contrary claims. We have already come across Heiser's use of poisoning the well.

Heiser begins chapter 2 in *Unfiltered* with the challenge, "Do you really believe what the Bible says?"² So, if the reader does not accept his interpretation of the text, the reader is guilty of not really believing what the Bible says. With this starting challenge, Heiser presents his characterization of the text of 1 Kgs. 22:19–23. After giving a translation, Heiser says, "Did you catch what the Bible's asking you to believe? That God meets with a group of spirit beings to decide what happens on earth? Is that for real?"³ Without any evidence of argument, Heiser prejudices the reader to take these verses as some kind of decision making process by God and the host of heaven. Besides the fact that this statement denies God's sovereignty and immutability, it sounds like the very kind of approach of the old fundamentalists who said, "If you don't believe us, you're going to hell!" If you don't believe Heiser, you don't believe the Bible.

Another example is his declaration about the interpretation of Gen. 6:1–4:

¹ William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (Dublin: John Pasley, 1794), III.4.584.

² *Unfiltered*, 11.

³ *Unfiltered*, 12

There have been many attempts to strip this passage of its supernatural elements in order to make it palatable to modern Bible students. Since this sort of material has been my academic focus for the past 15 years, I can tell you that all such attempts have significant flaws of exegesis and logical coherence. But the greatest flaw is that any view that humanizes the sons of God and denies the unusual nature of the Nephilim invariably violates the passage's original context and polemic meaning.⁴

Before providing any evidence, Heiser has disqualified all other interpretations by vilifying them as those who strip the passage of its "supernatural elements." Heiser has depicted all competent scholars who interpret the passage differently as incompetents who only try to make the text palatable to modern Bible students. Anyone who interprets the passage in contrast to Heiser's view is automatically disqualified as a flawed exegete who is logically incoherent. This is, frankly, not honest.

Selective Reporting

Selective reporting is when a person presents only the information that supports a point of view, opinion, or interpretation, choosing not to report information that may be contrary to the point of view, opinion, or interpretation. A classic example is the report by a Soviet newspaper concerning the results of an Olympic contest. The headline read, "Britain Finishes First, Soviet Union Finishes Third, USA Finishes Next to Last." What the paper did not report is that there were only three contestants: 1st Britain, 2nd USA, 3rd Soviet Union.

1) Referring to Dan. 4:25–26, Heiser argues,

Verse 25 says very plainly that the Most High is sovereign. It is clearly singular. The phrase "heaven is sovereign" is interesting because the Aramaic word translated heaven (*shemayin*) is plural and is accompanied by a plural verb. The plurality of *shemayin* can point to either the members of the council or the council as a collective. In any event, the wording is suggestive of the interchange between council and Most High earlier in Daniel.⁵

The problem here is that Heiser does not bother to tell his readers that the Aramaic word שְׁמַיִן (*šēmayin*) is always plural. There is no singular form of this word. The same is true of the Hebrew word שָׁמַיִם (*šāmayim*). There is no singular form of the word. To claim that this is referring to a council without alerting the reader to the fact that the word is always plural is, frankly, not honest. The Hebrew word שָׁמַיִם (*šāmayim*) is used in Gen. 1:8: "God called the expanse heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day"⁶ Here the word רָקִיעַ (*rāqiaʿ*, "expanse") is singular referring to the שָׁמַיִם.

⁴ *Unfiltered*, 53.

⁵ *Unseen Realm*, 54.

⁶

(Gen. 1:8) וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְרָקִיעַ שָׁמַיִם וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי:

Heiser also neglects to point out to his readers that Daniel uses the word שְׁמַיִם (*šəmayin*, “heavens”) in verse 25.

that you be driven away from mankind and your dwelling place be with the beasts of the field, and you be given grass to eat like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven [שְׁמַיִם, *šəmayin*]; and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes (Dan. 4:25).

Are we to think that the dew is from the council? Heiser misrepresents the language and reads into the text what it does not say in order to support his view.

- 2) “I use the phrase ‘the *satan*’ deliberately. The Hebrew (*satan*) means something like ‘adversary,’ ‘prosecutor,’ or ‘challenger.’ It speaks of an official legal function within a ruling body—in this case, Yahweh’s council. When Yahweh asks the *satan* where he has been, we learn that his job involves investigating what is happening on earth (Job 1:7). He is, so to speak, Yahweh’s eyes and ears on the ground, reporting what he has seen and heard.”⁷

Although we have already given the following quote with reference to Heiser’s eisegesis, the same quote is also an instance of selective reporting. Heiser conveniently neglects to report the NT reference to “the Satan.” Mark uses the name ‘Satan’ with the definite article: “And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by the Satan [τοῦ Σατανᾶ, *tou Satana*]; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him” (Mk. 1:13).⁸ Revelation 2:9 uses the definite article with the name ‘Satan’: “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of the Satan [τοῦ Σατανᾶ, *tou Satana*].”⁹ Revelation 2:13 uses the definite article with the name ‘Satan’: “I know where you dwell, where the throne of the Satan [τοῦ Σατανᾶ, *tou Satana*] is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where the Satan [ὁ Σατανᾶς, *ho Satanas*] dwells.”¹⁰ There are seven times that the name ‘Satan’ is used in Revelation, and in every instance it is used with the definite article. A particularly significant one is Rev. 20:2: “And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and the Satan [ὁ Σατανᾶς, *ho Satanas*], and bound him for a thousand years;”¹¹ Of the 35 times the word Σατανᾶς is used in the NT, 26 of them have the definite article. That this is a proper

⁷ *Unseen Realm*, 56–57.

⁸ καὶ ἦν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τεσσαράκοντα ἡμέρας πειραζόμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ Σατανᾶ, καὶ ἦν μετὰ τῶν θηρίων, καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι διηκόνουν αὐτῷ (Mk. 1:13).

⁹ Οἶδά σου τὴν θλίψιν καὶ τὴν πτωχείαν, ἀλλὰ πολὺσιος εἶ, καὶ τὴν βλασφημίαν ἐκ τῶν λεγόντων Ἰουδαίους εἶναι ἑαυτούς, καὶ οὐκ εἰσίν, ἀλλὰ συναγωγὴ τοῦ Σατανᾶ (Rev. 2:9).

¹⁰ Οἶδα ποὺ κατοικεῖς, ὅπου ὁ θρόνος τοῦ Σατανᾶ, καὶ κρατεῖς τὸ ὄνομά μου, καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὴν πίστιν μου καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἀντιπάς, ὁ μάρτυς μου, ὁ πιστός μου, ὃς ἀπεκτάνθη παρ’ ὑμῖν, ὅπου ὁ Σατανᾶς κατοικεῖ (Rev. 2:13).

¹¹ καὶ ἐκράτησεν τὸν δράκοντα, ὁ ὅφιος ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὃς ἐστὶν Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς, καὶ ἔδησεν αὐτὸν χίλια ἔτη (Rev. 20:2).

name, whether with or without the definite article is indicated when Jesus addresses him directly: “Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go, Satan [Σατανᾶ, *Satana*]! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only’” (Matt. 4:10).¹²

- 3) “The chapter [Ezekiel 28] begins with God chastising the prince of Tyre (Ezek 28:1–8). God accuses this prince of extraordinary arrogance. In verse 2 the prince considers himself a god (*el*), who sits in the seat of the gods (*moshab elohim*), a term associated with the divine council.”¹³

We have also already given this statement concerning Heiser’s eisegesis, and it is also an instance of selective reporting. Heiser tells his reader only those aspects of the text that fit his view, and he simply does not alert his readers to those aspects of the text that call his interpretation into question. He first discusses verse 2: “² Son of man, say to the prince of Tyre, ‘Thus says the Lord YHWH, “Because your heart is lifted up and you have said, ‘I am אֵל, [*’ēl*], I sit in the seat of אֱלֹהִים [*’ēlōhîm*] in the heart of the seas’; Yet you are a man and not אֵל, [*’ēl*], although you make your heart like the heart of אֱלֹהִים [*’ēlōhîm*].”’¹⁴ First, the word translated “seat” is מוֹשָׁב (*môšab*). Heiser renders the phrase מוֹשָׁב אֱלֹהִים [*môšab ’ēlōhîm*] a “the seat of the gods (*moshab elohim*).”¹⁵ The word translated “seat” is a singular noun. There is no definite article before the word אֱלֹהִים, which he translates as a plural noun, “gods.” Second, Heiser says, “the prince considers himself a god (*el*).” The problem here is, like NT Greek, Hebrew does not have an indefinite article corresponding to the English ‘a’ or ‘an.’ So, rendering the phrase אֵל אֲנִי (*’ēl ’ānî*) as “a god I,” or “god I,” is an interpretive choice. Heiser does not alert his reader to this grammatical fact. Third, the word translated “heart of” is כֶּלֶב (*kēlēb*; this is the combination of the word ‘heart’ — לֵב with the inseparable preposition כִּי meaning “as” or “like”). It is a singular noun. Heiser conveniently neglects to give his readers a translation of this portion. Now it may be understandable that the word translated “seat” could be referring to the seat of a group, as in the place where they convene. It is more problematic to think that the prince of Tyre makes his heart as the heart of the group.

- 4) “In essence, borrowing the language of Ezekiel 28, Isaiah portrays this particular divine being as hopelessly enamored of his own brilliance.”¹⁶

One wonders how Isaiah could borrow the language of Ezekiel 28 when Isaiah ministered some time between 740 to about 681 B.C., and Ezekiel wrote his prophecy c. 571, some 100 years later. Adding the prepositional phrase, “In essence” does not excuse the selective reporting.

¹² τότε λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς: Ὑπαγε, Σατανᾶ: γέγραπται γάρ· Κύριον τὸν θεόν σου προσκυνήσεις καὶ αὐτῷ μόνῳ λατρεύσεις (Matt. 4:10).

¹³ *Unseen Realm*, 75–76.

¹⁴ בְּנֶאֱמַר אָמַר לְנִיזָר צַר כִּהְאָמַר אֲדִנִּי יְהוָה יַעַן נִבְּחָה לְבָבִי וְהִאֲמַר אֵל אֲנִי מוֹשָׁב אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁבְּתִי בְּלֵב יָמִים
(Ezek. 28:2) וְאֵתָה אָדָם וְלֹא־אֵל וְתָתֵן לְבָבִי כֶּלֶב אֱלֹהִים:

¹⁵ *Unseen Realm*, 76.

¹⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 85.

- 5) “That this ‘shining one’ sought superiority over the other members of the divine council is indicated by the phrase ‘raise . . . my throne’ and his desire to ‘sit’ on ‘the mountain of the assembly.’”¹⁷

Although Heiser provides a translation of Isa. 14:12–15, it is significant that in the above statement Heiser does not give the whole translation. The text does not say “raise . . . my throne” above the divine council. It says “raise up my throne above the stars of God.” Again Heiser must use selective reporting to make it fit his view. Heiser believes that the reference to “stars” is a reference to the gods of the council. However, the text does not say this, and whether “stars” refers to the gods is Heiser’s interpretation of Job. Of the almost 70 instances of the reference to stars, there is not one instance where the text asserts that they are gods. In Dan. 12:3, those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars. In Jude 13, those who turn from the truth are referred to as wandering stars. In Revelation 2, the seven stars are seven angels of the seven churches. There is not one undisputed instance where the word ‘stars’ refers to gods. Heiser does not alert his readers to this fact.

- 6) “That this ‘shining one’ sought superiority over the other members of the divine council is indicated by the phrase ‘raise ... my throne’ and his desire to ‘sit’ on ‘the mountain of assembly.’ That this ‘mountain of assembly’ speaks of the divine council is clear from its location in ‘Zaphon’ (‘the north’; *tsaphon*) and the clouds. The ‘seat’ language is familiar from Ezekiel 28:2 (the ‘seat of the gods’). Isaiah 14 reads like an attempted coup in the divine council. *Helel* ben-shachar wanted his seat in the divine assembly on the divine mountain to be above all others. He wanted to be ‘like the Most High’ (*elyon*). But there can be only one of those.”¹⁸

The expression “recesses of the north” (NASB) or “sides of the north” (KJV) in Isa. 14:13 is actually a reference to Jerusalem. In Ps. 48:2 (in Hebrew verse 3) reads: “Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion, recesses of the north, the city of the great King” (Ps. 48:2, my translation).¹⁹

Table #10: Recesses of the North

Isa. 14:13	in the recesses of the north	בִּירְכָתִי צָפוֹן
Ps. 48:3	recesses of the north	יִרְכָתִי צָפוֹן

The expressions are almost identical. The difference is that in the Isaiah passage, the word ‘recesses of’ is prefixed with an inseparable preposition “in” בְּ (*b*), whereas this preposition is not present in the Psalm passage. The expression occurs only four times in the OT: (Ps. 48:3; Isa. 14:13; Ezek. 38:6, 15; 39:2). In each of the passages of Ezekiel it refers to the place from which Gog of the

¹⁷ *Unseen Realm*, 85.

¹⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 85.

¹⁹

יִפְּחֵה נֹחַ מְשֹׁשׁ כָּל־הָאָרֶץ הַרְצִינָה יִרְכָתִי צָפוֹן קִרְיַת מֶלֶךְ רַב: (Ps. 48:3)

land of Magog comes to invade Israel. In none of these instances is the expression used to refer to heaven.

The word in Isa. 14:14 translated “heights” is **בָּמֹת** (*bāmāh*) and refers to the high places where people, usually pagans, would worship their false gods. It never refers to heaven. The verse reads: “I will ascend upon *the* high place of *the* dark cloud; I will make myself like the Most High” (Isa. 14:14 my translation).

The word translated “clouds” is **עָב** (*āb*) and is actually a singular noun meaning “dark cloud,” “cloud-mass,” or “thicket.” This may in fact be a reference to the high places that were covered in dark cloud when God descended upon them, as at Sinai. Consequently, this person is not claiming that he will ascend to heaven, but that he will ascend to the high place where God is said to descend, and this person will set himself up in the place of God. This is in fact what Sennacherib, king of Assyria, said he would do when he destroyed Jerusalem. He would ascend to the holy place where God would descend, and he would make himself the highest god. This has nothing to do either with Satan or with ascending to heaven. Heiser neglects to alert his readers to these aspects of the Hebrew text because they call into question his interpretation.

- 7) “This passage [Deut. 4:37–38], taken with Exod 23 and others in which God himself brings Israel into the land, reveals that the Angel of Yahweh, Yahweh himself, and the ‘presence’ of God are synonymous. The Angel is Yahweh because Yahweh is inseparable from his presence.”²⁰

The problem here is that God said He would not go up with the people to bring them into the land: “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst [**אֲנִי לֹא אֶעֱלֶה בְּקִרְבְּךָ**, *lō’ e’ēleh bēqirbēka*], because you are an obstinate people, and I might destroy you on the way” (Exod. 33:3).²¹ God sent an angel before them to bring them into the land because He would not go up among them lest He destroy them on the way. Heiser conveniently neglects to alert the reader to this text because it contradicts his claims.

- 8) “The word **אלה** is a defective spelling of the lemma **אלוה**.”²²

According to Heiser,

There are in fact no occasions in the Hebrew Bible where **אלוה** is contextually plural or is used as a collective noun. The only place where such an option might appear to be workable [as a plural] is 2 Kgs 17:31, where the text informs us that ‘the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim (**אֱלֹהֵי סַפְרַיִם**).’ The pointing here suggests that the lemma is not **אלוה** but rather **אלהים** in a misspelled or archaic plural construct form. That the Qere reading for this form is **אלהי** argues forcefully that the

²⁰ *Unfiltered*, 71.

²¹ (Exod. 33:3): **אֲנִי לֹא אֶעֱלֶה בְּקִרְבְּךָ כִּי עַם-קָשִׁי-עֲרָף אֶתָּה פֶּן-אֶכְלֶךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ** (Exod. 33:3).

²² Heiser, “Does Deuteronomy 32.17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?” 138.

lemma is not אֱלֹהִים but rather אֱלֹהִים. Lexicography therefore offers no support for a plural translation.²³

What Heiser is attempting to do is somehow to make the word אֱלֹהִים in 2 Kgs. 17:31 a defective plural form of אֱלֹהִים rather than a plural form of אֱלֹהִים. He must do this so that it does not open the possibility that Deut. 32:17 could be referring to gods, not God: “They sacrificed to demons who were not אֱלֹהִים, to אֱלֹהִים whom they have not known, new ones who came lately, your fathers did not dread them” (Deut. 32:17).²⁴ If we take אֱלֹהִים as a plural, then the text should be translated, “They sacrificed to demons who are not gods.” This translation would contradict Heiser’s claim that Deut. 32:17 should be translated, “They sacrificed to demons who are not God.” Consequently, Heiser argues that Deut. 32:17 does not deny the reality of “other gods.”

Again Heiser employs selective reporting. The two small circles over the ה and the ל in 2 Kgs. 17:31 are not pointing. They are called circelli and relate to the Masora Parva (Mp). The Mp are notes in the margin of the Hebrew text that indicate ways of reading the text. In this case, the Mp indicates that the text could be read as אֱלֹהִים, which would be a construct form of אֱלֹהִים, translated as “of God” or “of gods.” However, since throughout the Hebrew Bible, אֱלֹהִים is taken both as a singular, “God” or “god,” or as a plural, “gods,” this does not show that אֱלֹהִים should be taken as a singular or plural noun. Heiser must somehow make the form אֱלֹהִים in 2 Kgs. 17:31 into a defective plural form of אֱלֹהִים rather than a plural form of אֱלֹהִים. He must do this to support his claim about Deut. 32:17. Interestingly, the LXX translates אֱלֹהִים as θεοίς (“gods”), as does the Vulgate (*dii*), and the text seems to refer to the “gods of Sepharvaim,” not to “god of Sepharvaim.”

Additionally, the Mp does not specify that the word אֱלֹהִים is from the lemma אֱלֹהִים as Heiser claims. Rather, the Mp indicates only that אֱלֹהִים could be read as a plural construct noun. Heiser has misrepresented the function of the Mp. If אֱלֹהִים is a plural construct form of אֱלֹהִים, this would contradict Heiser’s claim that אֱלֹהִים is never used as a plural in the form אֱלֹהִים. Heiser does not provide any evidence why anyone should take אֱלֹהִים as a “misspelled or archaic plural construct form” of אֱלֹהִים. He simply asserts this because this would support his interpretation of Deuteronomy.

The point is that the circelli have nothing to do with the pointing of the text, but Heiser does not alert his readers to this fact.²⁵ Once the circelli are identified for what they are, the pointing of אֱלֹהִים in 2 Kgs. 17:31 is not different from the pointing of אֱלֹהִים in Deut. 32:17. They are both occurrences of the same form, אֱלֹהִים. If אֱלֹהִים in 2 Kings is a misspelled or archaic plural form of

²³ Heiser, “Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?” 138.

²⁴ (Deut., 32:17) יִזְבְּחוּ לִשְׂדֵיִם לֹא אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים לֹא יָדְעוּם חֲדָשִׁים מִקֶּרֶב בָּאוּ לֹא שָׁעֲרוּם אֲבֹתֵיכֶם:

²⁵ See, Gérard E. Weil, “Prolegomena” in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. K. Elliger et W. Rudolph (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1977), X. “c) Zwei oder mehr aufeinanderfolgende Wörter sind mit einer Notiz der Mp versehen. Dann ist (möglichst) genau oben in die Mitte zwischen allen in Betracht kommenden Wörtern je ein Circellus gesetzt. Beispiele: Gn 2,18 und Jes 1,20.

d) Eine Gruppe von mehreren Wörtern ist mit den nach c) erforderlichen Circelli versehen; aber zwei oder mehr Wörter innerhalb dieser Gruppe bilden einen weiteren bemerkenswerten Ausdruck, der anderswo in der Mp mit einer Notiz versehen ist. Diese zweiten Notiz ist überall da, wo sie fehlte, am Rand nachgetragen und durch einen Punkt von der ersten getrennt. Der Beginn des zugehörigen Textstücks ist durch einen zusätzlichen Circellus zwischen dessen beiden ersten Wörtern markiert.

אלהים, why is not the same form in Deuteronomy also a misspelled or archaic plural form of אלהים since they are the same form. Heiser has failed to alert the reader to what the circelli are and what they are there to do. Heiser misrepresents the circelli as part of the pointing of אלה as a misspelled or archaic plural construct form of אלהים. Once one understands what is actually going on in the text, one realizes that is it simply false that “Lexicography therefore offers no support for a plural translation” of אלה in the 2 Kings passage. Heiser’s treatment is no only incorrect, it is deceitful.

Misrepresenting the Text

I Am which I Am

Heiser frequently misrepresents the meanings of words. Commenting on the statement by God in Exod. 3:14, Heiser says, “In this sentence, the name of God, *ehyeh*, is a first-person, singular form of the verb ‘to be’ (*hayah*). It’s a statement of self-existence—and, therefore, a denial of being created by any higher power or force.”²⁶ The verse in question states, “God said to Moses, ‘I am Who I am’; and He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I Am’ has sent me to you’” (Exod. 3:14).²⁷ Heiser neglects to point out to his reader that this same form is used in Exod. 3:12: “And He said, ‘Certainly I will be [אֶהְיֶה, *ehyeh*] with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain” (Exod. 3:12).²⁸ It is also used in Exod. 4:12: “Now then go, and I, even I, will be [אֶהְיֶה, *ehyeh*] with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say” (Exod. 4:12).²⁹ Is God saying “I will be self-existent with your mouth”? Since the verb can mean “I am” or “I will be,” why doesn’t Heiser translate 3:14 as, “I will be which I will be”? Taking אֶהְיֶה to indicate God’s self-existence is a theological interpretation. In fact, God could be using this statement to express the fact that He is the Living God in order to make a distinction between Himself and the gods worshiped by others who are only idols and not living beings. about which he does not alert his readers. He misrepresents the meaning of the word to support his view.

Sea of Reeds

Heiser addresses the reference to the translation “Red sea” that is used in many translations in Exodus. For example, the name is used in Exod. 15:4: “Pharaoh’s chariots and his army He has cast into the sea; and the choicest of his officers are drowned in the Red Sea [בְּיַם־סוּף, *běyam sūph*]” (NASB).³⁰ Heiser argues, “So the Israelites crossed ‘the sea of reeds,’ which refers to a body of water with reeds in it, most likely papyrus reeds. That description could not apply to the Red Sea since very

²⁶ *Unfiltered*, 56.

²⁷ (Exod. 3:14) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲהִיָּה שְׁלַחְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם:

²⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֲהִיָּה עִמָּךְ וְהָיִלְךָ הָאֹת כִּי אֲנִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאָךְ אֶת־הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם תִּאֲבֹדוּן אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הָהָר הַזֶּה: (Exod. 3:12)

²⁹ וַעֲתָה לֵךְ וְאֲנִי אֲהִיָּה עִם־פִּיךָ וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹּר: (Exod. 4:12)

³⁰ מִרְכַּבְתָּ פָרָעָה וְחִילּוֹ יָרָה בָּם וּמִבְחָר שְׁלֹשִׁי סָבְעוּ בְּיַם־סוּף: (Exod. 15:4)

few parts of the Red Sea are suitable for reeds to grow due to the salt content of the water.”³¹ Heiser mistakenly assumes that the nature of the Red Sea today was the nature of the Red Sea thousands of years ago. However, as James Hoffmeier demonstrates, there is a connection between the Egyptian *p3 twfy* and *yām sūf*.³² In another place he points out, “First, it should be noted that the Egyptian term *twf(y)* is not restricted to the meaning ‘papyrus,’ but can apply to other marsh plants . . . Second, salt-tolerating reeds and rushes, called halophytes, do thrive in salt marsh areas. . . . And yet even today in these lakes [Suez Canal and Lake Timsah], which have water from the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, a variety of reeds and rushes grow, and even along the Suez Canal one can see reeds growing.”³³

Hoffmeier gives an lengthy analysis in which he shows that the crossing took place in the northeastern Delta. He provides a map indicating in red arrows where the crossing took place (see Figure 9).³⁴

Geographical considerations: Occurrences of *p3 twfy* in Egyptian texts located it generally in the northeastern Delta, as we have suggested. On the basis of our reading of Exodus 14:2 (see chapter 4, §VIII), *yām sūp* is situated in the northeastern Delta. Further support for this location is found in the eighth plague of Exodus 10. Locusts infest the land and are only removed when a strong wind from the west drove the hordes of locusts into *yām sūp* (Exod. 10:19). As is widely recognized, the starting point of the exodus and the epicenter of the plagues was in the region of Pi-Ramesses/Avaris (cf. chapter 4, §IV). So when the Bible describes the wind from the west driving the locusts east toward the Sea of Reeds, that is, *yāmmâ sūp*,³⁴ it is referring to the only major body of water east of the Ramesses region, the el-Ballah Lakes, which is located forty kilometers directly to the east.³⁵

Figure 9: Sea of Reeds Crossing



³¹ *Unfiltered*, 59.

³² James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 83.

³³ James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 209.

³⁴ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Sinai*, 111.

³⁵ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Sinai*, 82.

Divination in the Fall

Heiser misrepresents the events of the fall: “Divination refers to communication with the supernatural world. A diviner in the ancient world was one who foretold omens or gave out divine information (oracles). We can see that element in the story. Eve is getting information from this being.”³⁶

First of all, Heiser gives a truncated definition of the term ‘divination.’ According to OED, the term means, “the foretelling of future events or discovery of what is hidden or obscure by supernatural or magical means.”³⁷ The Hebrew verb translated “divination” in Lev. 19:26 is נחש (*nḥš*). According to HAL it means “to seek and give omens, foretell.”³⁸ Interestingly, it is related to the noun נחש, which is the word used for the serpent in Genesis: “I.1. *Etymology*. In Hebrew the consonant group *nḥš* includes the verb *nḥš* piel, ‘prognosticate,’ and the nouns *naḥāš*, ‘spell’; *nāḥāš* I, ‘serpent.’³⁹ The נחש foretold to Eve the outcome of eating the fruit, and his prognostication was partly right and partly wrong. They did not physically die immediately, but they did immediately die spiritually.

If divination is simply to communicate with the supernatural world, as Heiser says, then every time Adam, or Abraham, or Moses, or anyone else communicated with God, it was a case of divination. If that is so, why does the Bible condemn divination? “You shall not eat with the blood, nor practice divination or soothsaying” (Lev. 19:26).⁴⁰ Of course Heiser must give this truncated definition in order to make it fit his view.

Second, one wonders where to find divination in the story of the fall. What “information” did Eve get from the serpent? Let’s see:

¹ Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which YHWH God had made. And he said to the woman, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” ² The woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; ³ but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.’” ⁴ The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die! ⁵ For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:1–5).⁴¹

³⁶ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Sinai*, 87.

³⁷ OED, s.v. “divination.”

³⁸ HAL, s.v. “נחש.”

³⁹ Heinz-Josef Fabry, “נחש,” in מִרְדָּה – *mārad–nāqā*. Vol. IX, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. Botterweck, G. Johannes, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 356.

⁴⁰

(Lev. 19:22) לֹא תִנְחָשׁוּ וְלֹא תַעֲוִנוּ:

⁴¹ וַיִּנְחָשׁ הָיָה עָרוֹם מִכָּל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָאִשָּׁה אַף כִּי־אָמַר אֱלֹהִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִכָּל עֵץ הַגָּן: ² וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה אֶל־הַנָּחַשׁ מִפְּרִי עֵץ־הַגָּן נֹאכָל: ³ וּמִפְּרִי הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹךְ־הַגָּן אָמַר אֱלֹהִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ וְלֹא תִגְעוּ בוֹ פֶּן־תָּמוּתוּן: ⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר הַנָּחַשׁ אֶל־הָאִשָּׁה לֹא־מוֹת תָּמוּתוּן: ⁵ כִּי יָדַע אֱלֹהִים כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְכֶם מִמֶּנּוּ וְנִפְקַחוּ עֵינֵיכֶם וְהָיִיתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע: (Gen. 3:1–5)

So, not only did Eve not get any information from the serpent, what the serpent told her was actually a lie. The serpent says, “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing [יָדַעְתִּים, *yōdʿê*] good and evil.” (Gen. 3:5).⁴² When the serpent refers to what Adam and Eve will gain from eating the fruit, the serpent (נָחָשׁ, *naḥāš*) says God knows that they will become like God *knowing* of good and evil. The serpent uses a participle which is translated “knowing.” What the serpent is saying is that they will be in a state, like God, *knowing* good and evil. They will have acquired the knowledge, good and evil, knowledge that God has so that they can decide for themselves what is good and evil.

However, when God assesses the resulting state of Adam and Eve after they had eaten the fruit, God says they have “become like one of Us, *to know* [לָדַעַת, *lāda‘at*] good and evil;” (Gen. 3:22). In this statement God uses an infinitive to describe the result of their having eaten the fruit. God is pointing out that they were not actually in a state of *knowing* good and evil, but rather they were now in a state *to come to know* good and evil. In other words, the serpent told Eve that she would gain the knowledge that she sought that would enable the couple to be and live like God. By contrast, God says that what they have gained is independence, like God has, and that they are in a position to gain the knowledge they sought, to come to know good and evil, but that they did not gain the capacity to be and live or have knowledge like God.

In fact, in her defense, Eve declares, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate” (Gen. 3:13).⁴³ Although Eve certainly did communicate with the serpent, she did not get any information from him. What she got was a lie. Heiser must misrepresent the text in order to make it fit his view.

Misrepresenting Deut. 15:12–18

In an effort to have the Exodus passage refer to “other gods,” Heiser appeals to Deut. 15:12–18 as raising “the possibility that Exod 21:6 refers to a group of divine beings (‘gods’).”⁴⁴ Heiser provides a translation of the passage from Deuteronomy, and from this he argues,

The procedure in Exodus and Deuteronomy is the same, but the word *elohim* does not appear in Deuteronomy. If *elohim* referred to the God of Israel, there would be no logical reason for its removal from the law. (The same would be true if it referred to humans.) The only coherent rationale is that the writer (or a later editor) of Deuteronomy somehow knew that *elohim* referred to other divine beings (“gods” plural). Deuteronomy is famous for its strict monotheism (e.g., Deut 4:35,39) and its commitment to the centralization of worship (Deut 12).⁴⁵

Of course, Heiser does not mean that the word *elohim* does not appear anywhere in the book of Deuteronomy. He can only mean that the word does not appear in Deut. 15:12–18. From this assertion, Heiser speculates that the only rationale for the writer or editor of Deuteronomy not to use

42 כִּי יִדַּע אֱלֹהִים כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכַלְכֶּם מִמֶּנּוּ וּנְמַקְחוּ עֵינֵיכֶם וְהָיִיתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יָדְעִי טוֹב וְרָע: (Gen. 3:5)
43 הַנַּחֵשׁ הַשִּׂיאִי וְאָכַל (Gen. 3:13)

⁴⁴ *Unfiltered*, 63.

⁴⁵ *Unfiltered*, 64.

elohim would be to avoid the implication of a reference to “other gods,” since, according to Heiser, Deuteronomy is “famous for its strict monotheism.”

The problem with Heiser’s effort is that the word *elohim* actually appears twice in the passage of Deuteronomy, once in verse 15 and once in verse 18:

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and YHWH your God [אֱלֹהֶיךָ, *’ēlōheykā*] redeemed you; therefore I command you this today (Deut. 15:15).⁴⁶

The word *elohim* is in the construct state, which shortens the spelling, with a 2nd person, pronominal suffix “you.” This could be translated “God of you.”

It shall not seem hard to you when you set him free, for he has given you six years with double the service of a hired man; so YHWH your God [אֱלֹהֶיךָ, *’ēlōheykā*] will bless you in whatever you do (Deut. 15:18).⁴⁷

Someone might object that perhaps Heiser has made a typographical error, and he is actually referring to different verses in Deuteronomy. But this is not possible since Heiser presents a translation of Deut. 15:12–18. Since the verses in Deuteronomy do use the word *elohim*, this blows a hole in Heiser’s appeal to Deuteronomy to support his notion that the passage in Exodus refers to “other gods.” In fact, assuming the connection that Heiser makes, it actually argues that the Exodus passage is referring to YHWH God, not to “other gods.”

Illegitimate Totality Transfer

Sometimes writers, when they use a term, want their readers to think about *all* possible meanings and nuances. If I ask, “How has your reading been?” the reader is forced to think about all three. Do I mean the latest assignment (noun)? Am I wondering if you got the right glasses (adjective)? Or am I referencing the process (verb)? What I’m suggesting is that, since there are immediate clues in the story that the serpent is more than a mere snake, that he may be a *divine* adversary, the term *nachash* is a triple entendre. The writer wants his readers to consider all the possible nuances in their interpretive, intellectual experience. All of them carry theological weight.⁴⁸

In this instance, Heiser attempts to lead his reader into an illegitimate use of language and meaning. This is a common error on the part of persons who do not know the nature of language and the principles of communication. James Barr gave it the name “illegitimate totality transfer.”⁴⁹ A description given by Ludwig Wittgenstein, although with reference to a different problem, has

⁴⁶ אָפֶס כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֲבִיּוֹן כִּי־בָרְכָךָ יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נִחַלְךָ נִחַלָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: (Deut. 15:15)

⁴⁷ לֹא־יִקְשָׁה בְּעֵינֶיךָ בְּשִׁלְחָךָ אֹתוֹ חֹפְשִׁי מֵעֶמֶךָ כִּי מִשְׁנֵה שָׂכָר שְׂכִיר עֲבָדְךָ שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים וּבְרָכָךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה: (Deut. 15:18)

⁴⁸ *Unfiltered*, 87–88.

⁴⁹ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM Press, 1961), 218.

perfect application here: “As if the sense [meaning] were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which it carried with it into every kind of application.”⁵⁰ Barr explains this error: “The error that arises, when the ‘meaning’ of a word (understood as the total series of relations in which it is used in the literature) is read into a particular case as its sense and implication there, may be called ‘illegitimate totality transfer.’”⁵¹

This is a Platonist view of language. Plato held that everything in this world participates in a form. Every tree is a tree because it participates in the form “treeness.” The form “treeness” exists outside every individual tree in a realm outside the world that we perceive. When applied to language, meaning is like a form that exists outside of the individual uses of a word, and this “meaning” is part of the word in every instance in which the word is used. Heiser’s example — “If I ask, ‘How has your reading been?’ the reader is forced to think about all three” — actually misrepresents the case. It is the lack of context that makes the question ambiguous, not the possible meanings. In fact, Heiser indicates this when he says, “Do I mean the latest assignment (noun)? Am I wondering if you got the right glasses (adjective)? Or am I referencing the process (verb)?” In other words, the one asking the question does not mean all of these unless he is deliberately trying to cause confusion.

Why Does It Matter?

There are many more instances of eisegesis, selective reporting, and misrepresentations employed by Heiser, but these are sufficient to demonstrate that Heiser used whatever means at his disposal to promote his view. In previous chapters we have looked at instances of misrepresenting the meanings of words, committing the Fallacy of Composition, the Fallacy of Division, the Intentional Fallacy, and the Fallacy of Hypothesis Contrary to Fact. Below we will show that Heiser’s lack of facility in philosophy leads him to commit the fallacy of placing God in a genus or species, which reduces God merely to a member of a group. Unfortunately, those who are not trained in biblical languages, hermeneutics, theology, or philosophy have been easily captured by Heiser’s writings. A reader should not simply take what Heiser says “at face value.” The astute reader must do the research necessary either to confirm or reject his claims.

⁵⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2d ed. (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), I.117. “Als wäre die Bedeutung ein Dunstkreis, den das Wort mitbringt und in jederlei Verwendung hinübernimmt.”

⁵¹ Barr, *Semantics*, 218.

CHAPTER 10

HEISERIAN THEOLOGY

Theology Proper

Denial of God's Immutability

Heiser consistently speaks about God as if God changes. At one point he asserts, “[God’s] desire was to live among them [humankind], and for them to rule and reign with him. After the fall that plan was not altered. Eventually, God would decide to tabernacle *within* humans, through his Spirit.”¹ The fact that Heiser states that God “eventually” decided “to tabernacle within humans” implies that, from the beginning, God had not planned “to tabernacle within humans.” So, God had planned to live among humankind, but, because of the fall, God had to modify His plan — eventually. In another place Heiser says, “As Israel reached the final stages of failure, God announced through the prophets that plans had changed.”² Again he says, ““The apostasy of his people and their subsequent exile prompted a change in Yahweh’s approach to restoring his rule on earth. He could not depend on humans, though he had pledged himself to humanity’s preservation.”³ Now, if we take Heiser’s words at “face value,” he is “straightforwardly” denying God’s immutability.

At one point Heiser seems to contradict himself by saying God does not need to change His plan:

An Edenic realization without human participation would mean that the *nachash* would then have won a victory—the abolition of humankind as God’s image. God need not change his plan in response to human weakness or the self-willed rebellion of a divine council member. He need not remove humanity or human freedom— and with it, his image—to accomplish what he wants. An omniscient, all-powerful being doesn’t need to cheat. He knows how best to win—and how best to misdirect his opponents.⁴

Heiser is not contradicting his earlier statements that God changed His plan. He is saying that God does not need to change His initial plan to live among humans, although He did need to change

¹ *Unseen Realm*, 43. Emphasis in original.

² *Unseen Realm*, 216.

³ *Unseen Realm*, 240.

⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 267.

how He would accomplish this. Heiser says, “He [God] knows how best to win—and how best to misdirect his opponents.” Heiser claims that God would change his plan on how He would live among humans so that His image in man would not be erased.

In a paper delivered to the Evangelical Theological Society, Heiser stated,

The Canaanite analogy informs us that one cannot presume that the council is only composed of Yahweh’s “sons” and not *ml'km* because far more neutral language is used when the council participates with God in making decisions (“spirits” – 1 Kings 22:19–23; “Watchers” – cp. Dan 4:17, 24; “assembly of the holy ones” – Psa 89:5 [Eng]). On what basis can angels and divine throne guardians (*cherubim*, *seraphim*) be excluded from a description like “spirits” and “holy ones” in such descriptions of council activities?⁵

Heiser argues that God is involved in a decision making process: “Not all members of a king’s ‘government’ would be directly involved in decision making, but they still worked for the high sovereign.”⁶ Referring to 1 Kgs. 22:19–23, Heiser presents God as deciding on a course of action:

The text presents us with a clear instance where God has sovereignly decided to act but allows his lesser, intelligent servants to participate in how his decision is carried out. God wasn’t searching for ideas, as though he couldn’t conceive of a plan. He allowed those who serve him the latitude to propose options. In other words, *the members of the host were involved in the divine decree.*⁷

Decision making necessarily involves discursive reasoning. Discursive reasoning or discursive thought is the movement from one thought to another. But God cannot be involved in discursive reasoning or decision making. As Aquinas argues, there is no discursive movement in God’s knowledge:

I respond: There is no discursive reasoning in God’s knowledge. This is clear as follows: In our knowledge there are two types of discursive reasoning. The one type involves only succession, as when, after having an act of intellectual understanding with respect to one thing, we turn to consider something else. The second type involves causality, as when we arrive at the cognition of conclusions through their principles.

The first type of discursive reasoning cannot belong to God. For while we understand many things successively when each is considered in itself, we understand them all at once when we understand them in some one thing—as, for example, when we understand the parts in the whole, or when we see diverse things in a mirror. But, as has been established, God sees all things in some one thing, viz., in Himself. Hence, He sees them all at once and not successively.

⁵ Heiser, “The Divine Council in the Pentateuch,” n.p.

⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 74.n1.

⁷ *Angels*, 35. Emphasis in original.

Similarly, the second type of discursive reasoning cannot belong to God. For, first of all, the second type presupposes the first type, since those who are proceeding from principles to conclusions do not consider both of them simultaneously. Second, this sort of discursive reasoning is had by one who is proceeding from what is known to what is unknown. Hence, it is clear that while he is considering the first, he is still ignorant of the second, and so the second is being discerned not in the first, but rather on the basis of the first. By contrast, the terminus of discursive reason occurs when the second is seen in the first—after the effects have been analyzed into their causes—and at that point discursive reasoning ceases. Hence, since God sees His own effects in Himself as in a cause, His cognition is not discursive.⁸

Heiser depicts God as reacting to various circumstances:

The wording is important. When God divided up the nations, *they were divided among the sons of God*. God allotted the nations to members of his divine council. This is the Bible's explanation for why other nations came to worship other gods. Until Babel, God wanted a relationship with all humanity. But the rebellion at Babel changed that. God decided to let members of his divine council govern the other nations.

God had judged humanity. Even after the flood they would not resume the kingdom plan he had begun in Eden. So God decided to create a new nation, his “portion” as Deuteronomy 32:9 says—Israel. He did this, beginning with the call of Abraham, in Genesis 12, the very next chapter after the Tower of Babel story.⁹

Heiser says, “The wording is important,” as indeed it is, and Heiser's wording depicts God as going through a decision making process. God cannot react to circumstances by deciding to do something. If this were the case, then there would necessarily be a before the decision and after the decision. Because, as we have shown above, Heiser rejects immutability, he interprets these kind of passages accordingly. However, it cannot be the case that God changes, or reacts, or decides, since all of these actions mean that God is not eternal.

⁸ Aquinas, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.14.7. “RESPONDEO DICENDUM quod in scientia divina nullus est discursus. Quod sic patet. In scientia enim nostra duplex est discursus. Unus secundum successionem tantum: sicut cum, postquam intelligimus aliquid in actu, convertimus nos ad intelligendum aliud. Alius discursus est secundum causalitatem: sicut cum per principia pervenimus in cognitionem conclusionum. Primus autem discursus Deo convenire non potest. Multa enim, quae successive intelligimus si unumquodque eorum in seipso consideretur, omnia simul intelligimus si in aliquo uno ea intelligamus: puta si partes intelligamus in toto, vel si diversas res videamus in speculo. Deus autem omnia videt in uno, quod est ipse, ut habitum est. Unde simul, et non successive omnia videt. – Similiter etiam et secundus discursus Deo competere non potest. Primo quidem, quia secundus discursus praesupponit primum: procedentes enim a principiis ad conclusiones, non simul utrumque considerant. Deinde, quia discursus talis est procedentis de noto ad ignotum. Unde manifestum est quod, quando cognoscitur primum, adhuc ignoratur secundum. Et sic secundum non cognoscitur in primo, sed ex primo. Terminus vero discursus est, quando secundum videtur in primo, resolutis effectibus in causas: et tunc cessat discursus. Unde, cum Deus effectus suos in seipso videat sicut in causa, eius cognitio non est discursiva.” Translated by Alfred J. Freddoso.

⁹ *Supernatural*, 49–50.

God wanted a human family. He wanted to live on his creation, earth, with the people he had made. He wanted his unseen family and his human family to live with him and serve him. He wanted people to multiply and for all the earth to become like Eden. But when God forsook humanity at the Tower of Babel, he had no children—until he called Abraham. Israel was God’s new family. It was time to get back to the original plan. As Adam and Eve had been God’s earthly imagers, Israel would now fill that role.

Going back to Sinai was a homecoming. Even the heavenly council was there, watching as God’s plan was put back into motion. They were witnesses to a new covenant between God and his people—the Law.¹⁰

Were the events of Babel not a part of God’s original plan? Heiser indicates that at some point God’s plan was not “in motion,” and so it had to be “put back into motion.” Of course, nowhere in the account of Babel is it said that God “forsook humanity,” and God did not have to put His plan “back into motion” since this would require a change in God. In fact, Heiser presents God as reacting to the Babel incident: “The Tower of Babel incident was what gave rise to God’s decision to scatter the nations and put them under the authority of other gods (Deut. 4:19–20; 32:8–9). At first glance there doesn’t seem to be much connection between that event and what happened in Acts 2. But in the original languages, there are clear connections between the two.”¹¹ So, God reacted to the Babel incident with a decision to do something about it.

According to Heiser, God’s plan was ruined: “Think back to Eden. God wanted his two families—one divine, the other human—to live and rule together in Eden. That plan was ruined by rebellion, but revived by the rescue of Israel from Egypt. Out of Abraham’s children would come the messiah, who would undo the failure in Eden (Gen. 3:15). Without an Israel, we would have no destiny.”¹² We must first point out Heiser’s logical fallacy. He says “Without an Israel, we would have no destiny.” This fallacy is called Hypothesis Contrary to Fact. Someone commits this fallacy when making an argument that is based on a hypothetical situation that did not actually happen. Heiser assumes that if there has been no Israel, then things would have occurred differently. This type of argument is a fallacy because it relies on speculation rather than one any actual evidence. Heiser also assumes that if there was no Israel, God could not have had a destiny for us today. This not only places limitations on God, but also it assumes that Heiser knows more than he could possibly know.

So, was God’s plan ruined? Did God not anticipate this and plan for it? Are we to think that the fall was not a part of God’s original plan or that Babel forced God to react? Heiser says God came up with a “new plan.”

The disciples had no sense, no inkling, of this new plan of God’s. They thought of Jesus only as the son of David and rightful heir to his throne, someone who performed miracles just as the Old Testament prophets did. . . . The “new plan” of God’s—that he would die and then rise from the dead to reverse the curse of the fall—isn’t at all evident in the Old Testament.

¹⁰ *Supernatural*, 70.

¹¹ *Supernatural*, 129.

¹² *Supernatural*, 75.

Instead, clues are scattered throughout the Old Testament in dozens of places. Never is it all revealed in one place. The messianic profile is only clear in hindsight—and even then only to someone who already knows what to look for and expect.¹³

One wonders whether Heiser has actually read the Gospels. In the first chapter of John, Jesus confronts Nathanael, and Nathanael responds, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel” (Jn 1:49).¹⁴ After the discourse on mana, many of Jesus’ disciples turned back from following Him. When Jesus ask if the twelve would also turn back, Peter spoke for the group: “⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God’” (Jn. 6:68–69).¹⁵ It is certainly true that the disciples did not understand that Jesus would die on the cross and be resurrected, but they knew that Jesus was more than simply “the son of David and rightful heir to his throne, someone who performed miracles just as the Old Testament prophets did.”

Heiser says, “They [the disciples] didn’t understand Jesus’ death on the cross had been the plan from the beginning.”¹⁶ But if Jesus’ death on the cross was the plan from the beginning, why was it necessary to come up with a “new plan”? On the one hand Heiser says Jesus’ death on the cross was the plan from the beginning, and on the other hand he says, “The ‘new plan’ of God’s—that he would die and then rise from the dead to reverse the curse of the fall—isn’t at all evident in the Old Testament.”¹⁷

If God devised an “new plan,” then how do we explain Paul’s statement in Ephesians:

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love ⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will (Eph. 1:3–5).¹⁸

Why would God predestine us in Christ before the world was created if the fall was not part of God’s original plan? Without some original sin, there would be no separation from God, there would be no need for Christ to pay for our sins. Heiser says, “In Christ, believers are ‘the sons of God.’”¹⁹ However, if there had been no separation from God because of sin, there would be no need for our adoption as sons since humanity would not have stopped being “the sons of God.” Heiser says, “The idea of the Church being ‘the body of Christ’ reflects the truth that it is through Christ’s

¹³ *Supernatural*, 101.

¹⁴ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ Ναθαναήλ· Ῥαββί, σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, σὺ βασιλεὺς εἶ τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ (Jn. 1:49).

¹⁵ ⁶⁸ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ Σίμων Πέτρος· Κύριε, πρὸς τίνα ἀπελευσόμεθα; ῥήματα ζωῆς αἰωνίου ἔχεις, ⁶⁹ καὶ ἡμεῖς πεπιστεύκαμεν καὶ ἐγνώκαμεν ὅτι σὺ εἶ ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ (Jn. 6:68–69).

¹⁶ *Supernatural*, 109.

¹⁷ *Supernatural*, 101.

¹⁸ ³ Εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ εὐλογήσας ἡμᾶς ἐν πάσῃ εὐλογίᾳ πνευματικῇ ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις ἐν Χριστῷ, ⁴ καθὼς ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς ἐν αὐτῷ πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου, εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἁγίους καὶ ἀμώμους κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ ⁵ προορίας ἡμᾶς εἰς υἰοθεσίαν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς αὐτόν, κατὰ τὴν εὐδοκίαν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ (Eph. 1:3–5).

¹⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 308.

physical incarnation, *physical* death, and *physical* resurrection that believers—Jew or Gentile—become members of God’s family.”²⁰ But, according to Paul, these facts of salvation were predestined before the creation of the world. It cannot be the case that God altered his predestined plan as a result of the fall. Unless the fall was part of God’s original plan, there would have been no reason for God to predestine us to salvation. This, of course, raises the question of the relation of predestination to free will, a topic that we consider below.

Heiser asserts, “God cannot be harmed. But he can be grieved. He is moved by human sin and suffering (Gen 6:6; Isa 54:6–7). God was willing to risk that to have humanity.”²¹ This is a straightforward denial of God’s immutability. To be grieved necessarily involves a before and an after—before being grieved and after being grieved. But God is eternal and cannot be involved in before and afters. In fact, immutability means “immovable.”

Anything that is moved is changed in some aspect and remains the same in another aspect. In the midst of change, something must remain unchanged. Indeed, the very notion of change includes the idea that some *thing* changes. Yet, that which changes is the same thing through the change. As Margaret Gorman has observed, “If there were not *things* to change, man would say that there were *new* things, not that *things* changed.”²² Gorman identifies three elements of change.

1. The Arrival of Something New
2. a subject to receive the change or to be changed for, if there is nothing that has changed, no *change* has taken place but a new being has come. A ball to be moved must be a ball or it cannot be moved and be described as a ball that has been moved. A child to grow must be a child; the growing does not occur unless there is a subject of growing.
3. the subject’s lack of the perfection acquired through the change.²³

From these principles it is clear that to be moved is a change, and change necessarily takes place in something that is composed of parts. Since God is not composed of parts, He cannot change or be moved, as Aquinas explains:

Second, everything that is moved is such that it stays the same with respect to something and undergoes a transition with respect to something else. For instance, that which is moved from whiteness to blackness stays the same with respect to its substance. And so in each thing that is moved some sort of composition is present. However, it was shown above that there is no composition in God, but that instead He is altogether simple. Hence, it is clear that He cannot be moved.²⁴

²⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 309–10. Emphasis in original.

²¹ *Unseen Realm*, 60.

²² Margaret Gorman, *General Semantics and Contemporary Thomism* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 17 (emphasis in original).

²³ Gorman, *General Semantics*, 89.

²⁴ Aquinas, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.9.1. “Secundo, quia omne quod movetur, quantum ad aliquid manet, et quantum ad aliquid transit: sicut quod movetur de albedine in nigredinem, manet secundum substantiam. Et sic in omni eo quod movetur, attenditur aliqua compositio. Ostensum est autem supra quod in Deo nulla est compositio,

Heiser refers to Gen. 6:6 and Isa. 54:6–7:

“YHWH was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (Gen. 6:6).²⁵

“‘For YHWH has called you, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, even like a wife of one’s youth when she is rejected,’ says your God. ⁷‘For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you’” (Isa. 54:6–7).²⁶

It is important to note that Heiser, who chided others for “overemphasizing literal interpretation,” because “the most straightforward reading can produce bizarre outcomes,” takes these texts in a woodenly literal, “straightforward reading” that issues in a “bizarre outcome.” The bizarre outcome is the claim that the immutable God changes and moves. There is no question that the biblical text employs figures of speech with reference to God. The Psalmist refers to God’s fingers: “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers” (Ps. 8:3).²⁷ Of course, God does not have fingers since He is uncomposed. After Moses interceded for the people at Mt. Sinai, the text states, “So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people” (Exod. 32:14).²⁸ This must be interpreted as a figure of speech since, if God could change His mind, He would be a temporal being, not the eternal God.

There are texts that assert that God does not change. Samuel declares to Saul, “Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind” (1 Sam. 15:29).²⁹ James 1:17 states: “All generous giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or the slightest hint of change” (The NET Bible Translation).³⁰ Heiser refers to this verse in a few places, in the following quote he remarks on the notion of change:

James’ phrase “Father of lights” is unique in the Bible. Understanding the phrase is crucial to comprehending what he means by there being “no variation or shadow due to change” with God. “Father of lights” points to God’s role as creator of the stars and other celestial objects. We see this idea in the creation account as well as in Psalms (Gen 1:14–18; Pss 136:7–9; 148:1–5). Similar phrases pointing to the same idea occur sporadically in other ancient Jewish literature, like the Dead Sea Scrolls.

sed est omnino simplex. Unde manifestum est quod Deus moveri non potest.” Translated by Alfred J. Freddoso.

²⁵ וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וַיַּחֲעָצֵב אֶל־לִבּוֹ: (Gen. 6:6)

²⁶ כִּי־כִאֲשֶׁה עֲזוּבָה וְעֲצוּבַת רוּחַ קָרָאךְ יְהוָה וְאִשֶׁת נְעוּרִים כִּי תִמָּאֵס אָמַר אֱלֹהֶיךָ: ⁷ בְּרִגְעַ כְּטָן עֲזוּבָתִיךָ וּבְרַחֲמִים נְדָלִים אֶקְבֹּצֶךָ: (Isa. 54:6–7)

²⁷ כִּי־אַרְאֶה שָׁמַיִךְ מַעֲשֵׂי אֲצַבְעֶיךָ (Ps. 8:3)

²⁸ וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לְעַמּוֹ: (Exod. 32:14)

²⁹ וְגַם יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִשְׁקַר וְלֹא יִנָּחֵם כִּי לֹא אָדָם הוּא לְהִנָּחֵם: (1 Sam. 15:29)

³⁰ Πᾶσα δόσις ἀγαθὴ καὶ πᾶν δῶρημα τέλειον ἄνωθέν ἐστιν, καταβαῖνον ἀπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς τῶν φῶτων, παρ’ ᾧ οὐκ ἔνι παραλλαγὴ ἢ τροπῆς ἀποσκίασμα (James 1:17). One reason for the differences in translations is the text critical issues of the verse.

The celestial bodies mark seasons and the passage of time (Gen 1:14–18). They are associated with change. The word translated “change” (Greek *trope*) in James 1:17 is a noun used elsewhere in Greek literature to describe the movement and positioning of stars, seasonal changes and their effect on the land, and the two annual solstices. James’ use of “change” with “shadow” suggests an eclipse. His point is profound. Although the lights—the celestial bodies—change and vary, their Father does not. He is unwavering.³¹

So, in one place Heiser claims that God grieves and moves, yet in this place he claims that God does not change and vary, and that He is unwavering. Either Heiser contradicts himself, or he believes that part of God grieves and moves while another part of God does not and is unwavering. Most commentators take James’ statement as indicating that God does not change. Only a few of them are given here:

The term “change” picks up the astral realm of the phrase “Father of lights.” God, as Creator of the “heavenly lights,” is incomparably greater than they are (cf. Ps 135:6; Jer 4:23). The God who orders the stars and their changes to indicate “seasons and days and years” (Gen 1:14) and who controls all the changes in his creation does not himself change. His governance over all things is impeccable and benevolent, bringing them to the end he has willed for them.³²

Thus confusion results when one tries to determine to which astral phenomena James refers. . . . but commentators have searched in vain to find to what phenomena it refers: (a) shadow of the changing constellations; (b) shadow of an eclipse, or (c) shadow of night. Perhaps all of these are looking for too specific a referent. The father of lights is God. God neither changes (παραλλαγή) nor is changed (darkened by a shadow from change). The terms suggest a general reference to astronomical phenomena, particularly to the sun and moon, which were well known for changing, while God was unchanging.³³

“God’s creative relation to these variable heavenly lights prompts James to assert the immutable nature of God; ‘with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning’ (v. 17b). The changelessness of God is given a double emphasis. This attribute of God is evident when He is viewed, not through variable nature, but in His inner being.”³⁴

“It is not necessary to confine ‘shadow’ to eclipses or any other specific sort of shadow. God’s light or radiance lets nothing stop it. Horatius Bonar expresses a similar thought in his fine

³¹ *Unfiltered*, 211–12.

³² Kurt A. Richardson, *James*, vol. 36, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 86.

³³ Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 87–88.

³⁴ D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James: Tests of a Living Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 113.

hymn: *Light of the world! for ever, ever shining, There is no change in Thee; True Light of Life, all joy and health enshrining, Thou canst not fade nor flee.*³⁵

These interpretations are typical. Even the colleague of Rudolph Bultmann, Martin Dibelius (1883–1947), takes this to be a statement about God’s unchangeableness:

For, as we have seen, what Jas offers is a mosaic: the saying, which portrays God as the giver of good things, is supposed to confirm the idea that temptations do not come from God; the stressing of his unchangeableness is obviously intended to exclude the possibility that sometimes good comes from God and sometimes evil.³⁶

I have not found any place in his publications where Heiser either refers to or attempts to provide his view of the statement in Mal. 3:6: ““For I, YHWH, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.”³⁷ Since it has been rationally demonstrated that God is immutable, Heiser’s claims that God changed His plan, or was grieved, cannot be correct.

Denial of God’s Sovereignty and Providence

Sovereignty and Providence are traditionally distinguished. Sovereignty concerns God’s authority to govern and preserve His creation, while Providence concerns God’s actions of governing and preserving His creation. In about 437, in his text *De Providentia*, Theodoret of Cyrus (386–460) declared, “For the Creator himself governs the creature, and does not allow the ship which he has built to be deserted by the pilot. But since he himself built the ship, and planted the material from which it is made, and at the same time created the material and built the ship, he also holds the same rudder constantly.”³⁸

Aquinas argued that Providence extends over all things:

Chapter 123 - That everything is governed by divine providence: From the aforesaid it may be evident that all things are governed by divine providence. For whatever things are ordered to the end of some agent, they are directed to the end by that agent, just as all those who are in an army are ordered by the leader to the end, which is victory, and are directed by him to the end. Now it has been shown above that all things tend by their actions to the end of divine

³⁵ James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 75.

³⁶ Martin Dibelius and Heinrich Greeven, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 103.

³⁷

(Mal. 3:6): כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה לֹא שֶׁנִּיתִי אֶחָד בְּיָדֵיכֶם לֹא כְלִיָּהֶם:

³⁸ Theodoretus Cyrensis Episcopus, “De Providentia,” Tomus 83, *Patrologiæ Græcæ* (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1864), 563–64. Κυθερνῶ γὰρ τὴν κτίσιν ὁ Ποιητὴς, καὶ οὐ κατέλιπεν ἀκυθέρνητον ὁ πεποίηκε σκάφος, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς ὢν καὶ ναυπηγός, καὶ τῆς ὕλης φυτουργός, καὶ κιατὸ ταῦτόν τὴν γε ὕλην δημιουργήσας, καὶ τὸ σκάφος ὑφάνας, κατεγων δια τελει τὰ πηδάλια.

Creaturam enim ipse Creator regit, nec navim, quam ipse construxit, gubernatore destitui patitur. Sed cum idem ipse navim fabricarit, et materiam e qua constat plantaverit, simulque materiam crearit, navimque extruxerit, clavum quoque ejusdem constanter tenet.

goodness. From God himself, therefore, to whose end this is proper, all things are directed to their end. Now this is the providence of a certain king and being governed. All things, therefore, are governed by divine providence.³⁹

The Westminster Confession of Faith states that all creatures, actions, and things are governed by the providence of God:

Chap. V: Of Providence. I. God the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy Providence; according to his infallible fore-knowledge, and the free, and immutable counsell of his own Will, to the praise of the glory of His Wisdom, Power, Justice, Goodness, and Mercy.⁴⁰

Charles Hodge taught that God's providence preserves and governs all creatures and their actions:

God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions. Providence, therefore, includes preservation and government. By preservation is meant that all things owe the continuance of their existence, with all their properties and powers, to the will of God. . . . Providence includes not only preservation, but government. The latter includes the ideas of design and control. It supposes an end to be attained, and the disposition and direction of means for its accomplishment. If God governs the universe He has some great end, including an indefinite number of subordinate ends, towards which it is directed, and He must control the sequence of all events, so as to render certain the accomplishment of all his purposes.⁴¹

As Beeke and Smalley explain, "Just as God preserves all beings that he made, so he rules over all things and all events, and directs them according to his good and wise decree. Divine control is not coercive tyranny, but a consequence of God's infinite power, omnipresence, and authority over his creation. Like God's preservation, God's active control reflects his wisdom, goodness, and faithfulness."⁴²

The Westminster Confession of Faith also affirmed God's sovereignty:

³⁹ S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Compendium theologiae* (Columbia, South Carolina: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 1.123. "Caput 123 - Quod omnia reguntur divina providentia: Ex praedictis autem manifestum esse potest quod omnia divina providentia gubernantur. Quaecumque enim ordinantur ad finem alicuius agentis, ab illo agente diriguntur in finem, sicut omnes qui sunt in exercitu, ordinantur ad finem ducis, qui est victoria, et ab eo diriguntur in finem. Supra autem ostensum est quod omnia suis actibus tendunt in finem divinae bonitatis. Ab ipso igitur Deo, cuius hic finis proprius est, omnia diriguntur in finem. Hoc autem est providentia alicuius regi et gubernari. Omnia igitur divina providentia reguntur."

⁴⁰ The Humble Advice Of the Assembly Of Divines, Now by Authority of *Parliament* fitting at Westminster, Concerning *A Confession of Faith* (London and Edinburgh: Evan Tyler, 1647), V.10.

⁴¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1871), 1.575.

⁴² Beeke and Smalley, *Revelation and God*, 1065.

Chap. III: *Of Gods eternall Decree.* God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy Counsell of his own Will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass. Yet so, as thereby neither is God the Author of sin, nor is violence offered to the wil of the Creatures, nor is the Liberty or contingency of second Causes taken away, but rather established.⁴³

Sovereignty is not technically an attribute of God, but is rather the relation of God's creation to God. As the Creator of all that has come to be, God has absolute control and authority over all. God declared His sovereignty to Moses: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Exod. 33:19).⁴⁴ Paul quoted this and expanded on it: "⁴²⁰On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? ²¹Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?" (Rom. 9:20–21).⁴⁵ Nebuchadnezzar came to acknowledge God's absolute sovereignty: "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing. But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can restrain His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Dan. 4:35).⁴⁶

The *Didache* was a Christian treatise probably composed during the time of Paul's mission to the gentiles. According to Milavec, "The *Didache* represents the preserved oral tradition whereby mid-first-century house churches detailed the step-by-step transformation by which gentile converts were to be prepared for full active participation in their assemblies." He goes on to point out that it "was created at the time of Paul's mission to the gentiles."⁴⁷ The *Didache* affirmed God's sovereignty: "Accept the experiences befalling you as good, knowing that, apart from God, nothing happens."⁴⁸

The manuscript titled, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, is a letter relating the events of Polycarp's martyrdom. It was composed some time in the 2nd century. The letter affirms the sovereignty of God who has power of all things. "All the martyrdoms, then, were blessed and noble which took place according to the will of God. For it becomes us who profess greater piety than others, to ascribe the authority over all things to God."⁴⁹

⁴³ *A Confession of Faith*, 6.

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וַחֲנַנִי אֶת-אֲשֶׁר אֶחָן וְרַחֲמֵי אֶת-אֲשֶׁר אֶרְחָם: (Exod. 33:19)

^{45 20} ὦ ἄνθρωπε, μενοῦνγε σὺ τίς εἶ ὁ ἀνταποκρινόμενος τῷ θεῷ; μὴ ἐρεῖ τὸ πλάσμα τῷ πλάσαντι. Τί με ἐποίησας οὕτως; ²¹ ἢ οὐκ ἔχει ἐξουσίαν ὁ κεραμεὺς τοῦ πηλοῦ ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ φυράματος ποιῆσαι ὃ μὲν εἰς τιμὴν σκεῦος ὃ δὲ εἰς ἀτιμίαν; (Rom. 9:20–21).

וְכָל־דְּאָרֵי אֶרֶץ כְּלֵף חֲשִׁיבִין וּכְמֻצָּבֹת עֶבֶד בְּחֵיל שְׁמָא וְדָאֲרֵי אֶרֶץ וְלֹא אִיתִי דִּי־יִמְחָא בִּיכּוּחַ וְיֵאמֹר
לֵה מַה עֲבַדְתָּ: (Dan. 4:35)

⁴⁷ Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003), ix.

⁴⁸ Milavec, *The Didache*, 3:10 τὰ συμβαίνοντά σου ἐνεργήματα ὡς ἀγαθὰ προσδέξῃ· εἰδὼς ὅτι ἄτερ θεοῦ οὐδὲν γίνεται.

⁴⁹ Kirsopp Lake, ed., “The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna,” in *The Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), II.1314–15. Μακάρια μὲν οὖν καὶ γενναῖα τὰ μαρτύρια πάντα τὰ κατὰ τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ γεγονότα. δεῖ γὰρ εὐλαβεστέρους ἡμᾶς ὑπάρχοντας τῷ θεῷ τὴν κατὰ πάντων ἐξουσίαν ἀνατιθέναι.

Although we have already given this quote from Tertullian, it serves to give that portion in which he declares that God has all power: “By that word [God] you signify that there is someone, and you confess that all power belongs to Him to Whose will you look.”⁵⁰

Aquinas argued that God’s power extends to all things that do not involve a contradiction:

Accordingly, as stated above, God’s power, considered in itself, extends to all such objects as do not imply a contradiction. Nor is there even an instance of those which convey a failure, or bodily motion, since the very possibility of such things involves their impossibility to God. And as regards things that imply a contradiction, they are impossible to God as being impossible in themselves. Consequently God’s power extends to things that are possible in themselves: and such are the things that do not involve a contradiction. Therefore it is evident that God is called omnipotent because he can do all things that are possible in themselves.⁵¹

According to Charles Hodge, “Sovereignty is not a property of the divine nature, but a prerogative arising out of the perfections of the Supreme Being. If God be a Spirit, and therefore a person, infinite, eternal, and immutable in his being and perfections, the Creator and Preserver of the universe, He is of right its absolute sovereign.”⁵²

Norman Geisler asserts, “A God who is before all things, beyond all things, creates all things, upholds all things, knows all things, and can do all things, is also in control of all things. This complete control of all things is called the sovereignty of God.”⁵³

According to Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley, “God is *sovereign*; that is, he is the supreme Lord who rules over all.”⁵⁴ They go on to point out that modern theology has misrepresented the sovereignty of God.

Modern theology severely truncates the doctrine of God’s sovereignty because people assume it hinders love and relationships. [Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 23–24.] John Cobb and David Griffin say that God “seeks to persuade” his creatures but “cannot control” the outcome of events. [Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 53.] Greg Boyd writes, “God rules by love, not control.” [Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 69.] For John Sanders, God’s sovereignty is his freedom to limit his control over significant parts of reality so that others can join him in a real relationship and partnership. Emil Brunner said, “God limits himself by creating something which is not himself,” a self-limitation of omnipotence “that springs from the love of God.”

⁵⁰ Tertulliani, *De Testimonio Animae* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1952), II.1.6–7. “Ea voce et aliquem esse significas et omnem illi confiteris potestatem, ad cuius spectas voluntatem.”

⁵¹ S. Thomae Aquinatis, *De Potentia Dei*, vol. 1, *Quaestiones Disputatae* (Taurini: Marietti, 1942), Q.1.Art.7.19. “Dicendum ergo est, quod, sicut supra dictum est, potentia Dei, quantum est de se, ad omnia illa objecta se extendit quae contradictionem non implicant. Nec etiam instantia de illis est quae defectum important, vel corporalem motum; quia posse ea, Deo est non posse. Ea vero quae contradictionem implicant Deus non potest; quae quidem sunt impossibilia secundum se. Relinquitur ergo quod Dei potentia ad ea se extendat quae sunt possibilia secundum se. Haec autem sunt quae contradictionem non implicant. Constat ergo quod Deus ideo dicitur omnipotens, quia potest omnia quae sunt possibilia secundum se.”

⁵² Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1.440.

⁵³ Norman L. Geisler, *Chosen But Free* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1999), 15.

⁵⁴ Beeke and Smalley, *Revelation and God*, 758.

Jürgen Moltmann sets lordship against friendship as if God cannot be Lord if he would be love.⁵⁵

Assertions

Heiser frequently refers to the sovereignty of God. Below are only some examples:

“the sovereign king”⁵⁶

“sovereignty belongs to the singular Most High”⁵⁷

“Verse 25 says very plainly that the Most High is sovereign.”⁵⁸

“Nor does he need it for his sovereign plan.”⁵⁹

“He is their creator and sovereign master.”⁶⁰

“God’s sovereign plan of salvation.”⁶¹

“the God of Israel remained the real sovereign.”⁶²

“There is a distinct pattern to Yahweh’s Sovereign choice of human leaders, a pattern that includes the divine council.”⁶³

“When we see the word ‘God,’ we instinctively assign a unique set of attributes (e.g., omnipresence, omnipotence, sovereignty) to the letters G-o-d.”⁶⁴

“God graciously allows us to participate with him in fulfilling his kingdom plan on earth, yet he is sovereign. In the end, only he will deserve praise.”⁶⁵

These assertions certainly seem orthodox. If God is absolutely sovereign, then there cannot be another God who is also absolutely sovereign. In order for one God to be absolutely sovereign, God would necessarily be sovereign over the other god, who therefore could not be absolutely sovereign. Hence, there can be only one God. But Heiser’s claims about God’s sovereignty, though they seem orthodox, are denied by his compromises.

Compromises

In several places Heiser refers to God’s plan having been derailed or having failed. The following are only some examples:

⁵⁵ Beeke and Smalley, *Revelation and God*, 759.

⁵⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 31.

⁵⁷ *Unseen Realm*, 54.

⁵⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 54.

⁵⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 60.

⁶⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 68.

⁶¹ *Unfiltered*, 33.

⁶² *Unseen Realm*, 108.

⁶³ *Unseen Realm*, 232.

⁶⁴ *Angels*, 11.

⁶⁵ *Angels*, 56.

The kingdom of God is the rule of God. God desires to rule over *all* he has created: the invisible spiritual realm and the visible earthly realm. He will have his way in both domains.⁶⁶

It is difficult to overlook the assumption that God does not presently rule over “all” he has created.

God’s original plan was to live among his human family on earth. We who were made lesser than the divine beings (Heb 2:6–7) were destined to become members of God’s household. At the fall, this goal was derailed. The rest of the Bible is about God’s effort to restore what was lost—to dwell among his people, transforming the earth into his kingdom.⁶⁷

Heiser believes that God’s plan can be “derailed” because of the failure of God’s people. But this necessarily means that God is not absolutely sovereign and that His providence has failed.

In contrast to the idyllic beginnings in Eden, the installation of Israel into the land had been violent. Those means were necessary to revive Yahweh’s original vision in a fallen world, a world full of divine and human conflict, of free imagers seeking their own will, not the will of the creator. Yahweh could have just spoken Israel into existence in the land. He could have acted unilaterally as high sovereign to resuscitate his rule on earth. But Yahweh’s decisions in the original Eden meant that he would not overturn human (or divine) freedom in his imagers. Yahweh had chosen to accomplish his ends through imagers loyal to him against imagers who weren’t. This commitment to humanity, his original imagers on earth, is one often-missed reason why, when humanity (Israel) failed to restore God’s rule, God took matters into his own hands *by becoming human* in Jesus Christ.⁶⁸

Why would “Yahweh’s original vision” need to be “revived”? According to OED, “to revive” means “To cause to return to a flourishing state; to restore again following decline or decay.”⁶⁹ Of course Heiser believes that God’s plans have failed, so God had to come up with a new plan.

God’s kingdom rule—his plan for a restored Eden—went down in flames. The supernatural worldview that emerged from Babel, with unbelieving nations under the dominion of evil gods, remained intact. Israel was defeated and scattered, and her Promised Land came under the rule of other gods and their peoples.⁷⁰

It would be difficult to find a clearer rejection of God’s sovereignty and providence. Heiser’s belief that God’s people and God’s enemies can derail His plans denies the very declarations of Scripture. Even Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed: “All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing. But He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth;

⁶⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 38. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ *Angels*, 152–53.

⁶⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 215.

⁶⁹ OED, s.v. “revive.”

⁷⁰ *Supernatural*, 95.

And no one can restrain His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” (Dan. 4:35).⁷¹ Jehoshaphat prayed: “YHWH, God of our fathers, are You not God in the heavens? And are You not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You” (2 Chron. 20:6).⁷² David made a similar prayer: “¹¹ To Your, YHWH, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; to You is the dominion, YHWH, and You exalt Yourself as head over all. ¹² Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone” (1 Chron. 29:11–12).⁷³ David and Jehoshaphat’s view of God’s sovereignty and providence are quite different from Heiser’s

The glory of the conquest was overshadowed by epic failure. Defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory. God’s kingdom rule—his plan for a restored Eden—went down in flames.⁷⁴

Heiser says God’s plan went down in flames. So, according to Heiser, God had a plan that He could not bring about because Israel frustrated His plan by their failure to take the land that was promised to them. Did God not know that this would happen? Was Israel’s failure to take the land outside of the will of God? What if Israel’s failure was part of God’s plan from the beginning? Heiser’s assertion denies God’s sovereignty and providence.

Since the fall, God had been trying to revive his original goal for Eden: to live with both his divine and human family on earth. God had told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, thereby spreading God’s good rule over the rest of the planet. God wanted the whole earth to be a place where heaven and earth met, where humanity could enjoy the divine, and where the divine could enjoy earth and humanity. We know how *that* went.⁷⁵

Heiser depicts God as trying. Does God try to do something? To try is to make an effort, to endeavor to accomplish something, to attempt to do something.⁷⁶ “Trying” implies that an attempt was made, but the goal was not attained, so it was necessary to try again.

It was time for a new approach to the old problem of sin and failure. Humanity could not be trusted with reviving the Edenic kingdom rule. Only God himself could do what needed to be done. Only God could meet the obligations of his own covenants. But humanity would not be set aside. Instead, *God would have to become man*. God would have to fulfill the Law and the covenants himself and then take upon himself the penalty for all human failure. But pulling

⁷¹ וְכָל־דָּאֲרֵי אֶרֶץ כְּלָה חֲשִׁיבִין וְכַמְצָבִיהָ עֶבֶד בְּחֵיל שְׁמָיָא וְדָאֲרֵי אֶרֶץ וְלֹא אִיתִי דִּי־יִמְחָא בִּידָהּ וְיֹאמֶר לָהּ מָה עֲבַדְתָּ: (Dan. 4:35)

⁷² וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ הֲלֹא אֲתָה־הוּא אֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם אֲתָהּ מוֹשֵׁל בְּכָל־מַמְלָכוֹת הַגּוֹיִם וּבִיָּדְךָ כָּח וְגִבּוֹרָה וְאִין עֲמִיד לְהִתִּיצֵב: (1 Chron. 20:6)

⁷³ לָךְ יְהוָה הַגִּבּוֹרָה וְהַתְּפָאֶרֶת וְהַנּוֹצֵחַ וְהַהוֹד כִּי־כָל בְּשָׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ לָךְ יְהוָה הַמְּמַלְכָה וְהַמְתַּנְשֵׂא לְכָל לְרֹאשׁ: ¹¹ לָךְ יְהוָה הַגִּבּוֹרָה וְהַתְּפָאֶרֶת וְהַנּוֹצֵחַ וְהַהוֹד כִּי־כָל בְּשָׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ לָךְ יְהוָה הַמְּמַלְכָה וְהַמְתַּנְשֵׂא לְכָל לְרֹאשׁ: (1 Chron. 29:11–12) ¹² וְהַעֲשֶׂה וְהַקְבֹּד מִלְּפָנֶיךָ וְאֲתָהּ מוֹשֵׁל בְּכָל וּבִיָּדְךָ כָּח וְגִבּוֹרָה וּבִיָּדְךָ לְגַדֵּל וּלְחַזֵּק לְכָל: (1 Chron. 29:11–12)

⁷⁴ *Supernatural*, 95.

⁷⁵ *Supernatural*, 97.

⁷⁶ OED, s.v. “try.”

off that unthinkable solution meant that it would have to be kept secret from every- one, including the intelligent supernatural beings hostile to his purposes. That wasn't going to be easy.⁷⁷

According to Heiser, since the first approach, that is, God's initial plan, failed, God had to come up with a "new approach." Where in the Bible is there any statement about a "new approach"? Did God abandon the first approach? Was the supposed failure of the first approach not part of God's initial plan? There certainly is a new covenant, but this is not because the first covenant failed. The new covenant was always God's plan. Jeremiah anticipated the new covenant.

After the flood, God had repeated the goal of Eden to Noah and his family: be fruitful and multiply. It was a do-over. Instead, humanity rebelled. Rather than obey God and spread the knowledge and rule of God everywhere, they would build a tower where God could come to them.

Failure again. God wouldn't go for it. He mixed up the nations' languages and turned the nations over to his divine council to rule. Then he decided to start over with a new human family—through Abraham and Sarah. He would get back to the other nations—through Abraham's descendants—once his kingdom rule was revived (Gen. 12:3).

This, too, was a failure. So was the next attempt, bringing Israel out of Egypt, then to Sinai, and then finally to the Promised Land. Israel failed. Eventually God raised up David, and then Solomon. But after Solomon died, Israel followed other gods and the Israelites turned on each other. God had to expel them from the Promised Land in exile.⁷⁸

So, God did a 'do-over,' but, according to Heiser, this led to "Failure again," and God "decided to start over." We have already shown that there is no decision making process in God. Not only does Heiser's assertion deny the sovereignty and providence of God, but also he denies God's immutability. That God's acts and plans cannot ever have failed or been derailed is emphatically declared by God. We have given this quote above, but it is relevant here:

¹⁰"You are My witnesses," declares the LORD, "and My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me. ¹¹"I, even I, am the LORD, and there is no savior besides Me. ¹²"It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed, and there was no strange god among you; So you are My witnesses," declares the LORD, "And I am God. ¹³"Even from eternity I am He, and there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?" (Isa. 43:10–13).⁷⁹

⁷⁷ *Supernatural*, 96.

⁷⁸ *Supernatural*, 98.

⁷⁹ ¹⁰ אֲתֵם עֲדֵי נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְעַבְדִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּחִרְתִּי לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּ וְתִאֱמִינוּ לִי וְתִבְיִנוּ כִּי־אֲנִי הוּא לִפְנֵי לֹא־נֻצַר אֵל וְאַחֲרַי לֹא יִהְיֶה: ¹¹ אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה וְאֵין מִבְּלַעֲדִי מוֹשִׁיעַ: ¹² אֲנֹכִי הַגִּדְתִּי וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי וְהִשְׁמַעְתִּי וְאֵין בְּכֶם זֶר וְאַתֶּם עֲדֵי נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְאֲנִי־אֵל: ¹³ גַּם־מִיּוֹם אֲנִי הוּא וְאֵין מִיָּדִי מַצִּיל אֶפְעֹל וּמִי יִשְׁבְּנָה: (Isa. 43:10–13)

God is asserting, “Who can cause My plans to fail or be derailed so that I must ‘do over’?” Of course the answer is, “No one!”

²⁴ YHWH of hosts has sworn saying, “Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand, ²⁵ to break Assyria in My land, and I will trample him on My mountains. Then his yoke will be removed from them and his burden removed from their shoulder. ²⁶ This is the plan devised against the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out against all the nations. ²⁷ For YHWH of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?” (Isa. 14:24–27).⁸⁰

According to Heiser, God’s plans have been frustrated, derailed, and failed so that God has to “revive” them, and God must have a “do over.” According to God, who can frustrate His plan? According to God, who can turn back His hand? According to God, when He has planned, it will stand. Heiser is misrepresenting the nature of God.

Predestination and Foreknowledge

Heiser believes that God took a risk by creating beings in His image:

God’s decision to create free imagers involved that risk. You might think that all the risk was ours—after all, the world of humanity has suffered in its wake. But the only way in which there was no risk involved for God is if you define risk as the threat of harm. God cannot be harmed. But he can be grieved. He is moved by human sin and suffering (Gen 6:6; Isa 54:6–7). God was willing to risk that to have humanity.⁸¹

One wonders from where Heiser got his notion of ‘risk.’ According to OED, the definition of risk is, “(Exposure to) the possibility of loss, injury, or other adverse or unwelcome circumstance; a chance or situation involving such a possibility.”⁸² Notice that the OED definition refers to the “possibility” of loss, injury, etc. In other words, risk necessarily requires uncertainty about the outcome of an action and the possibility of something unforeseen. Are we to think that God was uncertain about whether Adam and Eve would disobey Him and precipitate the fall? The idea that God took a risk by creating free beings flies in the face of the foreknowledge of God as Paul declared:

⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love ⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In Him we have redemption through His

⁸⁰ נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת לֵאמֹר אִם-לֹא פֶאֶשֶׁר דְּמִיתִי בֵּן הָיְתָה וְכֹאֲשֶׁר יַעֲצָתִי הִיא תִּקְוָם: ²⁵ לְשֹׁבֵר אֲשׁוּר בְּאַרְצִי וְעַל-חָרִי אֲבוֹסֶנּוּ וְסָר מֵעַלֵּיהֶם עָלָיו וְסִבְּלוּ מֵעַל שִׁכְמוֹ יְסוֹר: ²⁶ זֹאת הָעֲצָה הַיְעוּצָה עַל-כָּל-הָאָשֶׁרֶץ וְזֹאת הַיָּד הַנִּסְתָּה עַל-כָּל-הַגּוֹיִם: ²⁷ כִּי־הָיָה צְבָאוֹת יָעַן וּמִי יָפֵר וַיְדוּ הַנְּטוּיָהּ וּמִי יִשִּׁיבָנָהּ: (Isa. 14:24–27)

⁸¹ *Unseen Realm*, 60.

⁸² OED, s.v. “risk.”

blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace ⁸ which He lavished on us (Eph. 1:4–8).⁸³

If God did not know that man would fall, why does Paul declare that God chose us in Christ “before the foundation of the world”? Heiser seems to reject the notion that God predestined us to salvation in Christ. Paul also taught, “²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; ³⁰ and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (Rom. 8:29–30).⁸⁴

The problem here is that Heiser does not understand the doctrine of predestination, nor God’s foreknowledge, nor even God’s nature. Heiser appeals to a narrative section from 1 Samuel 23 as an illustration of his position. He quotes verses, 1–13, and he focuses on David’s appeal to God and God’s response. First it should be noted that nowhere in this passage is anything said about God’s foreknowledge. In this narrative, David asks God three questions. The first and second questions are, “Will the rulers of Keilah deliver me into his hand? Will Saul come down as your servant has heard?” (1 Sam. 23:11). The third question is, “Will the rulers of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul?” Basically what David is asking is, “If A happens, will B happen?” So, God is forewarning David of what will happen if he stays in Keilah. So, David does not stay in Keilah, but escaped from Keilah, which prevented these things from happening.

Heiser seems to have misunderstood what is going on here. This has nothing to do with the doctrine of predestination. In fact, this has nothing to do with foreknowledge. God is not declaring that these things will necessarily happen or even that He had foreknowledge that they would happen. God is telling David, “If you do A, then B will happen.” People often do this kind of thing: “If you put your hand into the cookie jar one more time, you will be punished.”

Heiser seems to subscribe to a Socinian view of God’s knowledge. Socinianism, which gets its name from its principal exponent, Faustus Socinus (1509–1563), was an anti-trinitarian movement during the Radical Reformation of the 16th century.⁸⁵ Valentinus Smalcius (1572–1622), a German Socinian theologian, expressed the Socinian objection to the claim that God can know future contingents, which sounds very much like what Heiser is asserting:

How indeed can truth be that which destroys itself, and contradicts the sacred letters, or brings great power to them? To say that God knows those things which are in no way possible, what future contingencies are, is to contradict himself. For what is knowable is not properly contingent: what is properly contingent cannot be known. I will continue, if God is a civilist

⁸³ ⁴ καθὼς ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς ἐν αὐτῷ πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου, εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἁγίους καὶ ἀμώμους κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ ⁵ προορίσας ἡμᾶς εἰς υἰοθεσίαν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς αὐτόν, κατὰ τὴν εὐδοκίαν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ ⁶ εἰς ἔπαινον δόξης τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ ἧς ἐχαρίτωσεν ἡμᾶς ἐν τῷ ἡγαπημένῳ, ⁷ ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν διὰ τοῦ αἵματος αὐτοῦ, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν παραπτωμάτων, κατὰ τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ ⁸ ἧς ἐπερίσσευσεν εἰς ἡμᾶς (Eph. 1:4–8).

⁸⁴ ²⁹ ὅτι οὓς προέγνω, καὶ προώρισεν συμμόρφους τῆς εἰκόνος τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν πρωτότοκον ἐν πολλοῖς ἀδελφοῖς· ³⁰ οὓς δὲ προώρισεν, τούτους καὶ ἐκάλεσεν· καὶ οὓς ἐκάλεσεν, τούτους καὶ ἐδικαίωσεν· οὓς δὲ ἐδικαίωσεν, τούτους καὶ ἐδόξασεν (Rom 8:29–30).

⁸⁵ It does *not* seem to be the case that Heiser is an anti-Trinitarian.

of contingencies, as contingencies, how could he or should he have been saddened when he saw the happening of those things which he had always foreseen? How could he expect anything else when he foresaw the future with certainty? How could he swear that he would do something that he knew was not going to happen?⁸⁶

It is obvious that human beings can know those things that are in no way possible. In fact, to claim that the very claim is a claim to know something that is in no way possible, that is, for God to contradict Himself. Since humans can have such knowledge, how could God not have such knowledge. In fact, future contingencies are not things that are in no way possible. Future contingencies are contingent, not impossible.

Yet Heiser asserts a view that is very similar to the one described by Smalcus:

Things we discussed earlier in this book allow us to take the discussion further. God may foreknow an event and predestine that event, but such predestination does not necessarily include decisions that lead up to that event. In other words, God may know and predestine the end—that something is ultimately going to happen—without predestining the means to that end.

We saw this precise relationship when we looked at decision making in God's divine council. The passages in 1 Kings 22:1 3–2 3 and Daniel 4 informed us that God can decree something and then leave the means up to the decisions of other free-will agents. The end is sovereignly ordained; the means to that end may or may not be.⁸⁷

Of course, if God predestined an event, then that event will necessarily happen. Since that event will necessarily happen, how is it even conceivable that God did not also predestine the decisions that led up to that event? If the decisions are what led up to the event, and since the event will necessarily happen, it is absurd to think that the decisions were not also predestined.

In fact, God knows all future contingents, as Aquinas explains:

To Objection 3: Those things which are temporally brought into action are known by us successively in time, but by God in eternity, which is above time. Hence to us, because we know future contingencies insofar as they are such, they cannot be certain: but only to God, whose understanding is in eternity beyond time. Just as he who goes along the road does not see them because they are coming behind him: but he who looks at the whole road from a certain height sees at the same time all those who pass along the road. And therefore that which is known by us must also be necessary according to what is in itself: because those

⁸⁶ Valentinus Smalcus, *Refutatio Thesium D. Wolfgangi Frantzii* (Racoviae: Sebastian Sternacki, 1614), Disputatio.XII.436–37. “Quomodo verò verum esse potest, quod seipsum destruit, & sacris literis repugnat, vel magnam illis vim affert? Dicere, Deum illa, quæ nullo modo sunt, scire, qualia sunt futura contingentia, est sibi contradicere. Nam quod scibile est, illud contingens propriè non est: Quod contingens est propriè, sciri non potest. Porro si Deus scivita contingentia, ut contingentia, quomodo contristari potuit aut debuit, cum ea fieri videret, quæ semper præviderat? Quomodo aliud expectare potuit, quàm futurum certò prævidit? Quomodo jurare potuit, se aliquid facturum, qui sciebat ilud futurum non fuisse?”

⁸⁷ *Unseen Realm*, 65.

things which are future contingencies in themselves cannot be known by us. But those things which are known by God must be necessary according to the manner in which they are subject to divine knowledge, as has been said: but not absolutely, according as they are considered in their proper causes.⁸⁸

An example that Aquinas gives is seeing Socrates sitting. If Socrates is in fact sitting, then it is certainly known that he is sitting. However, knowing that he is sitting does not change the fact that his sitting is contingent. God knows what will necessarily take place in the future. God also knows all contingents because He knows them from eternity, but that does not change the fact that, in time, they are contingent.

Geisler provides a helpful explanation:

All of God's knowledge is necessary, even his knowledge of contingents. Simply because an event is contingent does not mean that God's knowledge of it is also contingent. God knows everything that can be known (both actual and possible) in a necessary way, even if a thing known is not necessary. For example, God knows for sure what will happen freely. In Aquinas's own words, "things known are contingent because of their proximate causes, while the knowledge of God, which is the first cause, is necessary." So the event is necessary from the standpoint of God's knowledge, but free from the vantage point of its immediate cause. There is no contradiction involved here at all.⁸⁹

Heiser does not understand the relation between God's foreknowledge and the free moral agency of human kind. Appealing to his treatment of the passage from 1 Samuel, Heiser declares, "*This passage clearly establishes that divine foreknowledge does not necessitate divine predestination.* God foreknew what Saul would do and what the people of Keilah would do given a set of circumstances. In other words, God foreknew a *possibility*—but this foreknowledge did not mandate that the possibility was actually predestined to happen."⁹⁰ Again, Heiser has misunderstood the situation. God did not tell David that these events were necessarily going to happen. God told David that if He did A then B would occur. As we pointed out above, as finite beings we do this very kind of thing when we know what could happen if certain choices are made or certain actions are taken. But, knowing what would happen given certain choices or actions is not foreknowledge. It is simply knowledge.

⁸⁸ Aquinas, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.14.13. "AD TERTIUM DICENDUM quod ea quae temporaliter in actum reducuntur, a nobis successive cognoscuntur in tempore, sed a Deo in aeternitate, quae est supra tempus. Unde nobis, quia cognoscimus futura contingentia in quantum talia sunt, certa esse non possunt: sed soli Deo, cuius intelligere est in aeternitate supra tempus. Sicut ille qui vadit per viam, non videt illos quia post eum veniunt: sed ille qui ab aliqua altitudine totam viam intuetur, simul videt omnes transeuntes per viam. Et ideo illud quod scitur a nobis, oportet esse necessarium etiam secundum quod in se est: quia ea quae in se sunt contingentia futura, a nobis sciri non possunt. Sed ea quae sunt scita a Deo, oportet esse necessaria secundum modum quo subsunt divinae scientiae, ut dictum est: non autem absolute, secundum quod in propriis causis considerantur."

⁸⁹ Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 117.

⁹⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 64.

At the beginning of his discussion, Heiser asserts, “Despite the risk of evil, free will is a wonderful gift. God’s decision was a loving one. Understanding that requires only a consideration of the two alternatives: (1) not having life at all, and (2) being a mindless robot, capable only of obeying commands and responding to programming.”⁹¹ This is a false dichotomy based on the fact that Heiser does not understand the relation of God’s foreknowledge and human freedom. There is a third option: (3) being free moral agents in a world in which the absolutely sovereign God foreknows and has determined all things in accordance with free will.

Heiser asks, “If our decisions were all coerced, how authentic would those ‘decisions’ actually be? If love is coerced or programmed, is it really love? Is *any* such decision really a genuine *decision* at all? It isn’t. For a decision to be real, it must be made against an alternative that could be chosen.”⁹² Predestination and foreknowledge does not make mankind a mindless robot nor does God’s foreknowledge coerce our decisions. Turretin explains what Heiser does not understand:

XXV. The freedom of the will is indeed overthrown by physical necessity and coercion, which is fraught with the formal reason of freedom; but not through hypothetical necessity and the result of infallibility, for in the same respect it can be free and necessary: Hence, although the actions of men are free, because they are done spontaneously and by the previous judgment of reason, they do not cease to be necessary by reason of God’s decree and foreknowledge. But the foreknowledge of God indeed brings about the infallibility of the future and events, and the necessity of consequence, yet it does not bring about coercion or violence, nor does it take away from the will its intrinsic freedom.⁹³

Turretin goes on to explain that God’s foreknowledge is infallible:

XXX. When God conceives future contingencies as certain futures, he does not conceive them otherwise than they are; but he knows those in relation to the decree as necessarily happening and determined, which in relation to their causes he knows to be indeterminate and contingently future. Therefore God foresaw them both in himself and by his decree as the first cause, and thus they are necessary because of the immutability of the decree and the infallibility of foreknowledge; and also in secondary causes, on which they depend proximately and immediately, which are in themselves indefinite, and so are contingencies.⁹⁴

⁹¹ *Unseen Realm*, 61.

⁹² *Unseen Realm*, 61–62.

⁹³ Turretino, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, Locus Tertius, Q.XII.232–33. “XXV. Libertas voluntatis evertitur quidem per necessitatem physicam & coactionis, quæ prænata cum formali ratione libertatis; sed non per necessitatem hypotheticam & infallibilitatis eventus, idem enim hoc respectu potest esse liberum & necessarium: Unde quamvis actiones hominum sint liberæ, quia sponte fiunt & prævio rationis iudicio, non desinunt esse necessariae ratione decreti & præscientiæ Dei. Præscientia autem Dei infert quidem futurationis & eventus infallibilitatem, & necessitatem consequentiæ, non tamen infert coactionem aut violentiam, nec aufert voluntati suam intrinsicam libertatem.” In the 1696 edition, the numbering of the paragraphs skips the number XXIV and counts from XXIII to XXV. Consequently, in the English translations, the translators have renumbered paragraph XXV as XXIV, and so on to XXXI.

⁹⁴ Turretino, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, Locus Tertius, Q.XII.234. “XXX. Quando Deus concipit futura contingentia ut certò futura non concipit ea aliter quàm sunt; sed ea relatè ad decretum novit, ut necessariò eventura & determinata, quæ relatè ad causas suas novit indeterminata & contingentia futura. Præscit ergo ea Deus, tum in *seipso*,

Aquinas explains that God's foreknowledge does not impose necessity on us:

It is likewise clear that predestination is certain, and yet does not impose necessity. For God's moving or directing or plan to direct a thing to an end (which is what predestination is) is done in accordance with the nature and order of causes created by God. Now, whenever there are two ordered causes, one of which is necessary and the other of which is contingent, their effect is always contingent. And predestination involves two causes, one of which is necessary (God) and the other of which is contingent (free choice). Thus, the effect of predestination must be contingent. Hence, predestination is certain, since God knows and wills this or that person to reach such an end. But predestination's certainty does not impose any necessity, since God wants to direct them to such an end by their free will.⁹⁵

From his arguments, Heiser concludes, "*Since foreknowledge doesn't require predestination, foreknown events that happen may or may not have been predestined.*"⁹⁶ The problem with Heiser's "theological point" is that it misses the point. Everything that does actually happen has been determined by God Who is the first and sustaining cause of all things, necessary and contingent. God foreknew that David would escape and that he would not be handed over to Saul, but that did not change the fact that David's actions and the events that followed were contingent. The events were not a case of foreknowledge. Since, as Heiser asserts, some things that happen may not be predestined, Heiser's theological point amounts to a rejection of the sovereignty of God.

Some will ask, "How is it possible for God to foreknow and predestine yet our decisions and actions are still free?" The problem with this question is that it ignores the fact that God can do things that we do not understand, because He is God and we are not. Divine predestination does not negate free will. This is not a contradiction. A claim cannot be both true and false in the same sense. But, the claim that God predestines all things and the claim that we are free moral beings are not true in the same sense. God predestines in eternity. We act in time. This principle is not unique to the question of predestination and free will. The same principle is in the word of God. Every word that is in God's revelation is exactly the word that He wanted, yet he did not violate the freedom of each author to write according to his own literary abilities and decisions. Jude captures this very principle: "Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all

& decreto suo ut primâ causâ, & sic necessaria sunt propter immutabilitatem decreti & infallibilitatem præscientiæ; tum in *causis secundis*, à quibus proximè & immediate dependent, quæ sunt per se indefinitæ, & ita sunt contingentia."

⁹⁵ Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, 2d ed. (Romae: Desclès et Socii Editores, 1913), XI.Q.3. <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/q111.html>. Accessed 5/23/2024. "Quod vero praedestinatio certitudinem habeat, et necessitatem non imponat, similiter patet. Modus enim vel directio vel propositum dirigendi in finem, quod est ipsa praedestinatio, est secundum constitutionem et ordinem causarum a Deo constitutarum. Constat autem quod, quando sunt duae causae ordinatae, quarum una est necessaria et alia contingens, effectus semper est contingens. In praedestinatione autem sunt duae causae, quarum una est necessaria, scilicet ipse Deus; et alia est contingens, scilicet ipsum liberum arbitrium: et ideo oportet effectum praedestinationis contingentem esse. Unde quia Deus scit et vult istum vel illum consequi talem finem, praedestinatio certitudinem habet; quia vero Deus vult ut secundum libertatem arbitrii in talem finem dirigatur, ideo huiusmodi certitudo nullam praedestino necessitatem imponit." Translated by Turner Nevitt and Brian Davies.

⁹⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 65. (Emphasis in original).

handed down to the saints” (Jude 3).⁹⁷ Jude was planning to write to his reader about one thing, but, by the Spirit, God moved Jude to write about a different thing, yet Jude expresses this in term of his own decision making. God had predestined Jude to write His word, and Jude made the free moral decision to write it. How is God able to have Jude write exactly what He wants written without violating Jude’s freedom? That is something that God can do that we simply cannot comprehend, but we know it is not contradictory.

The same principle is evident in the incarnation. Jesus took on a human nature. He is fully God and fully human. Whereas God is three Persons and one essence, the Son is one essence with two natures. How is it possible for God the eternal Son to take on a human nature? That is something that God has done that we simply cannot comprehend, but it is not contradictory. The same pattern applies to predestination and foreknowledge. God, as the first and sustaining cause of all things, has foreknown and predestined all things without violating the free moral agency of any free creatures. Heiser’s view diminishes the nature and power of God.

The Image of God

In order to make the text fit his view, Heiser needs to redefine the traditional notion of the image of God. In the section titled “Image or Imager,” he misrepresents the traditional notion of the image of God as a list of abilities:

- Intelligence
- Reasoning ability
- Emotions
- The ability to commune with God
- Self-awareness (sentience)
- Language/communication ability
- The presence of a soul or spirit (or both)
- The conscience
- Free will⁹⁸

It is because Heiser thinks that the traditional view of the image of God is simply a list of abilities that he says, “All those things sound like possibilities, but they’re not. The image of God means none of those things. If it did, then Bible-believers ought to abandon the idea of the sanctity of human life in the womb.”⁹⁹ If the image of God is constituted of a list of abilities, and since an unborn child does not exhibit any of these abilities, then the unborn child does not bear the image of God.

Heiser goes on to list what he claims the Bible teaches about the image of God.

⁹⁷ Αγαπητοί, πᾶσαν σπουδὴν ποιούμενος γράφειν ὑμῖν περὶ τῆς κοινῆς ἡμῶν σωτηρίας ἀνάγκην ἔσχον γράψαι ὑμῖν παρακαλῶν ἐπαγωνίζεσθαι τῇ ἅπαξ παραδοθείσῃ τοῖς ἁγίοις πίστει (Jude 3).

⁹⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 40.

⁹⁹ Beeke, and Smalley, *Revelation and God*, 759.

1. Both men and women are equally included.
2. Divine image bearing is what makes humankind distinct from the rest of *earthly* creation (i.e., plants and animals). The text of Genesis 1:26 does *not* inform us that divine image bearing makes us distinct from heavenly beings, those sons of God who were already in existence at the time of creation. The plurals in Genesis 1:26 mean that, in some way, we share something with them when it comes to bearing God's image.
3. There is something about the image that makes humankind "like" God in some way.
4. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the image has been or can be bestowed incrementally or partially. You're either created as God's image bearer or you aren't. One cannot speak of being *partly* or *potentially* bearing God's image.¹⁰⁰

The text asserts that the man and the woman were created in God's image. Heiser says the text of Gen. 1:26 "does *not* inform us that divine image bearing makes us distinct from heavenly beings," neither does the text say that this is what makes humankind "distinct from the rest of *earthly* creation." It is Heiser's practice to read into the text what he wants it say. It is certainly true that the text does not suggest that the image has been or can be bestowed incrementally or partially, but neither does the text say or imply that anyone other than the man and the woman are created in God's image.

Heiser goes on to argue,

Among the list of proposed answers to what image bearing means are a number of *abilities* or *properties*: intelligence, reasoning ability, emotions, communing with God, self-awareness, language/communication ability, and free will. The problem with defining the image by any of these qualities is that, on one hand, nonhuman beings like animals possess *some* of these abilities, although not to the same extent as humans. If one animal anywhere, at any time, learned anything contrary to instinct, or communicated intelligently (to us or within species), or displayed an emotional response (again to us or other creatures), those items must be ruled out as image bearing. We know certain animals have these abilities because of carefully conducted research in the field of animal cognition. Artificial intelligence is on the verge of similar breakthroughs. And if intelligent extraterrestrial life is ever discovered, that would also undermine such definitions.¹⁰¹

The problem with Heiser's argument is that he assumes that the image of God is a collection of qualities, and that it is the collection of the qualities that constitute the image of God. Heiser has misrepresented and misunderstood the traditional notion. This is why the qualities are not what constitute the image of God. It is the image of God by which these qualities are possessed. In fact, where does the text say that these are all of the qualities that a being in the image of God possesses?

Heiser also equivocates on the terms he uses to identify some of the qualities. He says, "If one animal anywhere, at any time, learned anything contrary to instinct, or communicated intelligently (to us or within species), or displayed an emotional response (again to us or other

¹⁰⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 41.

¹⁰¹ *Unseen Realm*, 41.

creatures), those items must be ruled out as image bearing.” Heiser claims, “We know certain animals have these abilities because of carefully conducted research in the field of animal cognition.”¹⁰² Of course Heiser conveniently neglects to provide any support for this claim. In fact, no animal has ever communicated intelligently as humans do. After a lengthy analysis and evaluation of the efforts to train primates to communicate, Wilson and McKeon conclude,

On the basis of the foregoing analysis of the chimpanzee and gorilla language projects, we have seen that there is no sound evidence to refute the traditional view that language acquisition is species-specific. If human language were a product of general intelligence, then would we not expect to find such intelligent animals as the great apes learning the rudiments of language, especially after all the extensive methodical attempts, lavished with plenteous rewards?

We have seen that an innate (genetically determined) mental schemata—the language faculty, with its universal principles of language—is necessary to postulate in view of the facts of language acquisition, the rule-governed properties of human languages, and the nontrivial similarities among languages at a highly abstract level. Thus we may conclude that such biological endowment responsible for the acquisition of a generative grammar (upon exposure to language) is *not available* to these very intelligent primates.¹⁰³

Also, Heiser has illegitimately circumscribed the nature of capacity for human communication. After 36 months of training, Koko the gorilla learned to use 184 signs. By contrast, by age 5 or 6 years, apart from defect or deformity, a human child has developed full linguistic competence. As Wilson and McKeon assert, “Thus children continue to acquire rules that more accurately reflect adult competence, until, around age five or six, one cannot easily recognize major differences either in the constructions they form (syntactically and phonetically) or in their interpretations of adult sentences, except for a few (such as certain forms of passive and some opaque constructions involving the infinitive . . .”¹⁰⁴ Wilson and McKeon’s book was published in 1984. After 40 years, primates have yet to learn a language.

Heiser declares, “Defining image bearing as *any* ability is a flawed approach.”¹⁰⁵ But, as pointed out above, the image of God in mankind is not defined as any ability. The abilities of human beings derive from the nature of human kind. Heiser is critiquing a Sartrean existentialist approach in which “to do, is to be.” However, the biblical approach is “to be, is to do.” In other words, a human does not have a human nature based on what he or she does. Rather, what a human does derives from having a human nature. Humans do not have the image of God because they can use language. Rather, humans use language because they have the image of God.

Heiser rejects the notion that either the soul or the spirit constitute the meaning of the image of God. Appealing to the biblical text, Heiser argues,

¹⁰² *Unseen Realm*, 41.

¹⁰³ Clifford Wilson and Donald McKeon, *The Language Gap* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 155–56.

¹⁰⁴ Wilson and McKeon, *The Language Gap*, 88.

¹⁰⁵ *Unseen Realm*, 41.

So how do we understand divine image bearing in a way that does not stumble over these issues and yet aligns with the description in Genesis? Hebrew grammar is the key. The turning point is the meaning of the preposition *in* with respect to the phrase “*in* the image of God.” In English we use the preposition *in* to denote many different ideas. That is, *in* doesn’t always mean the same thing when we use that word. For example, if I say, “put the dishes *in* the sink,” I am using the preposition to denote *location*. If I say, “I broke the mirror *in* pieces,” I am using *in* to denote the *result* of some action. If I say, “I work *in* education,” I am using the preposition to denote that I work *as* a teacher or principal, or in some other educational capacity.

This last example directs us to what the Hebrew preposition translated *in* means in Genesis 1:26. Humankind was created *as* God’s image. If we think of imaging as a verb or function, that translation makes sense. We are created to image God, to be his imagers. It is what we are by definition. The image is not an ability we have, but a status. We are God’s representatives on earth. To *be* human is to image God.¹⁰⁶

Heiser is referring to the inseparable preposition בְּ (*bē*). It is called an inseparable preposition because it is prefixed to another word, although sometimes it can occur with its own suffixes. According to HAL, this preposition has a wide range of uses including, “in, at, among, within which, upon, on, in spite of, according to, into, without, against, with, through, with/to, when.”¹⁰⁷ Heiser claims, “Humankind was created *as* God’s image.” Yet of all the possible uses of this preposition, HAL does not include “*as*” among the possible uses. Without explanation or justification, Heiser simply picks the use that fits his assumption and treats it as if this is the only possible meaning. This is, frankly, not honest.

He says, “If we think of imaging as a verb or function, the translation makes sense.” Here Heiser is actually employing a Sartrean existentialist reasoning to support his view. According to Heiser, we do not have the image of God and therefrom “image” God. Rather, “imaging” God constitutes the image of God; to do—to “image” God, is to be—have the image of God. Heiser has simply replaced the earlier list of abilities with his own notion of an ability to image God. However, according to the Hebrew grammar, God created man and woman in His image before they did any “imaging.” And, the word translated “image” (צֶלֶם , *selem*) just is not a verb. Heiser appeals to the Hebrew, but then ignores the actual Hebrew text in order to make it say what he needs it to say to support his view. The commission of the man and the woman to “image” God was predicted on the fact that God had created them in His image.

Heiser appears to reject the notion that “imaging” God is an ability we have: “We are created to image God, to be his imagers. It is what we are by definition. The image is not an ability we have, but a status. We are God’s representatives on earth. To *be* human is to image God.”¹⁰⁸ But if “imaging” God is not an ability we have, what is it? As he says later, “We saw earlier that the image of God is not an attribute or ability. Rather, it is a status conferred by God on all humans, that of

¹⁰⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 42.

¹⁰⁷ HAL, s.v. “ בְּ .”

¹⁰⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 42–43.

representing God.”¹⁰⁹ The problem is, a “status” is merely a position of an individual in relation to another or others. So, for Heiser, the image of God has nothing to do with human nature. Rather, it is only a matter of the position that human kind has been given in relation to God and the world. Heiser has completely abandoned the orthodox doctrine of the image of God and replaced it with his notion of a “status.”

In fact Heiser contradicts his first statement with his final statement, “To *be* human is to image God.” We are human because we “image” God. This is clearly an instance of “to do is to be.” We are what we do. We have this status because we “image” God. “Imaging” God is what we do. If he is going to think of “imaging” as a verb or function, then it is disingenuous to deny that it is an ability we have. Heiser has got the whole thing backwards. Not only is Heiser not conversant in philosophy. He seems also not to have a rudimentary grasp of theology.

The reason Heiser wants to replace the orthodox view of the image of God with his notion of being and “imager” is so that he can then apply his conclusion to the “other *elohim*.” Heiser frequently appeals to what the Bible does not say, but he ignores this principle when it comes to his own view. He asserts, “At no point in the Old Testament does the Scripture teach that Jews or Jewish leaders were put in authority over the other nations.”¹¹⁰ Likewise, at no point in the Old Testament does Scripture teach that the “other *elohim*” are God’s “imagers.” Since we have shown that at no point in the Old Testament does the Scripture teach Heiser’s notion of “imaging” God, it follows that it is simply false to claim that the “other *elohim*” are also God’s “imagers.”

According to Anthony Hoekema, Irenaeus held that the image of God was lost as a result of the fall: “Again we find Irenaeus saying that though man was created in the image of God, he lost the similitude or likeness to God in the Fall. Christ, however, showed us in his own person what the image of God truly was. Furthermore, Christ also restores the likeness of God in those who belong to him by making them one with the Father.”¹¹¹ Irenaeus asserts this is in *Adversus Haereses*:

For in former times it was indeed said that man was made in the image of God, but it was not shown. For the Word, in whose image man had been made, was still invisible. And because of this he easily lost his likeness. But when the Word of God became flesh, both were confirmed: for he showed the true image, when he himself became this, which was his image; and by establishing the likeness he restored, making man like the invisible Father through the visible Word.¹¹²

Aquinas held that the image of God was principally man’s intellectual nature:

¹⁰⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 58.

¹¹⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 29.

¹¹¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 34.

¹¹² Sancti Irenæi. *Libros quinque adversus Haereses* (Cantabrigiæ: Typis Academicis, 1857), Liber V.XVI.1.368. In præteritis enim temporibus, dicebatur quidem secundum imaginem Dei factum esse hominem, non autem ostendebatur. Adhuc enim invisibile erat Verbum, cujus secundum imaginem homo factus fuerat. Propter hoc autem et similitudinem facile amisit. Quando autem caro Verbum Dei factum est, utraque confirmavit: et imaginem enim ostendit veram, ipse hoc fiens, quod erat imago ejus; et similitudinem firmans restituit, consimilem faciens hominem invisibili Patri per visibile Verbum.

I respond: Since it is because of his intellectual nature that man is said to be made to the image of God, it follows that he is made to God's image to the highest degree to the extent that his intellectual nature is able to imitate God to the highest degree. But it is with respect to God's knowing and loving Himself that an intellectual nature especially imitates God.¹¹³

John Calvin argued that the image of God is the spiritual aspect of man:

Just let it remain fixed, that the image of God, which is seen or shines in these external features, is spiritual. . . . then there is no ambiguity in the matter itself, except that man is called the image of God, because he is like God. . . . Therefore, although the soul is not a man, it is not absurd that he should be called the image of God with respect to the soul: although I retain the principle which I have just laid down, to reveal the image of God to all the excellence by which the nature of man stands out among all the species of animate beings. Accordingly, by this word is marked the integrity with which Adam was endowed, when he had a right intelligence, his affections were composed to reason, all his senses were tempered in a right order, and he would report the excellence of his workman by truly excellent gifts. And although the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and heart, or in the soul and its powers, yet there was no part, even down to the body, in which some sparks did not sparkle.¹¹⁴

Although Calvin sometimes seems to argue that the image of God was destroyed by the fall, at one point he actually asserts the opposite.

There is no doubt that Adam, when he fell from his rank, was alienated from God by this defect. Therefore, even if we do not claim that the image of God was emptied and destroyed in him, it was still so corrupted that whatever remains is a hideous deformity. And therefore the beginning of our recovery of salvation is in that restoration which we obtain through Christ, who is also called the second Adam for this reason: because he restored us to true and solid integrity.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Aquinatis, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.Q.93.A.4.404–5. “Respondeo dicendum quod, cum homo secundum intellectualem naturam ad imaginem Dei esse dicatur, secundum hoc est maxime ad imaginem Dei, secundum quod intellectualis natura Deum maxime imitari potest. Imitatur autem intellectualis natura maxime Deum quantum ad hoc, quod Deus seipsum intelligit et amat.”

¹¹⁴ Ioannis Calvini, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*. Pars Prior (Berolini: Apud Gustavum Eichler, 1884), Liber Primus. Capita XV.3.128–29. Modo fixum illud maneat, imaginem Dei, quae in his externis notis conspicitur vel emicat, spiritualem esse. . . . deinde in re ipsa nulla est ambiguitas, quin Dei imago nominetur homo, quia Deo similis est. . . . Quamvis ergo anima non sit homo, absurdum tamen non est, eum animae respectu vocari Dei imaginem: etsi principium quod nuper posui retineo, patere Dei effigiem ad totam praestantiam, qua eminet hominis natura inter omnes animantium species. Proinde hac voce notatur integritas, qua praeditus fuit Adam quum recta intelligentia polleret, affectus haberet compositos ad rationem, sensus omnes recto ordine temperatos, vereque eximiis dotibus opificis sui excellentiam referret. Ac quamvis primari sedes divinae imaginis fuerit in mente et corde, vel in anima eiusque potentiis: nulla tamen pars fuit etiam usque ad corpus, in qua non sintillae aliquae micarent.

¹¹⁵ Calvini, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, Liber Primus. Capita XV.4.129. “Quin Adam, ubi excidit e gradu suo, hac defectione a Deo alienatus sit, minime dubium est. Quare etsi demus non prorsus exinanitam ac deletam in eo fuisse Dei imaginem, sic tamen corrupta fuit, ut quicquid superest, horrenda sit deformitas. Ideoque recuperandae salutis

Laird Harris asserts that the image is seen in man's nature: "God is a spiritual, rational, moral Being and anything that is a spiritual, rational, moral being is in His image."¹¹⁶ According to Herman Hoeksema, "The general meaning of the phrase 'image of God' is clear enough. It signifies that man was so created that there was a creaturely likeness of God in him, that there was a reflection of the perfections of God in man. . . . But man is so made in the image of God that the image is also a likeness, so that this very nature reflects some of God's own perfections. There is therefore, a creaturely likeness of God in man."¹¹⁷

From each of these theologians, it is clear that the image of God is what man is, not only what he has or what he does. It is a case of "to be, is to do." As Millard Erickson puts it,

In light of the foregoing considerations, the image should be thought of as primarily substantive or structural. The image is something in the very nature of man, in the way in which he was made. It refers to something man is rather than something he has or does. By virtue of his being man, he is in the image of God; it is not dependent upon the presence of anything else. By contrast the focus of the relational and functional views is actually on consequences or applications of the image rather than on the image itself. Although very closely linked to the image of God, experiencing relationships and exercising dominion are not themselves that image.¹¹⁸

Heiser wants to make the image a matter of function, not of nature. The very fact that Heiser refers to "imagers" rather than "image" indicates his functional approach. Heiser is compelled to do this in order to include the "other gods" as "imagers." If the image of God is according to man's nature, then there are no "imagers" except mankind. If the image of God in man were a matter of man's function, one must then ask whether one being may have the image more than another. As Erickson says, "There is no indication that the image is present in one person to a greater degree than in another. Superior natural endowments, such as high intelligence, are not evidence of the presence or degree of the image."¹¹⁹ Man was created to reflect the nature of God by virtue of man's nature as God had created him. As the God-Man, Jesus manifests the nature of God perfectly: "And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb 1:3a).¹²⁰

What About Jesus!

nobis initium est in ea instauratione, quam consequimur per Christum, wqui etiam hac de causa vocatur secundus Adam: quia nos in veram et solidam integritatem restituit."

¹¹⁶ R. Laird Harris, *Man—God's Eternal Creation: Old Testament Teaching on Man and His Culture* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 18.

¹¹⁷ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 204.

¹¹⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 2.513.

¹¹⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2.513.

¹²⁰ ὅς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτὴρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ (Heb. 1:3a).

Heiser asserts, “I still embrace the deity of Christ.”¹²¹ But what does it mean to say he “embraces” the deity of Christ. In other places, Heiser uses the word ‘deity’ to refer to “other gods.” Commenting on a statement in Amos 4, Heiser asserts,

Amos could be targeting temple priestesses who served the gods along with male priests. It is also quite possible that the cows of Bashan are the deities themselves in the form of the idols. This possibility is strengthened by noticing their crimes: “oppressing the poor [*dallim*]” and “crushing the needy [*ebyonim*].” These same two Hebrew words are used in Psalm 82, where the corrupt *elohim* are accused of exactly these same crimes (Psa 82:3–4).¹²²

Here Heiser equates the *elohim* with deities. In a footnote, Heiser refers to “. . . the doctrine of the deity of Christ (i.e., that Jesus was God).”¹²³ For Heiser to say that Jesus “was God” may not be as “straightforward” as it sounds. Heiser refers to the members of YHWH’s council as “gods” or as “other gods.” So, is Jesus one of the gods? Capitalizing the word ‘God’ may indicate that Heiser believes Jesus to be YHWH. At one point Heiser asserts, “Jesus is heir to all things because he is Yahweh,”¹²⁴ but why does he say, “Jesus was God”? As Heiser pointed out, “The wording is important.”¹²⁵

Perhaps things will become clearer in his brief section in which he addresses the question, “What About Jesus?”¹²⁶

Readers of Psalm 82 often raise a specific question about Jesus. If there are other divine sons of God, what do we make of the description of Jesus as the “only begotten” son of God (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9)? How could Jesus be the *only* divine son when there were others? “Only begotten” is an unfortunately confusing translation, especially to modern ears. Not only does the translation “only begotten” seem to contradict the obvious statements in the Old Testament about other sons of God, it implies that there was a time when the Son did not exist—that he had a beginning.

The Greek word translated by this phrase is *monogenes*. It doesn’t mean “only begotten” in some sort of “birthing” sense. The confusion extends from an old misunderstanding of the root of the Greek word. For years *monogenes* was thought to have derived from two Greek terms, *monos* (“only”) and *gennao* (“to beget, bear”). Greek scholars later discovered that the second part of the word *monogenes* does not come from the Greek verb *gennao*, but rather from the noun *genos* (“class, kind”). The term literally means “one of a kind” or “unique” without connotation of created origin. Consequently, since Jesus is indeed identified with Yahweh and is therefore, with Yahweh, unique among the *elohim* that serve God, the term *monogenes* does not contradict the Old Testament language.¹²⁷

¹²¹ *Unseen Realm*, 13.

¹²² *Unseen Realm*, 290.

¹²³ *Angels*, 63.n10.

¹²⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 314.

¹²⁵ *Supernatural*, 49.

¹²⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 36–37.

¹²⁷ *Unseen Realm*, 36–37.

This is yet another instance of the imposition of his prior theological and philosophical commitments on the text. He takes issue with the translation of such statements as found in Jn. 1:14: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (NASB).¹²⁸ Rather than deal with the Greek word first, he starts by asking, “How could Jesus be the *only* divine son when there were others?” What does it mean to say that there were “others”? Were their other divine sons of God? Where in the Bible is it taught that there were other divine sons? Heiser strategically employs the fallacy of equivocation. He first says that there were other divine sons, and then changes that to “other sons of God.”

Heiser is certainly correct that the meaning of *μονογενής* (*monogenēs*) is not “only begotten.”

As applied to Jesus, *μονογενής* clearly is used to mark him out uniquely above all earthly and heavenly beings. The rendering “only-begotten” goes back to Jerome, who used *unigenitus* in the Vulg. to counter the Arian claim that Jesus was not begotten but made. Although the vb. *γεννάω* G1164, “to beget,” is common in the Johannine writings, it is not normally applied to Jesus (the only exceptions are John 18:37; 1 John 5:18b), and in any case *μονογενής* is formed from the noun *γένος* (see above, GL), not from the vb. *γεννάω* (although both terms are ultimately derived from *γίνομαι* G1181, “to become, be born,” etc.). Thus the meaning of the compound is “of a single kind” (it is used in this sense of the Phoenix, *1 Clem.* 25.2).¹²⁹

Heiser states, “Greek scholars later discovered that the second part of the word *monogenes* does not come from the Greek verb *gennao*, but rather from the noun *genos* (‘class, kind’).” Both the standard New Testament Greek lexicon (BDAG) and the Liddel and Scott Greek lexicon (LSJ) confirms Heiser’s statement. From this point, Heiser declares, “The term literally means ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’ without connotation of created origin.” The problem here is that Heiser’s assertion contradicts his earlier declaration. To say that something is “one of a kind” or “unique,” is contradictory to saying that Jesus is not the *only* divine son. For something to be “one of a kind” necessarily means that there are no others of this kind. Any English dictionary will tell you that the word ‘unique’ means something existing as the only one or as the sole example; having no like or equal; unparalleled; incomparable: single. In fact, both BDAG and LS give this definition for the word *μονογενής*:

μονογενής, 1. to being the only one of its kind within a specific relationship, one and only, only; 2. to being the only one of its kind or class, *unique (in kind)* of something, that is the only example of its category.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ δόξαν, ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας (Jn. 1:14).

¹²⁹ Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), s.v. “μόνος.”

¹³⁰ BDAG, s.v. “μονογενής.”

μονογενής, *the only member of a kin or kind*: hence, generally, *only, single* 2. *unique*.¹³¹

Heiser attempts to support his argument by reference to another passage in which the term μονογενής is used:

The validity of this understanding is borne out by the New Testament itself. In Hebrews 11:17, Isaac is called Abraham's *monogenes*. If you know your Old Testament you know that Isaac was *not* the "only begotten" son of Abraham. Abraham had earlier fathered Ishmael (cf. Gen 16:15; 21:3). The term must mean that Isaac was Abraham's *unique* son, for he was the son of the covenant promises. Isaac's genealogical line would be the one through which Messiah would come. Just as Yahweh is an *elohim*, and no other *elohim* are Yahweh, so Jesus is the unique Son, and no other sons of God are like him.¹³²

This argument does not help his case, however. Granted, there are others who are referred to as sons of God, but Isaac was the single one as the class of a covenant son. The qualification of Isaac as μονογενής was not with reference to his simply being a biological son of Abraham. Rather, even as Heiser points out, Isaac was "unique," i.e., the only one. There was not another covenant son of Abraham. In fact, Heiser uses the word 'unique,' but one begins to wonder whether he actually understands the meaning of the word. If Jesus is, as Heiser admits, the unique Son, then it cannot be the case there are other "divine" sons as Heiser claims. Either Jesus happens to be one among the other divine sons, in which case He is not "unique," or He is the only divine Son. If Jesus is the unique Son, then there are no other sons of His kind. He is the only one. That's what the word 'unique' means. In fact, that is what the word μόνος in the compound form μονογενής means: "being the only entity in a class, only, alone."¹³³ Heiser never explains how Jesus can be the "only one of His kind" and yet one among other "divine sons"?

As we have seen, Heiser admits that Jesus is, or "was," God, and that He is YHWH. But if Jesus is YHWH, then He is divine in a way that other "divine sons" are not. It follows that Heiser is equivocating on the word 'divine.' He uses the word

Of course, Heiser interprets these matters differently. But that is precisely the point. It is ultimately a matter of interpretation, and all interpretation involves the interpreter's presuppositions and worldview, for Heiser no less than for me, or anyone else. In fact, that is why Heiser starts off this section with his question, "How could Jesus be the *only* divine son when there were others?" He has already decided that Jesus is not the only "divine" son, and he interprets these matters accordingly, and he must head off any descent by prejudicing this section with this question. But for Heiser to present this as simply a matter of the definition of a word is, frankly, not honest.

Heiser does not seem to understand the expression "only begotten." Heiser argues, "'Only begotten' is an unfortunately confusing translation, especially to modern ears. Not only does the translation 'only begotten' seem to contradict the obvious statement in the Old Testament about

¹³¹ LSJ, s.v. "μονογενής." It is noteworthy that in the first definition in LSJ, they actually reference Jn. 1:14; that is, Jesus is the only member of a kind.

¹³² *Unseen Realm*, 37.

¹³³ BDAG, s.v. "μόνος."

other sons of God, it implies that there was a time when the Son did not exist—that he had a beginning.”¹³⁴ Historically it was used to refer to the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Turretin poses the question, “Was the Son of God begotten of the Father from eternity? We affirm.”

Question 29: On the Eternal Generation of the Son. *Is the Son of God eternally begotten of the Father? Aff. V.* This generation was made ἀχρόνως, not in time but from eternity; therefore no priority or posteriority of duration can be observed here, although the priority of order may be second to that of the Son to the Father, although he may not be after the Father. 2. ἀχωρίσως, because the Father did not beget outside of himself, but in the same essence. Whence it is said that Λόγος was with God; And the Father in the Son, and the Son in the Father. 3. ἀπαθῶς without any passion or change, either in the Father or in the Son, with whom He himself was begotten, He notes no imperfection, but rather the reception of all perfection. Although, therefore, with respect to the Father, Generation is well said to be active, yet it is not well said to be passive with respect to the Son, because in another way it might be said that the Son is in the power of begetting. Nor does it prevent that it is said to be born; for this ἀνθρωποπαθῶς is said, θεοπρεπῶς must be understood by removing all imperfection; hence what has a place in transitory, physical, and material generation, must not be transferred to the hyperphysical, immanent, and divine.¹³⁵

Heiser’s appeal to the use of μονογενής with reference to Isaac actually backfires. Isaac was the only covenant son of Abraham, but he was nevertheless “begotten” of Abraham. Heiser says, “Consequently, since Jesus is indeed identified with Yahweh and is therefore, with Yahweh, unique among the *elohim* that serve God, the term *monogenes* does not contradict the Old Testament language.”¹³⁶ Heiser just does not understand that neither YHWH nor Jesus are “unique among the *elohim*.” Neither YHWH nor Jesus are “among the *elohim*. The shortcomings of human language sometimes makes it difficult to depict the fact that neither YHWH nor Jesus are “among” or of the same kind. For God, there is no “kind.” God is utterly and completely distinct from all that He has created. For Heiser to claim that YHWH and Jesus are unique “among the other *elohim*” violates the fact of God’s absolute distinctness. And Jesus is not merely “identified” with YHWH. He *is* YHWH. Heiser claims that he still embraces the deity of Christ, that Jesus “was” God, but his explanations and assertions show that the straightforward meaning of what he says is not what orthodox theology asserts.

¹³⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 36.

¹³⁵ Turretino, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, Locus Tertius, Q.29.V.322. “Quaestio XXIX: De Aeterna Filii Generatione. *An Filius Dei ab aeterno sit genitus à Patre? Aff. V.* Generatio ista facta est ἀχρόνως, non in tempore sed ab aeterno; ideo nulla hic prioritas vel posterioritas durationis observari potest, licet sit prioritas ordinis, secundum quem Filius est à Patre, licet non sit post Patrem. 2. ἀχωρίσως, quia Pater non genuit extra se, sed in eadem essentia. Unde dicitur Λόγος fuisse apud Deum; & Pater in Filio, & Filius in Patre. 3. ἀπαθῶς sine ulla passione, vel mutatione, vel in Patre, vel in Filio, cum ipsum generari nullam imperfectionem notet, sed potius sit omnis perfectionis receptio. Quamvis ergo respectu Patris Generatio bene dicatur activa, non tamen bene dicatur passiva respectu Filii, quia aliàs potuisset dici Filius in potentia gignentis. Nec obstat quòd gigni dicatur; hoc enim ἀνθρωποπαθῶς dictum, θεοπρεπῶς debet intelligi, removendo omnem imperfectionem; unde quod locum habet in generatione transeunte & physica & materiali, non debet transferri ad hyperphysicam, immanentem, & divinam.”

¹³⁶ *Unseen Realm*, 36–37.

In *The Bible Unfiltered*, Heiser titles a chapter, “Everything in the Bible Isn’t About Jesus.”¹³⁷ That contradicts what Jesus did. On the way to Emmaus, Jesus explains to two travelers that everything in “all the Scriptures” is about Him: “Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures [ἐν πάσαις ταῖς γραφαῖς, *en pasais tais graphais*]” (Lk. 24:27).¹³⁸ Heiser asserts, “The truth is that there’s a lot in the Bible that *isn’t* about Jesus. Procedures for diagnosing and treating leprosy (Lev 13:1–14:57) aren’t about Jesus.”¹³⁹ How does Heiser know this is not about Jesus? Heiser must think he perfectly understands all of Scripture and knows what is about Jesus and what is not. It is quite arrogant to think that just because he does not know how this is about Jesus, it can’t be about Jesus.

Heiser asserts, “The Tower of Babel incident (Gen 11:1–9) doesn’t point to Jesus.”¹⁴⁰ In fact, it *does* point to Jesus. The men at Babel sought to accomplish two things: 1) to construct a mountain at the top of which they could meet with god: 2) to make a name for themselves (וְנַעֲשֶׂה-לָּנוּ שֵׁם, *wəna‘āseh lālnū šēm*, “and let us make for us a name”) as the representatives of the god. As the representatives of god, they would be gods to the people. In order to come to god, the people would have to come through them as god’s representatives.

God prevented their efforts by coming down and confusing their language so that they would be scattered over the face of the world. The giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, sent by the Father and the Son, is the reverse of Babel. God overcomes the language barrier in order to bring to the people the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ who gave His life to pay for our sins. Whereas the men at Babel sought to unite humanity under their name, God unites humanity under one name, the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus, whose name is above every name, is the representative of God to mankind. There is only one way to meet with God, and that is on the basis of the work of God. God must bring us up to where He is. We cannot come up to where God is by our efforts. No one comes to God except through Jesus. In order to meet God, we must come through Him. Jesus brings us up to where God is and seats us in the heavenlies in Christ. The Tower of Babel *does indeed* point to Jesus as the only representative of God and the only name by which we can meet with God. Heiser simply does not understand how “all the Scriptures” point to Jesus.

Denial of Inerrancy

Pre-Scientific Worldview

There are many instances in which Heiser indicates his commitment to inerrancy. However, as we have seen with Heiser’s view of sovereignty and providence, a tactic he uses is to make a claim that sounds orthodox and then deny the claim by making compromises. He uses this approach with reference to inerrancy.

On his website, Heiser posted a series on the question of inerrancy. One post addressed the question of the supposed “pre-scientific” view of the biblical authors. Heiser considers Paul’s

¹³⁷ *Unfiltered*, 32.

¹³⁸ καὶ ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ Μωυ σέως καὶ ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν προφητῶν διερμήνευσεν αὐτοῖς ἐν πάσαις ταῖς γραφαῖς τὰ περὶ ἑαυτοῦ (Lk 24:27).

¹³⁹ *Unfiltered*, 32.

¹⁴⁰ *Unfiltered*, 32.

statement in 1 Cor. 11:14: “¹⁴ Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, ¹⁵ but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering” (1 Cor. 11:14–15).”¹⁴¹ Heiser argues,

Here Paul makes a specific statement about nature—it’s clearly a comment on the natural world and a truth that Paul believes the natural world communicates or points to. Having read the article in the readings list, it is quite clear that Paul’s statement is rooted in an absolutely non-scientific worldview. His statement is scientifically false. I’d say he’s clearly “affirming” something about nature here and then extrapolating to his more significant point. So, I think we need to dump this “affirming” language as some sort of safeguard (read: weasel-word) for defending inerrancy. Here’s what I’d like your (and others’) thoughts on:

1. Paul is clearly in error in terms of his understanding of nature on this point (he’s a pre-scientific man). Does that matter? Although Paul believed this, is he putting forth this belief as something his readers must believe? that (*sic*) is, while his contemporary readers no doubt believed what he believed, should be view this belief as something that we must believe? Is this the way this statement is cast? Put another way, when I read this passage, is Paul’s belief about hair what I am supposed to embrace as truth from this passage? I don’t think so, and I think you’d agree. But I also think it would be silly to say Paul isn’t “affirming” the particular erroneous belief about hair. He believes it.¹⁴²

It is interesting that it never seems to occur to Heiser that he simply does not understand the text. Paul is not affirming that it is contrary to nature for a man to have long hair. In fact, Heiser is reading back into the text his modern notion of what the word ‘nature’ means. This is evident in his statement, “1. Paul is clearly in error in terms of his understanding of nature on this point (he’s a pre-scientific man).”¹⁴³ Heiser claimed, “Every other context is alien or at least secondary.”¹⁴⁴ Yet Heiser has imposed his modern context on the text to pass judgment on Paul.

As Anthony Thiselton argues,

In Paul’s sense of the term, “natural” need not refer to a structure inherent in creation but may include “the state of affairs surrounding a convention” or the quality, property, or nature (*Beschaffenheit*)¹⁴⁵ of male or female gender and the order, or arrangement, or system of things as they are (*die Ordnung der Dinge* [“the order of things”]). . . . Paul simply appeals to “how things are” or “how things are ordered” in the period and context for which he is writing. Judiciously Schrage cites Calvin: “Now he means by ‘natural’ what was accepted by common

¹⁴¹ ¹⁴ οὐδὲ ἡ φύσις αὐτὴ διδάσκει ὑμᾶς ὅτι ἀνὴρ μὲν ἐὰν κομᾷ, ἀτιμία αὐτῷ ἐστίν, ¹⁵ γυνὴ δὲ ἐὰν κομᾷ, δόξα αὐτῇ ἐστίν; ὅτι ἡ κόμη αὐτῇ περιβολαίου δέδοται (1 Cor. 11:14–15).

¹⁴² Michael S. Heiser, “Pre-Scientific Worldview ‘Problem’ and Inerrancy,” Jun 20, 2008. <https://drmsb.com/pre-scientific-worldview-problem-and-inerrancy/>. Accessed 6/27/2024.

¹⁴³ Heiser, “Pre-Scientific Worldview ‘Problem’ and Inerrancy.”

¹⁴⁴ *Unfiltered*, 13.

¹⁴⁵ “composition; constitution, nature, qualities,” *Collins German Dictionary*, 9th ed., s.v. “*Beschaffenheit*.”

consent and usage at that time. . . . For long hair was not always regarded as a disgraceful thing in man.”¹⁴⁶

Thiselton goes on to point out, “*Depending on the context of thought* Paul may use ἡ φύσις sometimes to denote the very ‘grain’ of the created order as a whole, or at other times (as here) to denote ‘how things are’ in more situational or societal terms.”¹⁴⁷ Gordon Fee says that Paul is not referring to nature in the way we usually think of it:

For him [Paul] this is not an appeal to Nature, or to “natural law,” or to “natural endowment”; nor is Nature to be understood as pedagogic (actually “teaching” these “laws”). Rather, for Paul it is a question of propriety and of “custom” (vv. 13, 16), which carries with it “disgrace” or “glory” (vv. 14–15). Hence, this is an appeal to the “way things are” (NIV, “the nature of things”), to the “natural feeling” that they shared together as part of their contemporary culture. Thus Paul is not arguing that men *must* wear their hair short, or that women *must* have long hair, as though “nature” meant some kind of “created order.” Indeed, the very appeal to “nature” in this way suggests most strongly that the argument is by way of analogy, not of necessity.¹⁴⁸

John Calvin understood the word ‘nature’ to refer to the consent and custom of all at the time:

14. *Not even nature itself.*] Again he proposes to them that nature is the teacher of beauty. but what was received by the consent and custom of all at that time, and indeed among the Greeks, he calls natural: for men was not always a dishonorable hair. History tells us that men used to be bald everywhere, that is, in the first centuries. whence they are wont to call the unshaven old men poets, by the trite epithet. They began to use the barbers of Rome late, about the age of the superior Africans. And at the time when Paulus wrote these things, the custom of shaving had not yet become prevalent among the Gauls and Germans; rather, it would have been rather disfiguring for men no less than for women, to be shaved or shorn. but since in Greece it was not very manly to grow long hair, so that such men were marked as effeminate: he has a custom already confirmed by nature.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 844.

¹⁴⁷ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 845–46.

¹⁴⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 527.

¹⁴⁹ Joannis Calvini, *Commentarii in Epistolam Pauli ad Corinthios I*, in *Commentarii in Omnes Epistolas S. Pauli Apostoli* (Amstelodami: Joannem Jacobi Schipper, 1667), 178–79. “14. *Ne ipsa quidem natura.*] Iterum naturam illis decori magistram proponit. quod autem omnium consensu & consuetudine receptum tunc erat, & quidem apud Græcos, vocat naturale: nam viris non semper fuit coma dedecori. Olim ubique viros fuisse comatos, hoc est, primis seculis, referunt historiae. unde & Poëtæ vocare solent intonsos veteres, trito epitheto. Sero tonsoribus Romæ uti cœperunt, circa ætatem Africani superioris. Et quo tempore scribebat hæc Paulus, nondum in Gallis & Germanis invaluerat tondendi usus: quin potius deforme s fuisset non minus viris quam mulieribus, radi aut tonderi. sed quoniam in Græcia parum virile erat alere comam, ut tales quasi effœminati notarentur: morem jam confirmatum pro natura habet.”

Heiser imposes upon the biblical text his modern view of the meaning of “nature,” and then accuses Paul of making an error.

Heiser’s view is also very close to the view of Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann asserted, “Can the Christian proclamation expect people today to recognize the mythical world view as true? This is pointless and impossible. Pointless; for the mythical world view as such is not specifically Christian at all, but simply the world view of a bygone age that has not yet been shaped by scientific thinking.”¹⁵⁰ And again, “One cannot use electric light and radio, use modern medical and clinical resources in cases of illness, and at the same time believe in the spirit and miracle world of the New Testament.”¹⁵¹ But Bultmann’s demythologizing is not an attempt to rid the Bible of its “pre-scientific” worldview, but, like Heiser, “to filter from the essential message of the New Testament the outmoded worldview of the first century and the tendency towards a false objectivizing of existential truths.”¹⁵² It is disingenuous for Heiser to claim to hold to inerrancy and yet charge the biblical authors with error.

Biblical Cosmology

Heiser believes that the biblical authors held to a view that was common in ANE culture:

The Israelites believed in a universe structure that was common among the civilizations of the ancient Near East. This structure included three parts: a heavenly realm for the gods, an earthly realm for humans, and an underworld for the dead. The vocabulary of the Israelites’ cosmology is also similar to that found in the literature of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan.

The three tiers are reflected in the Ten Commandments: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in *heaven above*, or that is in *the earth beneath*, or that is in the *water under the earth*” (Exod 20:4; compare Psa 33:6–8; Prov 8:27–29). This cosmology is also affirmed in Philippians 2:10 and Revelation 5:3.

It will be important to look at each of the passages that Heiser references:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth (Exod. 20:4).¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, “Neues Testament Und Mythologie,” in *Kerygma und Mythos* (Hamburg: Herbert Reich · Evangelischer Verlag, 1960), 16. “Kann die christliche Verkündigung dem Menschen heute zumuten, *das mythische Weltbild als wahr anzuerkennen*? Das ist sinnlos und unmöglich. *Sinnlos*; denn das mythische Weltbild ist als solches gar nichts spezifisch Christliches, sondern es ist einfach das Weltbild einer vergangenen Zeit das noch nicht durch wissenschaftliches Denken geformt ist.

¹⁵¹ Bultmann, “Neues Testament Und Mythologie,” 18. “Man kann nicht elektrisches Licht und Radioapparat benutzen, in Krankheitsfällen moderne medizinische und klinische Mittel in Anspruch nehmen und gleichzeitig an die Geister- und Wunderwelt des Neuen Testaments glauben.”

¹⁵² David Fergusson, “Rudolf Bultmann,” in *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Chad Meister and James Beilby (London: Routledge, 2013), 133.

¹⁵³ לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ:
(Exod. 20:4)

It is difficult to see how this statement supports the notion that in Exod. 20:4 the biblical author subscribed to a three-tier structure similar to that of ANE beliefs. That the text refers to heaven, earth, and under the earth is hardly different from our “modern” view that there is a heaven above, an earth on which we live, and subterranean waters.

⁶By the word of YHWH the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host.
⁷He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap; He lays up the deeps in storehouses. ⁸Let all the earth fear YHWH; Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him (Ps. 33:6–8).¹⁵⁴

It is interesting how Heiser arbitrarily selects what he needs to be literal when it supports his view. So, Heiser takes the reference to the sea as a heap and storehouses as literally depicting the supposed cosmic structure, but then ignores the references to God’s breath and His mouth. Of course, God does not have literal breath or a literal mouth. Since this is poetry, why not take the references to the sea as a heap or to the deeps in storehouses as also figurative?

²⁷When He established the heavens, I was there, when He inscribed a circle on the face of the deep, ²⁸when He made firm the skies above, when the springs of the deep became fixed, ²⁹When He set for the sea its boundary so that the water would not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth; (Prov. 8:27–29).¹⁵⁵

Once again it is difficult to see how this supports the notion that the biblical author subscribed to a three tier cosmic structure. Heiser gives no evidence that there is an actual circle inscribed on an actual face of the deep, yet he takes the reference to making firm the skies as if this indicate a belief in a dome. Once again Heiser takes some statement literally and others figuratively according to what he needs the text to say.

⁹For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9–11).¹⁵⁶

These verses in fact do not support the three tier cosmic structure. The word translated “under the earth,” is *καταχθονίων* (*katachthoniōn*). It occurs only here in the NT. As Hendriksen points out, “In Paul’s solitary use of the term the subterraneans are the damned, for according to the context the

¹⁵⁴ בְּדִבְרֵי יְהוָה שָׁמַיִם נַעֲשׂוּ וּבְרִיחַ פִּיּוֹ כָּל־צִבְאוֹם: ⁷ כָּנֹס כְּנֹד מִי הָיָם נָתַן בְּאַצְרֹת תְּהוֹמוֹת: ⁸ יִירָאוּ מִיְהוָה כָּל־הָאָרֶץ מִמֶּנּוּ יִגְדְּרוּ כָּל־יֶשְׁבֵי תְהוֹל: (Ps. 33:6–8)

¹⁵⁵ בְּהִכְיֵנו שָׁמַיִם שָׁם אָנִי בַחֲקֵנו חוּג עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם: ²⁸ בְּאַמְצֹו שְׁחַקִּים מִמַּעַל בְּעִזּוֹ עֵינֹת תְהוֹם: ²⁹ בְּשׂוּמוֹ לַיָּם קָנוּ וּמַיִם לֹא יַעֲבְרוּ־פִיו בַּחֲקֵנו מוֹסְדֵי אָרֶץ: (Prov. 8:27–29)

¹⁵⁶ ⁹ διὸ καὶ ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν, καὶ ἐχαρίσατο αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντων ὀνομα, ¹⁰ ἵνα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ πάντων γόνα κάμψῃ ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων, ¹¹ καὶ πάντα γλῶσσαι ἐξομολογήσεται ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς (Phil. 2:9–11).

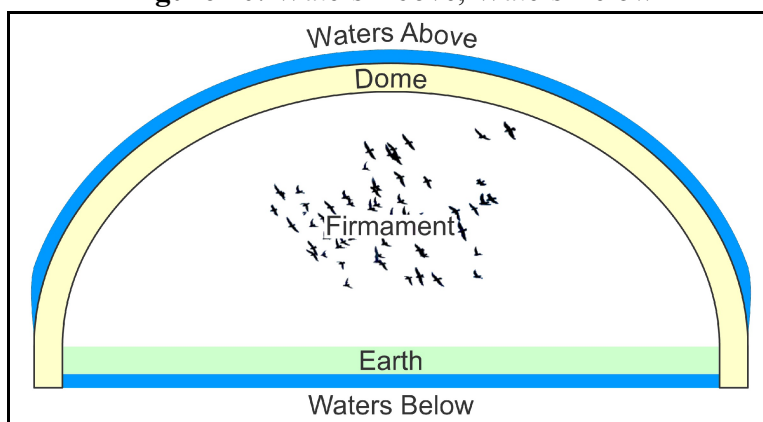
162 וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַיִּבְשָׁה אֶרֶץ וּלַמָּקוֹה הַמַּיִם קָרָא יָמִים וַיִּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב: (Gen. 1:10)

gathered (מִקְוֶה, *miqweh*) does not necessarily imply that they constituted one body. According to HAL, the word indicates a collecting.¹⁶³ God collects the waters into seas.

Heiser appeals to Gen. 1:6 and Prov. 8:27–28 as support for his claim that the water was held in place by the “expanse” or “firmament.” Genesis 1:6 reads, “Then God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’”¹⁶⁴ If, as Heiser asserts, water was held in place by the edges of a solid dome, why does the text say that the expanse separated the waters from the waters? According to Cassuto, the term רָקִיעַ (*rāqiaʿ*) “signifies a kind of horizontal area, extending through the very heart of the mass of water and cleaving it into two layers, one above the other — the upper and lower layers of water.”¹⁶⁵ Now, if there was a dome, as Heiser claims, then the dome was made of water.

The biblical text refers to three things: 1) waters above 2) waters below 3) firmament. In one place Heiser equates the solid dome with the firmament: “the water was held in place by the edges of the solid dome (“expanse”; “firmament”) that covered the earth (Gen 1:6; Prov 8:27–28).”¹⁶⁶ The firmament cannot be a solid dome reaching from the waters below to the waters above since that would make it impossible for birds to fly in the midst of a solid dome: “Then God said, ‘Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens’” (Gen. 1:20).¹⁶⁷ The firmament would need to be an expanse between the waters above and the waters below, and a solid dome holding up the waters above. But to claim that there was a solid dome separating the waters above from the waters below introduces a fourth something called a dome, which the biblical text does not include in the description: 1) waters above 2) waters below 3) firmament 4) dome (see **Figure 10**). The dome could not be the waters above since, according to Heiser, the dome is solid. But the waters above would not be solid since solid waters could not fall to earth as rain. Heiser’s characterization actually contradicts biblical description.

Figure 10: Waters Above, Waters Below



¹⁶³ HAL, s.v. “מִקְוֶה.”

¹⁶⁴

(Gen. 1:6) וַיֵּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וַיְהִי מַבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לְמַיִם:

¹⁶⁵ Umberto Cassuto, *From Adam to Noah, Part One, A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1944), 31.

¹⁶⁶ *Unfiltered*, 21.

¹⁶⁷ וַיֵּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים וְשָׂרְצוּ הַמַּיִם שָׂרָץ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה עַל-הָאָרֶץ עַל-פְּנֵי רָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם:

As is Heiser's method, he reads into the text the definition that he needs in order to support his view. The word translated "expanse" is רָקִיעַ (*rāqia'*). The meaning of this word is a hotly debated topic, yet Heiser ignores the scholarly debate as presents his view as if this is the only reasonable interpretation. There is also a verse that contradicts Heiser's view: "Now from above the expanse [וּמִמֶּעַל לְרָקִיעַ, *ûmimmia'al lārāqia'*] that was over [עַל, *al*] their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man" (Ezek. 1:26).¹⁶⁸ Heiser refers to this verse a couple of times in his dissertation: "This seat of authority is at times depicted above a wide expanse (רָקִיעַ) in *merkabah* visions (Ezek 1:22–26)"¹⁶⁹; "This sanctuary houses Yahweh's throne, which is depicted variously as atop an expanse (רָקִיעַ) in Ezekiel 1, or as a cloud-chariot (עֶבֶךְ הָעֲנָן)." ¹⁷⁰ Heiser does not address the verse in terms of the use of the word 'expanse.' In fact, the word רָקִיעַ (*rāqia'*) simply denotes an expanse, a wide extent, or widely spread out area.

This meaning is supported by the expression that occurs in Gen. 1:14, 15, 17, and 20: הַשָּׁמַיִם בְּרָקִיעַ, "in the expanse of the heavens" (*birqia' haššamayim*).¹⁷¹ Since the word הַשָּׁמַיִם (*haššamayim*) means "the heavens" or "the skies," if one takes בְּרָקִיעַ (*rāqia'*) to denote "in the sky of" or "in the skies of," then one is left with a meaningless repetition, "in the sky of the skies." Rather, the word רָקִיעַ (*rāqia'*) simply refers to the expanse, the widely spread out area, in this case referring to the expansive heavens.

Heiser parrots the claims of authors like Paul Seely: "The basic historical fact that defines the meaning of *raqia'* in Genesis 1 is simply this: all peoples in the ancient world thought of the sky as solid."¹⁷² An example Seely gives is from the myth of the Dogon people: "The Dogon tell of an ancient ancestor who came clown from heaven 'standing on a square piece of heaven . . . A thick piece? Yes, as thick as a house. It was ten cubits high with stairs on each side facing the four cardinal points.'" ¹⁷³ Seely does not bother to inform his reader that the Dogon were not Ancient Near Eastern people. They were people who are indigenous to the central plateau region of Mali, in West Africa near the city of Bandiagara, and the people date back to about to the 1500's A.D. They much too late to have had any influence upon the authors of the OT.

A problem with Seely's claim that "all peoples in the ancient world thought of the sky as solid," as G. K. Beale points out, is that no one knows that all peoples in the ancient world thought this:

For example, we just do not know that all ancients believed the sky was a solid dome or that there was anything near unanimity on this point. The mythological portrayal in the *Enuma Elish* of the splitting of Tiamat's body does not prove the point from the Babylonian view,

¹⁶⁸ וּמִמֶּעַל לְרָקִיעַ אֲשֶׁר עַל-רֹאשָׁם כְּמִרְאָה אֶבֶן-סַפִּיר דְמוּת כֶּסֶף וְעַל דְמוּת הַכֶּסֶף דְמוּת כְּמִרְאָה אָדָם עָלָיו
(Ezek. 1:26) מִלְמַעְלָה:

¹⁶⁹ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 38.

¹⁷⁰ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 186.

¹⁷¹ In some grammars, the *patach yod* [יְ] in the word הַשָּׁמַיִם is treated as a vowel letter pronounced *eye* and transliterated *â* rather than *ay*; either form is acceptable

¹⁷² Paul H. Seely, "The Firmament and the Water above Part I: The Meaning of *raqia'* in Gen 1:6–8," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991), 228.

¹⁷³ Seely, "The Firmament and the Water above Part I," 229.

despite Seely's protestation to the contrary, since we cannot be sure that the body of the deity would have been thought of as solid. The deity Apsu is composed of liquid; indeed, even Tiamat is the deity of saltwater deep and equated with that reality. Would the Babylonians have thought of saltwater as something solid? Furthermore, the Israelites and other ancient peoples observed that the sun, moon, and planets move across the sky at different rates, which seems to indicate that these were not implanted in a solid-like dome.¹⁷⁴

Additionally, the Babylonians knew that the heavenly bodies moved through the sky:

As far back as we have any record, men have always had reasons for studying the sky and the things going on in it. Settled agricultural life demands a practical grasp of the cycle of the seasons, so, although man's focus was on the earth where he lived, his attention was early on drawn to the comings and goings of the heavenly bodies: their appearances ('phenomena', as the Greeks called them), their disappearances, phases, and eclipses—those recurrent cycles whose existence is already obvious even before one has any theory or model of the Heavens. For centuries, indeed, the Babylonians studied this pageant with great sophistication, yet without—so far as we can tell—asking, as a matter of physics, what the objects in the celestial procession really were. They observed, recorded, and mastered the astronomical cycles for practical reasons, and seem to have ignored most questions of a speculative kind.

The basic problem which the Babylonians tackled—and largely solved—was the problem of celestial forecasting. Some things are easy enough to predict: as the seasons change, the constellations move gradually and uniformly across the sky, and reappear year by year in the same regular succession. But the Sun, the Moon, and the planets all move across the constellations at varying speeds, and in a pattern which is sometimes intricate. . . . Why were the Babylonian astronomers so interested in these particular questions? The reasons throw light on the practical aims which Babylonian astronomy was expected to meet: divination, and the control of the calendar. On the one hand, celestial bodies were regarded as gods and all the major planets were given the names of gods. Their motions were thought to influence, not just the weather and the tides, but also the health and fortunes of men and of states. So the art of prophesying astronomical events was valued as yielding possible clues to the future welfare of the State.¹⁷⁵

Othmar Keel points out that in the Ancient Egyptian Pyramid texts, “. . . the earth is the region of men and of the (common) dead. The heavens are the region of the gods and of the dead kings.”¹⁷⁶ It is unintelligible to claim that the heavens was a solid dome in which the gods of Egypt lived.

¹⁷⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008), 198.

¹⁷⁵ Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield, *The Fabric of the Heavens: The Development of Astronomy and Dynamics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 26–31.

¹⁷⁶ Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 30.

According to Joanne Conman, “It is easy to be misled into thinking that the Egyptians meant to indicate that the sun god was moving against the background of a static sky in his boat. A significant clue that that is not the case is found in the ‘astronomical’ tomb art. The sun and the decan [‘ten’] stars (which were fixed stars) are portrayed in boats, while not all of the planets are.”¹⁷⁷ After a long and very technical study, Conman concludes,

In summary, the Egyptians had no conception of an underworld. They understood that time manifests itself through the continually changing sky, a concept that was personified by the goddess Nut. The constantly turning sky was not a stationary background but an active force that moved the sun and stars around. The sun was attached to the sky and functioned as a mobile meridian, so that time and direction were not easily separable concepts in ancient Egyptian thought. The star model from the tombs of Seti I and Ramses IV, as explained in the Carlsberg papyri, works properly only if stars are observed in the same location (the *msqt* region) in the same state (rising) at different times of the year. The Asyut coffins' decan lists are part of this same system, tracking stars during their “work” phase. Ancient Egyptian sacred texts were not and should not be mistaken for “primitive” astronomy, nor should abstract conceptions be mistaken for astral simulacra or locations in the sky.¹⁷⁸

Whether one agrees with Conman’s arguments, her presentation demonstrates that other scholars present ancient cosmology in completely different terms and descriptions. As Beale observed, there is no evidence that, concerning cosmology, there was any degree of unanimity among ancient cultures.

Heiser’s claim that the biblical authors believed that the earth was flat and the sky was a solid dome is falsified on two points. First, there is no evidence that the biblical authors borrowed or adopted the cosmological myths of ancient cultures. The only reason Heiser, and others, hold this view is because of the similarities of descriptions between some of the biblical accounts and certain ancient cultures. But, similarity of design does not prove identity of origin. Heiser and other exaggerate the similarities and ignore the critical differences. As John Oswalt puts it, “Beyond these details, what is striking is not what is similar in the biblical creation account to the other stories of origins found in Israel’s world; rather, it is what is different. Thus Wolfram von Soden can write: ‘Direct influences of the Babylonian creation epic on the Biblical account of creation cannot be discerned.’”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Joanne Conman, “It’s about Time: Ancient Egyptian Cosmology,” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur*, Bd. 31 (2003), 38.

¹⁷⁸ Conman, “It’s about Time: Ancient Egyptian Cosmology,” 68.

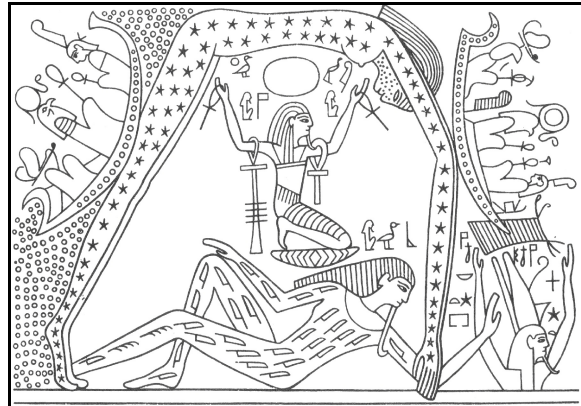
¹⁷⁹ John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 103.

The second point is, scholars such as Conman and Hornung have shown that the notion of a solid dome was not the view held by ancient Egyptians (see **Figure 11**).¹⁸⁰ That being the case, there is no reason to suppose some sort of relation between the biblical authors and the particular cosmology of ancient Mesopotamia rather than the view of the ancient Egyptians, or, in fact, that they borrowed and adopted any views from the mythology of ancient cultures. In fact, as Beale pointed out, there is no definitive evidence that the ancient Mesopotamians believed that the sky was a solid dome. David Toshio Tsumura points out that the Hebrew רָקִיעַ is an hyponym for שָׁמַיִם: “In Gen 1:8, God called the expanse, שָׁמַיִם. The term is hyponymous to שָׁמַיִם; i.e., what רָקִיעַ refers to is included in what שָׁמַיִם refers to, as in the expanse of the sky (Gen 1:14, 15, 17, 20). Cf. Akk. *burmû*, firmament (of the heavens) (CAD B:344–45).¹⁸¹ An hyponym is a word with a more specific meaning than a more general term. A spoon is an hyponym for cutlery. Tsumura references CAD, which is *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. In the definitions and uses of the word *burūmû*, CAD gives the following: “*ina bu-ru-mi ellūti šaruh tālukšu* his (Marduk’s) course is majestic on the bright firmament”¹⁸² So, Marduk’s course is similar to course of the Egyptian sun god, as Conman has interpreted it. Commenting on the depiction of the sun god’s trek, Keel points out, “In Fig. 32, both the sky and the earth appear in double form. Side by side with the concept of the sky as a woman stands another, unrelated concept: the sky as a sea traversed by the sun god.”¹⁸³ Keel refers to the sky as “a heavenly ocean.”¹⁸⁴ Walton includes the same graphic, and his caption reads, “Photo 8.1. Amun-Re, the sun god, sails his solar barque through the heavenly waters over the top of the sky god, Nut, who has the stars emblazoned on her body. Shu, the air god, maintains the separation between the sky god (Nut) and the earth god (Geb).”¹⁸⁵

In neither the Egyptian nor the Mesopotamian myths is it conclusive that the sky is depicted as a solid dome. As Beale notes, “But there is another Egyptian depiction where the god of the sky, Nut, is held up by Shu, which represents the air itself. Neither the fluid heavenly sea represented by Nut nor the air symbolized by Shu are solid materials.”¹⁸⁶ Not only has Heiser misrepresented the beliefs of the ancient Mesopotamians, he has also misrepresented the teaching of the OT.

An even more serious problem for Heiser’s view, at lest from the perspective of orthodox Christianity, is that Heiser’s view necessarily denies inerrancy. Heiser asserts that the biblical authors believed that the earth was flat: “For the biblical writers, the earth was flat and round, supported by

Figure 11: Separating the Sky and Earth



¹⁸⁰ The graphic in **Figure 11** is from Hornung, *Der Eine Und Die Vielen*, 59.

¹⁸¹ *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, s.v. “רָקִיעַ.”

¹⁸² *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, s.v. “*burūmû* (*burummû*).”

¹⁸³ Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 36.

¹⁸⁴ Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 36.

¹⁸⁵ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 150.

¹⁸⁶ Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 198.

pillars (2 Sam 22:8) and surrounded by water (Gen 1:10); the water was held in place by the edges of the solid dome ('expanse'; 'firmament') that covered the earth (Gen 1:6; Prov 8:27–28)."¹⁸⁷ How does Heiser know what the biblical authors believed? The only access he has to what the biblical authors may have believed is through what they wrote. This is clear from the biblical passages to which Heiser appeals. Since it is the case that the earth is not flat, and there is no "solid dome," it necessarily follows that, according to Heiser, the biblical writers believed a falsehood, and they affirmed the falsehood in what they wrote. Heiser says, "This [pre-scientific] worldview shaped the Old Testament and illustrates how the Bible uses the language of its time to explain its perspective and to glorify Yahweh."¹⁸⁸ Since, according to Heiser, the biblical authors taught a falsehood, then either the texts in which they affirmed this falsehood are not the Word of God, or God had inspired His authors to teach falsehood. Biblical authors presenting falsehood as if it is truth does not glorify Yahweh.

Avoiding the Charge of Errancy

Heiser attempts to avoid the charge of errancy by attempting to change or avoid the meanings of words in order to make them fit his perspective. He does this with the word 'affirm.'

The first thing I'd like to pursue is Chet's criticism of the word "affirm" — I also think it's a weasel-word. You quote 1 Cor. 11:14, which says, "Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him?" Here Paul makes a specific statement about nature—it's clearly a comment on the natural world and a truth that Paul believes the natural world communicates or points to. Having read the article in the readings list, it is quite clear that Paul's statement is rooted in an absolutely non-scientific worldview. His statement is scientifically false. I'd say he's clearly "affirming" something about nature here and then extrapolating to his more significant point. So, I think we need to dump this "affirming" language as some sort of safeguard (read: weasel-word) for defending inerrancy.¹⁸⁹

Heiser believes that his interpretation is the only possible one. As we have seen above, the problem here is not Paul's supposedly "pre-scientific" worldview, but Heiser's imposition of his modern worldview on Paul.

Instead of questioning his interpretation, he wants to weasel out of the problem by blaming the word 'affirm.' Heiser refers to a post by in which Chet objects to the use of the word 'affirm' in definitions of inerrancy:

I think the greatest wiggle word found in all of the definitions above is 'affirm'. I think there must be a secret definition of 'affirm' going around the systematic theology circles that I am not aware of. Anything stated positively is an affirmation. "In the beginning God created the

¹⁸⁷ *Unfiltered*, 21.

¹⁸⁸ Michael S. Heiser, "The Old Testament and the Ancient Near Eastern Worldview," in *Faithlife Study Bible*, ed. John D. Barry, et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016).

¹⁸⁹ Michael S. Heiser, "Pre-Scientific Worldview "Problem" and Inerrancy," <https://drmsb.com/pre-scientific-worldview-problem-and-inerrancy/>. Accessed 7/22/2024.

heavens and the earth” is an assertion, and therefore an affirmation. For that matter, so is “God created a firmament to separate the waters under the firmament from the waters above” and so is “Nature shows that long hair on a man is shameful”. Indeed, that last is an example of BOTH meanings of ‘affirm’, as it is both a positive statement “long hair on a man is shameful” and a statement of agreement or support of the assertion “Nature shows (affirms) that...”¹⁹⁰

Again, the problem is not with the word ‘affirm.’ The meaning of the word ‘affirm’ is not difficult. According to OED, the word means, “To make a statement of fact; to make a strong assertion. To assert (something) strongly; to state as a fact, transitive. With object and infinitive, or object and complement.”¹⁹¹ It is a simple matter of the correspondence view of truth. A claim is true if it corresponds to reality. When the text states, “God made the expanse, and separated the waters which were below the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse,” it is affirming and asserting that this is in fact what God did. The statement that God made the expanse is true if in fact this is what God did. The problem is with Heiser’s and Chet’s attempt to redefine the words involved in the definitions of inerrancy in order to claim that, even though the biblical authors believed and asserted errors, we can still be advocates of inerrancy. This is, frankly, not honest.

Was Israel Ever Polytheistic?

Was Israel ever polytheistic? Heiser certainly believes they were. The older view that Israel was never polytheistic is expressed by John Watson in this book, *Christianity and Idealism* in which he asserted, “What is unique in the development of the religion of Israel is that it passed without a break from the worship of nature, to the worship of Jehovah, without going through the intermediate stage of polytheism.”¹⁹² A few years after Watson’s book came out, Arthur Whatham objected to the notion that Israel was never polytheistic: “Now, I believe that, were this opinion to be adopted by students of the history of a people whose religious development is of such great importance to Christians, the actual religious development of this people would be altogether misunderstood a result so serious that I have ventured here to set forward my reasons for disagreeing with the scholars aforesaid.”¹⁹³

Whatham acknowledges the fact that the nation of Israel was constituted under the leadership of Moses, but he claims, “It is necessary, therefore, to investigate their religious conceptions before taken in hand by Moses, and to do this we must commence with their immediate forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”¹⁹⁴ In support he appeals to Josh. 24:2.: “² Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, “From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods. ³ Then

¹⁹⁰ Chet Silvermonte, “Comments,” (June 18, 2008). <https://drmsb.com/sifting-the-posts-and-comments-on-inerrancy/>. Accessed 7/22/2024.

¹⁹¹ OED, s.v. “affirm.”

¹⁹² John Watson, *Christianity and Idealism*, 2d ed. The Macmillan Company (London: Macmillan & Company, 1897), 45–46.

¹⁹³ Arthur E. Whatham, “Were the Israelites Ever Polytheists?” *The Biblical World*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (May, 1899), 293.

¹⁹⁴ Whatham, “Were the Israelites Ever Polytheists?” 294.

I took your father Abraham from beyond the River, and led him through all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac””” (Josh. 24:2–3).¹⁹⁵ The reference to the “fathers” who “served other gods” appears again in Joshua’s challenge to the people: “If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve YHWH, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve YHWH” (Josh. 24:15).¹⁹⁶ The gods of which their fathers served does not refer to gods whom the people may have worshiped before the time of Moses, but to the fathers referred to in 24:2 who “served other gods,” namely Terah, Abraham, and Nahor. So, there is nothing in the biblical text that indicates that the people after the time that Abraham believed in YHWH up to the time of Moses served or worshiped other gods. The only basis of the claim that Israel was polytheistic before Moses are the similarities between ANE literature and the Bible.

It is perhaps significant that Whatham gives only verse 2 of Joshua’s text. He omits the statement by God that He took Abraham from beyond the River. The people who became the nation of Israel under Moses were the people who descended from Abraham of whom it is said, “Then he believed in YHWH; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).¹⁹⁷

Whatham argues that after Abraham believed, he was a henotheist: “Now, it is the custom to speak of Abraham as though he was a monotheist after his call. But this is a mistake. He really was a henotheist. He recognized the existence of the god of Melchizedek, while Abimelech is represented as addressing the same divinity as Abraham, that is to say, *Adonai* (Gen. 18:3; 20: 4, where in both cases the word Lord is *Adonai*).”¹⁹⁸ The text says nothing about Melchizedek being “a god.” The word *Adonai* (אֲדֹנָי, *’ādōnā*) simply means “lord.” In Gen. 42:10, Joseph’s brothers call Joseph “lord,” but they certainly did not believe he was a god.

More recently, Mark Smith has argued that there was a polytheistic background to Israel’s religion. Smith asserts, “However, over the last half-century numerous scholarly studies have sought to locate the biblical foundational story of monotheism within its larger cultural context.”¹⁹⁹ Ultimately, authors like Whatham, Smith, and Heiser must appeal to ANE myths to construct a view that Israel at one point was polytheistic. They must construct this myth because there is no biblical evidence that Israel was ever polytheistic.

Why Does It Matter?

Heiser claims to believe in and worship the God of Christian theology. However, his arguments and assertions show that he does not believe in God of orthodox Christian theology. Several times Heiser depicts God as involved in decision making. He also claims that God’s plans

¹⁹⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶל-כָּל-הָעָם כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֶבֶר הַנָּהָר יָשְׁבוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם מֵעוֹלָם תֵּרַח אָבִי נָחוֹר וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים: ³ וְאַתָּה אֲתֵּי אֲבֹתֶיךָ אֶת-אַבְרָהָם מֵעֶבֶר הַנָּהָר וְאֵלֶיךָ אוֹתוֹ בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְאַרְבַּע אֲתִירָעוֹ וְאַתָּן-לּוֹ אֲתִירָעָה: (Josh. 24:2–3)

¹⁹⁶ וְאִם רָע בְּעֵינֵיכֶם לַעֲבֹד אֶת-יְהוָה בַּחֲרוּ לָכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת-מִי תַעֲבֹדוּן אִם אֶת-אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר-עֲבַדוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר בְּעֶבֶר הַנָּהָר וְאִם אֶת-אֱלֹהֵי הָאֻמִּים אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יֹשְׁבִים בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְאֵנֹכִי וּבֵיתִי נַעֲבֹד אֶת-יְהוָה: (Josh. 24:15)

¹⁹⁷ וַהֲאָמֵן בִּיהוָה נִחְשְׁבָה לּוֹ צְדָקָה: (Gen. 15:6)

¹⁹⁸ Whatham, “Were the Israelites Ever Polytheists?” 295–96.

¹⁹⁹ Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 4.

failed, that God had to restart His plan, and that God's plans were frustrated by events and persons. This is a denial of God's sovereignty and providence, and a rejection of God's immutability. Heiser's claims contradict the statement of God: "From this day I am He; no one can deliver from My hand; I will act, and who can prevent it?" (Isa. 43:13).²⁰⁰ Heiser also wants to redefine inerrancy to allow for the errors believed and taught by the biblical authors while still claiming to believe in inerrancy.

Heiser also wants to redefine predestination and foreknowledge. This effort also fails. Because God is absolutely sovereign, God has predestined all that will come to pass. This does not violate our moral freedom since the relation of our choices to God's sovereignty is from eternity, and our relation to our choices is temporal. Therefore, these are not contradictory. How God is able to do this is beyond our understanding, but, as we have shown, this pattern is evident in inspiration and inerrancy, and in the incarnation of Jesus Christ Who is God in the flesh.

It matters because Heiser denies the very nature and attributes of God as these have been revealed in His word, and as these have been studied, believed, and expounded upon throughout the history of the Christian church. Any author who denies God's sovereignty, providence, immutability, and the inerrancy of God's word is someone whose teaching is contrary to orthodox Christian theology. Any person has been given by God the freedom to believe what he or she chooses. But a person does not have the freedom to deny orthodox Christian theology and yet present his or her claims as if they are orthodox. Like Smith and others, Heiser has employed the myths of ANE literature to construct a hypothetical background to Israel's monotheism. This is, frankly, not honest.

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גִּם־מִיּוֹם אֲנִי הוּא וְאֵין מִיָּדִי מַצִּיל אֶפְעֵל וְמִי יִשְׁכַּבֶּנָּה: (Isa. 43:13)

CHAPTER 11

GOD'S ENTOURAGE

Introduction

One of Heiser's central claims is that there are "other gods" who form a "divine council" that functions to carry out God's commands and to consult with God in making judgments and decisions. In this chapter we will consider Heiser's interpretation of Job 38:4–7 in which he claims that there are "other gods" who constitute God's "divine council," and who were present when God created the world. We will also consider Heiser's interpretation of Jesus' use of Ps. 82:6 in His statement in Jn. 10:34, "I said, you are gods."

Heiser's Interpretation of Genesis 1:26–28

Heiser argues that "God's entourage" was present and watching when God created the heavens and the earth. Referring to the statement in Gen. 1:16, Heiser says, "What we have is a single person (God) addressing a group—the members of his divine council."¹ The NASB translation is given here:

²⁶ Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.²⁸ God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen. 1:26–28).²

Characterizing what God says in verse 26, Heiser argues, "It's like me going into a room of friends and saying, 'Hey, let's go get some pizza!' I'm the one speaking. A group is hearing what I say. Similarly, God comes to the divine council with an exciting announcement: 'Let's create

¹ *Unseen Realm*, 39.

²⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדִמוּתֵנוּ וְיִרְדּוּ בְּדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־
²⁷ וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם: וַיְבָרֶךְ
²⁸ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְכִבְשֶׁהָ וְיִרְדּוּ בְּדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיַּי הָרֶמֶשׂ
עַל־הָאָרֶץ: (Gen. 1:26–28)

humankind!”³ In order to make it fit his view, Heiser misrepresents God's words. God does not simply say, “Let's create humankind!” God says, “Let's create humankind in our image and our likeness.”

In a footnote on this passage, Heiser quotes a statement from Paul Joüon. Heiser gives the quote from Joüon as “The *we* of majesty does not exist in Hebrew.”⁴ This quote actually occurs in two footnotes in Joüon's grammar. The first is, “Le *nous* de majesté n'existe pas en hébreu. Pour le *pluriel de majesté* dan les noms cf. §136 *d*.” (“The *we* of majesty does not exist in Hebrew. For the plural of majesty in nouns cf. §136 *d*.”)⁵ The second occurs at the end of footnote 2 in §136 *d*, page 416: “Le *nous* de majesté n'existe pas en hébreu, § 114 *e* N.”⁶ The second quote references the first. Joüon is claiming that there is no instance of the pronoun ‘we’ being a plural of majesty pronoun. Later in the same grammar, Joüon refers to אֱלֹהִים as a plural of majesty: “Plural of **excellence** or **majesty**: אֱלֹהִים God (and ordinary plural: gods); it is generally constructed in the singular (§ 148 a, 150 f); comp. קֹדֶשׁ the Holy One (Pr 9, 10; 30, 3) and aram. עֲלִיּוֹן, the Most High (Dn 7, 18, 22, 25).”⁷ Heiser acknowledges that the plural of majesty does occur for nouns: “The plural of majesty does exist for nouns (see Jouon-Muraoka, par. 136.d), but Gen 1:26 is not about the nouns—the issue is the verbal forms.”⁸ To support his contention that it is “not about the nouns,” he references an article by John C. Beckman. Interestingly, Heiser does not provide any quote from Beckman's article. Beckham actually refers to fact that the plural of majesty appears most frequently for אֱלֹהִים:

The term ‘majestic plural’ or *pluralis majestatis* refers to the use of a plural word to refer honorifically to a single person or entity. It is also called the ‘plural of respect’, the ‘honorific plural’, the ‘plural of excellence’, or the ‘plural of intensity’. In the Hebrew Bible such plural forms are most commonly used when referring to the God of Israel, e.g., אֲדֹנָיִם אֲנִי *’ādōnīm ’ānī* ‘I am a master (lit. ‘masters’)’ (Mal. 1.6), although it can also be used when referring to a human, e.g., אֲבִרָהָם אֲדֹנָאֵו *’abrāhām ’ādōnāw* ‘Abraham his master (lit. ‘masters’)’ (Gen. 24.9), an object, e.g., קִבְרֹתֶיךָ *qibrōtekā* ‘your grave (lit. ‘graves’)’ (2 Kgs 22.20), or a personified abstraction, e.g., בֵּיתָהּ בְּחָכְמָהּ *ḥākmōt bāntā bētāh* ‘Wisdom (lit. ‘wisdoms’) has built her house’ (Prov. 9.1). The *pluralis majestatis* appears most frequently in nouns, particularly אֱלֹהִים *’ēlōhīm* ‘God (lit. ‘gods’),’ but may also be used with nominalized adjectives, e.g., קֳדֹשִׁים *qēdōšim* ‘the Holy One (lit. ‘holy ones’)’ (Prov. 9.10);⁹

³ *Unseen Realm*, 39.

⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 39.n1.

⁵ P. Paul Joüon, *Grammaire de L'Hébreu Biblique* (Rome: Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1923) 309.n1.

⁶ Joüon, *Grammaire de L'Hébreu Biblique*, 416.n.2.

⁷ Joüon, *Grammaire de L'Hébreu Biblique*, 136d.416. “Pluriel d'**excellence** ou de **majesté**: אֱלֹהִים *Dieu* (et pluriel ordinaire: *dieux*); il se construit généralement au singulier (§ 148 a, 150 f); comp. קֹדֶשׁ *le Saint* (Pr 9, 10; 30, 3) et aram. עֲלִיּוֹן, *le Très-Haut* (Dn 7, 18, 22, 25).” Emphasis in original.

⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 39.n1.

⁹ John C. Beckman, “Pluralis Majestatis,” in *P-Z*, vol. 3, *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden Brill, 2013), 145.

Contrary to Heiser's misleading reference, Beckham's article is actually about the nouns, particularly אֱלֹהִים. Beckman does not dispute the claim that אֱלֹהִים in Gen. 1:26 is a use of pluralis majestatis. What he claims is, "There are no undisputed examples of a *pronoun* or a *verb* displaying the pluralis majestatis."¹⁰ Heiser tries to divert the reader's attention away from the actual issue by claiming that it is about verbal forms. Bruce Waltke and M. O'Connor also assert that the plural of majesty, or "honorific plural" as they call it, is most frequently used with reference to God: "Most honorific plurals in the Bible involve the God of Israel, and the most common of these is אֱלֹהִים, used about twenty-five hundred times. When used of the God of Israel, this term usually takes singular agreement (אֱלֹהִים צַדִּיק 'a just God,' Ps 7:10); when used of various gods, it takes plural agreement (אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים 'other gods,' Exod 20:3; cf. Exod 12:12)."¹¹

Heiser continues: "You might wonder at this point why the language changes from plural in verse 26 ('Let *us* make humankind in *our* image and according to *our* likeness') to singular in verse 27 ('So God created humankind in *his* image, in the likeness of God he created him'). Does the Bible contradict itself here?"¹² Heiser argues that the shift from plural to singular is because in the statement, "Let us make man in Our image and in our likeness," God is addressing the "divine council." The problem with this interpretation, is that if God is speaking to a "divine council" when He says "Let *us* make man in *our* image," then He is saying that man would be created in the image of God and the "divine council."

In order to avoid this problem, Heiser asserts,

But if God is speaking to his divine council here, does that suggest that humankind was created by more than one *elohim*? Was the creation of humankind a group project? Not at all. Back to my pizza illustration: If I am the one paying for the pizza—making the plan happen after announcing it—then I retain both the inspiration and the initiative for the entire project. That's how Genesis 1:26 works.¹³

But this tactic does not solve the problem. Heiser misses the point with his "pizza illustration." When he says, "Let's go get some pizza," he is talking to the whole group to get pizza together, regardless of who pays for it. Whether he makes the plan happen or not, it is still the whole group who "gets pizza." But man is not created in the image of God and a supposed "divine council."

Why does the text says "Let *us* make man in *our* image"? It may simply be a grammatical thing. The translation, "let us make" is a single Hebrew form, נַעֲשֶׂה (*na'āśeh*). It is a 1st person plural verb. The translation "in our image" is the compound form בְּצַלְמֵנוּ (*bəṣalmēnū*). It is the noun צֶלֶם with the prefixed, inseparable preposition בְּ (*bē*), and the first person plural pronominal suffix נוּ (*nū*). Since a pronoun must agree with its antecedent in gender and number, the pronoun must be plural to agree with the plural noun אֱלֹהִים.

Another interpretation from the perspective of narrative art was proposed by Dale Patrick:

¹⁰ Beckman, "Pluralis Majestatis," 146.

¹¹ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 7.4.3b.122.

¹² *Unseen Realm*, 40.

¹³ *Unseen Realm*, 39.

In the account, God is depicted as carrying on internal dialogue only once, when he prepares to create humans: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion . . . (1:26). Although P employs internal dialogue only this once, it is sufficient to establish the presence of the art of characterization. The reader is allowed a glimpse into the thinking of the actor behind the act. This glimpse is something of a dramatic high point in the chapter. It is a momentous occurrence for the Creator to make a creature in his own likeness, so we the readers are permitted to view ourselves from God's perspective.¹⁴

This would be comparable to a person saying to himself, "Let's see if I can make this happen," or something similar. This may be supported by the similar statement in Gen. 11:5–8:

⁵ And YHWH came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. ⁶ And YHWH said, "Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech." ⁸ So YHWH scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city (Gen. 11:5–8).¹⁵

It is YHWH who came down. It is YHWH who said, "Let us go down." It was YHWH who confused the language can scattered the people. Claus Westerman also argues that the statement in Gen. 1:26 is a plural of deliberation, and he connects this with Gen. 11:7 and 8:

In favor of a plural of deliberation in 1:26 is the fact that in Is 6:8 the plural and the singular are used in the same sentence with the same meaning; similarly in 2 Sam 24:14 where it is a question of one and the same conclusion: ". . . Let us fall into the hand of the Lord . . . but let me not fall into the hand of man." C. Brockelmann describes the cohortative as "a form of speech which occurred primarily in self-deliberation" (*Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen* II, 24, 14a; W.H. Schmidt 130 n. 3; U. Cassuto p. 55: "Plural of exhortation"). A clear example of this type of deliberation occurs in Gen 11:7: "Come let us go down...." (the continuation in v. 8 is in the singular).¹⁶

Cassuto asserts, "The best explanation [for the plural forms], although rejected by the majority of contemporary commentators, is that we have here the plural of exhortation. When a person exhorts himself to do a given task he uses the plural: 'Let us go!' 'Let us rise up!' 'Let us sit!' and the like."¹⁷

¹⁴ Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 16–17.

¹⁵ וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה לִרְאוֹת אֶת-הָעִיר וְאֶת-הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְנֵי הָאָדָם: ⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֵן עַם אֶחָד וּשְׂפָה אַחַת לְכָלָם וְזֶה הַחֵלֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא-יִבָּצֵר מֵהֶם כֹּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: ⁷ הֲבֵנָה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ: ⁸ וַיִּפֶץ יְהוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֹת הָעִיר: (Gen. 11:5–8)

¹⁶ Claus Westermann, *A Continental Commentary: Genesis 1–11*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 145.

¹⁷ Cassuto, *From Adam to Noah*, 55.

Heiser's Interpretation of Job 38:4–7

Heiser begins chapter 3 of *Unseen Realm* with a question that children might ask: “WHAT WAS THERE BEFORE GOD MADE THE WORLD?” According to Heiser, although some adults might respond, “God was there,” this response, according to Heiser, is “true, but incomplete” because, Heiser claims, “God had company.”¹⁸ Heiser asserts, “The biblical answer is that the heavenly host was with God before creation. In fact, they witnessed it.”¹⁹ In support of his answer, Heiser claims that Job 38:4–7 “is clear on this point.”²⁰

The passage is set out here: “⁴Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, ⁵Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? ⁶On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, ⁷When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?²¹”

Heiser poses the question, “But who are the sons of God?”²² It may seem nit-picking, but how a question is posed often reveals latent or unexpressed assumptions. Heiser does not ask, “*What* are the sons of God?” Rather, he asks, “*Who* are the sons of God?” He has already made up his mind that the expression “the sons of God” must be referring to living beings rather than inanimate objects, which is why he poses the question the way he does. He could have asked, “*Who* or *what* are the sons of God?” in order to persuade the reader by his arguments and interpretation. However, before dealing with the text, before doing any exegesis on the passage, before making his argument, Heiser prejudices the reader to think of the sons of God as “*whos*” not “*whats*.” This is another instance of the fallacy of poisoning the well, and it is, frankly, not honest.

He immediately rejects the notion that the sons of God might be angels: “We might think of them as angels, but that wouldn’t be quite correct.”²³ Why wouldn’t this be quite correct? Heiser does not bother to explain why this would not be “quite correct.” Interestingly both the Syriac and the LXX translate “sons of God” as “angels”:

בְּיָמֵי אֱלֹהִים הָיוּ כָּל־אֲנָשִׁים מַלְאָכָא דְּמַלְאָכָא דְּמַלְאָכָא דְּמַלְאָכָא²⁴

“Created together stars of morning and all sons of angels [בְּיָמֵי אֱלֹהִים, *bny ml’k*]²⁵ shout for joy” (Job 38:7). The word מַלְאָכָא can also be translated “messengers.”²⁵

¹⁸ *Unseen Realm*, 23.

¹⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 23.

²⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 23.

²¹ אִיפֻהּ הָיִיתָ בְּיָמֵי אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה אֲנִי מִיָּדָע אוֹ מִיָּנֶסֶת עָלֶיךָ קֵן: ⁶ עַל־מָה אֲדַנִּיָּהּ הַטְּבָעוּ אוֹ מִיָּדָע אֲבִיךָ פְּתָחָהּ ⁷ בְּרִיחַ יִחַד כּוֹכְבֵי בֶקֶר וְיָרִיעוּ כָּל־בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים: (Job 38:4–7)

²² *Unseen Realm*, 23.

²³ *Unseen Realm*, 23.

²⁴ *Leiden Peshitta* (Leiden: Peshitta Institute Leiden, 2008), Job 38:7.

²⁵ Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, and Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2009), s.v. “מַלְאָכָא.”

George M. Lamsa translates the Syriac, “When did I create the morning stars, and all the angels shouted for joy?”²⁶ R. Payne Smith defined ܠܐܢܐ ܕܢܐܪܐ as “a messenger esp. a messenger of God, an angel.”²⁷ Michael Sokoloff defines ܠܐܢܐ ܕܢܐܪܐ, “1. messenger, 2. angel.”²⁸

The LXX translates the text as “angels”:

ὅτε ἐγενήθησαν ἄστρα, ἤνεσάν με φωνῇ μεγάλῃ πάντες ἄγγελοί μου²⁹

“When the stars were born, and praised me with a loud voice all My angels [ἄγγελοί, *aggeloi*]” (Job. 38:7).³⁰

Apparently, it seemed quite correct to the ancient translators of the Syriac and Greek texts of this verse to use the word ‘angels.’ Of course, to Heiser it is not correct because he has already decided that it refers to something else.

He goes on to explain:

The unseen world has a hierarchy, something reflected in such terms as *archangel* versus *angel*. That hierarchy is sometimes difficult for us to discern in the Old Testament, since we aren’t accustomed to viewing the unseen world like a dynastic household (more on that following), as an Israelite would have processed certain terms used to describe the hierarchy. 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.³¹

First of all he sets up a false distinction by contrasting the term ‘archangel’ with the term ‘angel.’ Of course, if the one is an *archangel*, it is certainly an *angel*. He argues that this hierarchy is difficult for us to discern because “we aren’t accustomed to viewing the unseen world like a dynastic household.” However, just because there is a distinction between an archangel and other angels does not mean that there is a “dynastic household.” Heiser just sneaks in this expression without justification. Once again he is attempting to prejudice the reader.

The expression “sons of God” occurs 5 times in the OT. In every instance, except Job 38:7, the text uses the phrase בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים, *bēnê hā’ēlōhîm*, “the sons of the God.” The definite article is

²⁶ *Holy Bible from the Ancient Eastern Text*, trans. George M. Lamsa (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1933), Job 38:7, 585.

²⁷ R. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary: Founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith*, ed. J. Payne Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1902), s.v. “ܠܐܢܐ, ܠܐܢܐܐ”. (Emphasis in original). In his dictionary, Smith combined the Estrangelo script with the vowel points from Western/Jacobite script.

²⁸ *A Syriac Lexicon*, s.v. “ܠܐܢܐ ܕܢܐܪܐ.”

²⁹ Joseph Ziegler, ed., *Iob*, vol. XI, 4, *Vetus Testamentum Graecum. Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis Editum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), Job 38:7a–b.

³⁰ There is a textual variant. Aquila and Theodotion translate the text as “υἱοὶ θεοῦ.” See, Joseph Ziegler, ed., *Iob; Apparatus II*, vol. XI, 4, *Vetus Testamentum Graecum. Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis Editum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 7b.384.

³¹ *Unseen Realm*, 23–24.

the הָ (*hā*) on the word ‘God’ (אֱלֹהִים, *’ēlōhîm*).³² According to the rule of construct relations, because the word in the absolute state, in this instance אֱלֹהִים, has the definite article, the word in the construct state, in this instance בְּנֵי, must be taken as definite. However, in Job 38:7 the expression, is בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, *bēnê ’ēlōhîm*, in which the definite article is missing from the word ‘God.’ Now, if we take the word translated “God” as a proper name, it is required that the definite article be used in the translation of the word ‘sons’ even if there is no definite article on the word ‘God.’ This is also due to the rule of a construct relation. However, the question is, why is it missing in Job 38:7. In the two other places where the phrase is used in Job, the word ‘God’ has the definite article. The following table sets out the instances in the OT in which the expression “sons of God” is used.

Table #11: The Sons of God

Gen. 6:2	And the sons of God [בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>bēnê hā’ēlōhîm</i>] saw the daughters of the man [הָאָדָם, <i>hā’ādām</i>] were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. וַיֵּרְאוּ בְנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־בָּנוֹת הָאָדָם כִּי טֹבֹת הָיָה וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּחָרוּ:
Gen. 6:4	The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God [בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>bēnê hā’ēlōhîm</i>] came in to the daughters of the man [הָאָדָם, <i>hā’ādām</i>], and they brought forth to them. These the mighty ones who from old, men of the name. הָנֶפִלִים הָיוּ בָאָרֶץ בְּיָמֵם הַגְּבֻרִים אֲשֶׁר מֵעוֹלָם אָנָּשִׁי הָאֱלֹהִים וְגַם אַחֲרֵי־כֵן אֲשֶׁר יָבֹאוּ בְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים אֶל־בָּנוֹת הָאָדָם וַיֵּלְדוּ לָהֶם הַמָּה הַנֶּפִלִים הָיוּ בָאָרֶץ בְּיָמֵם הַגְּבֻרִים אֲשֶׁר מֵעוֹלָם אָנָּשִׁי
Job 1:6	Now there was a day when the sons of God [בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>bēnê hā’ēlōhîm</i>] came to present themselves before the LORD, and the Satan also came among them. וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים לְהִתְיַצֵּב עַל־יְהוָה וַיָּבֹא גַם־הַשָּׁטָן בְּתוֹכָם:
Job 2:1	Again there was a day when the sons of God [בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>bēnê hā’ēlōhîm</i>] came to present themselves before the LORD, and the Satan also came among them וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים לְהִתְיַצֵּב עַל־יְהוָה וַיָּבֹא גַם־הַשָּׁטָן בְּתוֹכָם לְהִתְיַצֵּב עַל־יְהוָה:
Job 38:7	When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God [בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, <i>bēnê ’ēlōhîm</i>] shouted for joy. בְּרִיחַ יַחַד כּוֹכְבֵי בֹקֶר וַיִּרְעוּ כָּל־בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים:

³² The words בְּנֵי (“sons of”) and הָאֱלֹהִים (“the God”) are in a construct relation in which the word “sons of” is in the construct state, and the word “the God” is in the absolute state. When the word in the absolute state has the definite article, or is a proper name, the word in the construct state is made definite. So, even though “sons of” does not have a definite article, it is made definite by being in a construct relation with the word “the God.” That is why it is translated, “the sons of the God.”

Now Heiser cannot call fowl over the presence or absence of the definite article in these instances because he makes an argument about the word translated “Satan” in Job.

Old Testament scholars are well aware of all this. Their conclusion that *satan* is not a proper personal name in the Old Testament is driven by Hebrew grammar. Like English, Hebrew does not attach the definite article (the word “the”) to proper personal nouns. English speakers do not refer to themselves (or to another person) with phrases like “the Tom” or “he Sally.” I’m not “the Mike.” English doesn’t use the definite article with personal names. Neither does Hebrew.³³

Heiser’s characterization of English use is wrong. It is not uncommon for someone to say, “I’m not talking about *that* Tom. I’m talking about *the* Tom that I know.” In an exclamation, people often say something like, “Are you *the* Tom Cruse?” Following Heiser’s argument the uses of the definite article with the word אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlōhîm*) are not instances of a proper name, “God.” It follows from Heiser’s argument that in the two instances in Job where the definite article is used must be titles, and the one instance in which the definite article is not used is a proper name. But this makes absolutely no sense.

There are 8 instances in the OT in which both the word ‘God’ with a definite (הָאֱלֹהִים, *hā’ēlōhîm*), and the word ‘God’ without the definite article (אֱלֹהִים, *’ēlōhîm*), occur in the same verse.

Table #12: God and The God

Gen. 5:24	“Enoch walked with the God [הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>hā’ēlōhîm</i>]; and he was not, for God [אֱלֹהִים, <i>’ēlōhîm</i>] took him” וַיִּתְהַלֵּךְ חֲנוּךְ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֵינֶנּוּ כִּי־לָקַח אֹתוֹ אֱלֹהִים:
Gen. 20:17	“Abraham prayed to the God [הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>hā’ēlōhîm</i>], and God [אֱלֹהִים, <i>’ēlōhîm</i>] healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they brought forth.” וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אַבְרָהָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּרְפָּא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־אֲבִימֶלֶךְ וְאֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת־הַעֲמָהָתָיו וַיֵּלְדוּ:
Ex. 18:19	“Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God [אֱלֹהִים, <i>’ēlōhîm</i>] be with you. You be the people’s representative before the God [הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>hā’ēlōhîm</i>], and you bring the disputes to the God [הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>hā’ēlōhîm</i>].” עַתָּה שְׁמַע בְּקִלִּי אֵיעֲצֶךָ וַיְהִי אֱלֹהִים עִמָּךְ הֲיִהְיֶה אִתָּךְ לָעַם מוֹלֵךְ הָאֱלֹהִים וְהִבְאֵתָ אִתָּךְ אֶת־חֲדָוּתֵי הָאֱלֹהִים:
2 Kgs. 1:12	“Elijah replied to them, ‘If I am a man of the God [הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>hā’ēlōhîm</i>], let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.’ Then the fire of God [אֱלֹהִים, <i>’ēlōhîm</i>] came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.”

³³ *Unseen Realm*, 57.

	וַיַּעַן אֱלֹהִים וַיְדַבֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם אֱסֵאִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים אֲנִי תָרַד אִשׁ מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְתֹאכַל אֶתְךָ וְאֶת־חֲמִשֶּׁיךָ וְתִרְדָּר אִשׁ־אֱלֹהִים מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְתֹאכַל אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־חֲמִשָּׁיו:
2 Kgs. 5:15	“When he returned to the man of the God [הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>hā'ēlōhīm</i>] with all his company, and came and stood before him, he said, ‘Behold now, I know that there is no God [אֱלֹהִים, <i>’ēlōhīm</i>] in all the earth, but in Israel; so please take a present from your servant now.’” וַיָּשָׁב אֶל־אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים הוּא וְכָל־מַחְנֵהוּ וַיָּבֹא וַיַּעֲמֵד לִפְנֵי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה־נָא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אֵין אֱלֹהִים בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ כִּי אִם־בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַתָּה קַח־נָא בְרָכָה מֵאֵת עַבְדְּךָ:
2 Chron. 24:20	“Then the Spirit of God [אֱלֹהִים, <i>’ēlōhīm</i>] came on Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest; and he stood above the people and said to them, ‘Thus the God [הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>hā'ēlōhīm</i>] has said, ‘Why do you transgress the commandments of YHWH and do not prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, He has also forsaken you.’” וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים לָבָשָׁה אֶת־זַכְרְיָה בֶן־יְהוֹיָדָע הַכֹּהֵן וַיַּעֲמֵד מֵעַל לָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם כֹּה אָמַר הָאֱלֹהִים לָמָּה אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת־מִצְוֹת יְהוָה וְלֹא תִצְלִיחוּ כִּי־עֲוֹבְתֶם אֶת־יְהוָה וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶתְכֶם:
2 Chron. 26:5	“He continued to seek God [אֱלֹהִים, <i>’ēlōhīm</i>] in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding through the vision of the God [הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>hā'ēlōhīm</i>]; and as long as he sought YHWH, the God [הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>hā'ēlōhīm</i>] prospered him.” וַיְהִי לַדָּרֶשׁ אֱלֹהִים בְּיָמָיו וְזַכְרְיָהוּ הַמִּבִּין בְּרֹאֵת הָאֱלֹהִים וּבְיָמָיו דָּרָשׁוּ אֶת־יְהוָה הַצִּלְיָהוּ הָאֱלֹהִים:
2 Chron. 33:7	“Then he put the carved image of the idol which he had made in the house of the God [הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>hā'ēlōhīm</i>], of which God [אֱלֹהִים, <i>’ēlōhīm</i>] had said to David and to Solomon his son, ‘In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel, I will put My name forever;” וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת־פֶּסֶל הַפֶּסֶל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה בְּבֵית הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־דָּוִיד וְאֶל־שְׁלֹמֹה בְנוֹ בְּבֵית הַזֶּה וּבִירוּשָׁלַם אֲשֶׁר בָּחַרְתִּי מִכָּל שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשִׁים אֶת־שְׁמִי לְעֵלָם:

To conclude that the instances in which “God” occurs with the definite article are not instances of the use of a proper name is patently absurd.

Consider also the following passages:

1 Sam. 9:27	“As they were going down to the edge of the city, Samuel said to Saul, ‘Say to the servant that he might go ahead of us and pass on, but you remain standing now, that I may proclaim the word of God [דְּבַר אֱלֹהִים, <i>dēbar ’ēlōhīm</i>] to you.’”
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	הָמָּה יוֹרְדִים בְּקֶצֶה הָעִיר וַשְּׁמוּאֵל אָמַר אֶל־שָׁאוּל אָמַר לְנֹעַר וַיַּעֲבֵר לְפָנָיו וַיַּעֲבֵר וְאַתָּה עֹמֵד כִּיּוֹם וְאַשְׁמִיעֶךָ אֶת־דְּבַר אֱלֹהִים:
2 Sam. 16:23	“The advice of Ahithophel, which he gave in those days, was as if one inquired of the word of the God [הַדְּבַר הָאֱלֹהִים, <i>bidbar hā’ēlōhîm</i>]; so was all the advice of Ahithophel regarded by both David and Absalom.” וַעֲצַת אַחִיתֹּפֶל אֲשֶׁר יַעַן בְּיָמֵם הָהֵם כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשְׁאַל־בְּדָבָר הָאֱלֹהִים כֵּן כָּל־עֲצַת אַחִיתֹּפֶל גַּם־לְדָּוִד גַּם לְאַבְשָׁלֹם:

Notice that in 1 Sam. 9:27, in the expression “word of God,” there is no definite article before the word ‘God.’ However, in 2 Sam. 16:23, the expression “the word of the God” uses the definite article before the word ‘God.’ Are we to think that the one use of ‘God’ is a proper name and the second is a title? Again, this makes no sense.

There may be another reason why the one instance in Job 38:7 does not have the definite article. It may be used to make a distinction between the sons of God in Job 1:6 and 2:1 from the instance in Job 38:7. In the first two instances Job is referring to living beings. In the last instance he is referring to inanimate objects, namely, stars, and Job may be omitting the definite article from the word ‘God’ in 38:7 to reflect this distinction.

There are 37 times in the OT where the word ‘star’ (כֹּכַב, *kôkâb*) or ‘stars’ (כֹּכָבִים, *kôkâbîm*) occurs. The expression בְּקֶרֶךְ כֹּכָבֵי בֹקֶר (*kôkḇê bôqer*), “stars of morning” or “morning stars” occurs only once in the OT: in Job 38:7. To take this as referring to living beings requires more argument and evidence than Heiser has provided. To appeal to extra-biblical literature does not prove the case since there is no evidence that Job was either influenced by or borrowed from these extra-biblical texts. Similarity of design does not necessarily mean identity of origin. Just because the expression may have been used in extra-biblical literature to refer to living beings does not show that it was so used by Job. Words have a semantic range, a range of possible meanings. Just because a word is used with one meaning in one context does not require that the word always have that same meaning in every other context. A person doing an apologetic presentation made the statements, “The book of Revelation was written by John.”: “The book of Revelation was written by 96 AD.” Now, does the word ‘by’ have the same meaning in each one of these statements? Of course not. In the first statement it indicates source. In the second it is a temporal reference.

Additionally, to take the expressions “morning stars” and “sons of God” to refer to living beings is completely contrary to the context:

⁴Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding,

⁵Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? ⁶On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, ⁷When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? ⁸Or who enclosed the sea with doors when, bursting forth, it went out from the womb; ⁹When I made a cloud its garment and thick darkness its swaddling

band,¹⁰ And I placed boundaries on it and set a bolt and doors,¹¹ And I said, ‘Thus far you shall come, but no farther; and here shall your proud waves stop’?³⁴

The context is referring to God creating and exercising His power over the physical environment in which Job lives.

Table #13: Job 38:4–11 Parallelisms

Verses	Parallelisms	
Concerning the Earth		
4	Where were you	do you have understanding
5	measurements	stretching the line
6	bases	cornerstone
7	morning stars	sons of God
Concerning the Sea		
8	enclosing the sea	bursting forth
9	cloud as a garment	thick darkness as swaddling band
10	boundaries on the sea	setting bolt and doors
11	come no farther	stopping the waves.

All of these parallelism have to do with God's creation of and power over the earth and the sea. Suddenly to take the expressions “morning stars” and “sons of God” to refer to living beings violates this context and the parallelism. Heiser asserts, “God calls these spiritual beings his sons. Since he created them, the ‘family’ language makes sense, in the same way you refer to your offspring as your son or daughter because you participated in their creation.”³⁵ So, according to Heiser, the spiritual beings are called sons of God because God created them. So also, the stars are called “sons of God” because God created them. Heiser reads into the text his always-already-present worldview.

The most devastating argument against Heiser's claim that שָׂטָן (*sātān*) is not a proper personal name is its use in 1 Chron. 21:1:

Then Satan [שָׂטָן, *Sātān*] stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel.”

וַיַּעֲמֵד שָׂטָן עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיָּסֶת אֶת־דָּוִיד לְמִנּוּת אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל:

³⁴ אִיפֹה הָיִיתָ בְּיַסְדֵּי־אָרֶץ חָגַד אִם־יָדַעְתָּ בֵּינָה: ⁵ מִי־שָׁם מִמִּדְיָהּ כִּי תִדַּע אוֹ מִי־נָטָה עָלֶיהָ קָו: ⁶ עַל־מָה אֲדַנְיָהּ ⁷ בְּרֶן־כּוֹכְבֵי בֶקֶר וַיִּרְעוּ כָּל־בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים: ⁸ וַיִּסֹּךְ בַּדָּלְתַיִם יָם בְּגִיחוֹ מִרְחֹם יָצָא: ⁹ בְּשׁוּמֵי עֵינָי לִבְשׁוֹ וַעֲרָפֶל חֲתָלְתּוֹ: ¹⁰ וַאֲשַׁבֵּר עָלָיו חֲקֵי וְאָשִׁים בְּרִיחַ וּדְלָתַיִם: ¹¹ וְאָמַר עַד־כִּפָּה תָּבוֹא וְלֹא תִסִּיף וּפֹא יֵשִׁית בְּגִאוֹן גְּלִיד: (Job. 38:4–7)

³⁵ *Supernatural*, 22.

⁴¹ Michael S. Heiser, "Jesus' Quotation of Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34: A Different View of John's Theological Strategy" (Spokane, Washington: Pacific Northwest Regional Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 1.

Jew can, too? The mortal view does nothing to advance John's strategic goal of portraying Jesus as the incarnate Logos and the unique (*monogenes*) son of God. In simplest terms, it has John casting Jesus as another mortal, for Jesus simply applies a verse to himself in the manner other mortals can do.⁴²

Immediately Heiser has made an illicit assumption. He assumes that Jesus' response is simply saying that because humans are called *elohim*, that Jesus can call Himself the Son of God. Heiser has already misunderstood the text, and he uses this misunderstanding to question the interpretations of others. Heiser calls this interpretation the "mortal view."

His second question is, "... how does the mortal view coherently explain the reaction of the Jewish audience in John's story? They call for his arrest (10:39), on the heels of picking up stones to stone him in 10:30. If Jesus is citing a text that all of them could just as well cite on their own behalf for being sons of God, why would Jesus' use of it elicit such a response?"⁴³ If the "mortal view" were the only interpretation of the text, Heiser might have a point.

The "mortal view" certainly seems to be the majority view. D. A. Carson's view seems to be typical of something like Heiser's "mortal view":

As Jesus uses the text, the general line of his argument is clear. This Scripture proves that the word 'god' is legitimately used to refer to others than God himself. If there are others whom God (the author of Scripture) can address as 'god' and 'sons of the Most High' (i.e. sons of God), on what biblical basis should anyone object when Jesus says, *I am God's Son*? The argument gains extra force when it is remembered that Jesus is *the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world*.⁴⁴

Heiser has another point of dissatisfaction. "My third point of dissatisfaction is more personal since my field is Hebrew Bible. The mortal interpretation of Psalm 82:6 would be utterly foreign to a Hebrew Bible scholar whose focus is Israelite religion."⁴⁵ The problem with this point is that Heiser simply assumes that his interpretation of Psalm 82 must be the correct one. It matters not if every Hebrew Bible scholar interprets Psalm 82 in a way similar to Heiser's. In fact, Heiser is dissatisfied with the prevailing interpretation by New Testament Bible scholars, yet he thinks that because "a Hebrew Bible scholar" would take the Psalm in a certain way, this is supposed to lend support to his claim. Basically, Heiser is playing the "scholars card." Heiser appeals to scholars when they agree with him, and he discards scholars who do not agree with his interpretation. In fact, there are many Hebrew Bible scholars whose field is Hebrew Bible who take the verse as referring to humans. Heiser simply ignores the fact the many OT and NT scholars take a view that is contrary to his own.

⁴² Heiser, "Jesus' Quotation," 1.

⁴³ Heiser, "Jesus' Quotation," 1.

⁴⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 397 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁵ Heiser, "Jesus' Quotation," 1.

As we have seen, Heiser believes the text is referring to a council of “other gods.” In fact, Walton states that the council “is no longer made up of gods.”⁴⁶ Mitchell Dahood (1922–1982), a renown American Jesuit Hebraist and Bible scholar, professor of Hebrew language, and of the Ancient Near Eastern languages Ugaritic and Eblaite, at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, takes the statement in Ps. 82:6 to refer to false gods: “The psalmist had been under the impression that the pagan deities were of some importance, but now realizes that they are nothing, because they are quite incapable of defending the poor and rescuing the downtrodden.”⁴⁷ Willem A. VanGemenen, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament and Semitic Languages at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and senior editor of *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* describes three different ways of interpreting the reference to “gods” in Ps. 82:1. VanGemenen takes the third view: “The ‘gods’ are pagan deities. The gods of the nations are portrayed in this psalm as being nothing more than God’s subjects, who must render an account to the God of Israel for all of their evil and unjust acts. The imagery of the pagan pantheon of gods is here used dramatically to present God’s judgment on the rule of evil and the darkness of the world.”⁴⁸ According to Allen P. Ross, former Chairman of the Old Testament Department at Dallas Theological Seminary,

The psalm begins with a description of God’s action in the divine counsel. The setting, this counsel, is literally “the counsel of God” (עֲדַת־אֵל). In another context this could be taken to refer to the nation of Israel (see Num. 27:17; Josh. 12:16–17); but in view of the parallel “in the midst of the gods (בְּקֶרֶב אֱלֹהִים) it would refer to human judges at least. They serve as God’s vice-regents on earth — they are judges who act in his name. But as mentioned above, the language seems to be referring primarily to supernatural beings in a heavenly assembly—not divine beings in a pantheon, for there is no such court of lesser gods in the Hebrew faith.⁴⁹

According to Marvin E. Tate, professor of Old Testament interpretation at Southern Seminary from 1960 until 1995, and a senior professor until 2003, “The *Targum Onkelos* translates אֱלֹהִים as דִּינִיָּא, ‘judges,’ and forms the basis for the conclusion that אֱלֹהִים = ‘judges’ (also in Exod 22:6–7 . . .).”⁵⁰ The *Targum Onkelos* is the Aramaic translation of the Torah. It has been accepted as an authoritative translation and thought to have been written in the early second century. For example, in the translation of Exod. 22:9 below, the Hebrew word אֱלֹהִים is translated with the Aramaic word דִּינִיָּא (*dyny*’, “judges”).

And about whatever is injured covertly, whether ox, or ass, or sheep, or raiment, of whatever is (so) lost, he shall make oath when he saith that so it is; and when the thing stolen shall be

⁴⁶ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 56.

⁴⁷ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II: 51–100: The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1968), 270.

⁴⁸ Willem A. VanGemenen, *Psalms*, vol. 5, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Revised Edition*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 624.

⁴⁹ Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 2 (42–89)* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 720–21.

⁵⁰ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, vol. 20, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 340.

afterward found in the hand of the thief, the cause of both shall be brought before the judges, the cause of the householder and the cause of the thief; and whom the judges shall condemn, the thief shall restore twofold to his neighbor.⁵¹

The point is not whether one agrees or disagrees with the interpretations of these other Hebrew Bible scholars. Rather it shows that Heiser's assertion that the mortal interpretation of Jesus' use of Ps. 82:6 would be utterly foreign to a Hebrew Bible scholar is simply false. Heiser's claim is, frankly, not honest.

Heiser begins his study with the claim, "Israelite religion had an assembly of heavenly host under the authority of Yahweh. This assembly has very close affinities to the pantheons of ancient Near East, particularly in Canaanite religion."⁵² I have a "nagging point of dissatisfaction" with Heiser's assertion. The problem is, this is the very point at issue. To start out by asserting the point at issue as if this is certainly true is begging the question. It has not been demonstrated that the biblical authors either borrowed from, adopted, or were even influenced by the Canaanite myths. The belief that biblical authors were influenced by Canaanite myths is based only on what some identify as similarities. But, similarity of design does not necessarily indicate identify of origin.

Charles Pfeiffer points out,

We should not conclude that the Israelites directly borrowed their literary forms from Ugarit. Both peoples drew upon a literary and cultural inheritance which was common to the western Semites and, in a measure, to all Near Eastern peoples. The ancient inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent were highly mobile. Ugarit was not only linked to the Fertile Crescent — reaching southward to Egypt and eastward to the lands of the Tigris-Euphrates basin — but also enjoyed the cultural advantage of trade with the Mediterranean islands, particularly Cyprus, and with the Hittite Empire.⁵³

Heiser claims, "The most telling example is the literature from Ras Shamra (Ugarit)."⁵⁴ The problem here is that the supposed "very close affinities" in fact aren't. According to Marvin Pope, "In text [of Ras Shamra] 1:7 there is the enigmatic expression *dr il wp[h]]r b^c l* which Gordon renders 'The assemblage of 'Il and congr[eg]ation of Baal.' This might be taken to imply that El and Baal each had their separate and distinct families or coteries and there are some other indications of this, but the matter is by no means certain."⁵⁵ So, contrary to Heiser's belief, it is not even certain that there was a single "assembly of El."

Heiser says, "Psalm 82:1 is perhaps the best example, as it employs the expression *dt' il(m)* (Hebrew: עֲדַת־אֱלֹהִים) for the council."⁵⁶ Heiser refers to this in another place. He gives the following;

⁵¹ J. W. Etheridge, *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862), 519.

⁵² Heiser, "Jesus' Quotation," 2.

⁵³ Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Ras Shamra and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), 66.

⁵⁴ Pfeiffer, *Ras Shamra and the Bible*, 66.

⁵⁵ Marvin H. Pope, *El in the Ugaritic Texts* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955), 48.

⁵⁶ Heiser, "Jesus' Quotation," 2.

“‘*dt ʾilm* - ‘assembly of El / the gods.’”⁵⁷ He references two sources, both of which contradict his translation. The first reference is from *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* (DULAT): “(1) Assembly: ‘*dt ilm* the assembly of the gods, 1.15 II 7, 11.”⁵⁸ The Ugaritic text that Heiser gives is simply not equivalent to 𐎠𐎡𐎢𐎣𐎤. This text translates the Ugaritic as “assembly of the gods,” not “assembly of El” as Heiser has it. The second source Heiser references is *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places*: “1.15.II.7, ‘*dt ilm tlth* and 1.15.II.11. ‘*dt ilm*”⁵⁹ Notice that this source references DULAT, which translates the text as “sons of the gods.” It is important to note that Heiser renders the Ugaritic *ʾil(m)*. The text does not actually have (*m*). The Ugaritic text is *ilm*, not *il(m)*. In other words, the Ugaritic text uses the plural form, not the singular form.

Heiser treats the (*m*) as an enclitic. An enclitic is attached to the end of a singular noun, although it is not clear why it is added. Sometimes it is added to the end of a poetic line or for emphasis. Heiser has actually misrepresented the relation of the Ugaritic to the Hebrew. According to DULAT, *il* is singular: “il (I) n. m. 1) ‘god’”⁶⁰ The form *ʾilm* is plural, whereas the Hebrew אֱלֹהִים is singular. The Ugaritic *ilm* is not equivalent to the Hebrew אֱלֹהִים. The translation “assembly of god” does not appear anywhere in DULAT, nor does the word ‘council.’ DULAT gives the following meanings for ‘*dt*’: “‘*dt* (I) n. f. 1) ‘assembly’; 2) ‘confluence’; 3) ‘flowing current.’”⁶¹

Heiser reports, “As Smith notes, scholars are divided on whether the final *-m* in *ʾilm* is enclitic, and thus whether the phrases in which it appears denote any assembly of the gods or only El’s assembly.”⁶² Unfortunately, Heiser does not give the full statement of Smith:

The word *ʾilm* in this first category may mean either “gods” or the name “El” with final *-m*. In favor of the first option, we might contrast the expression, “the assembly of the sons of El,” *mph rt bn ʾil*, where the lack of *-m* on the final word marks it as a singular noun and hence the god’s name. Accordingly, one might not be inclined to view these expressions of assembly as El’s assembly as such. To put the point differently, the mythological texts may present El as the head of the divine assembly, but the terminology embedded in the expressions for assembly here might not refer specifically to him. Accordingly, the word “assembly” (*ph r*) may refer to more restricted groupings of deities centered around particular gods.⁶³

Heiser must treat the (*m*) as an enclitic in order to make it appear to be equivalent to the Hebrew. Concerning this issue, Pope reports,

⁵⁷ Heiser, *Divine Council*, 35.

⁵⁸ Gregorio Del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*, Part One, 2d ed. trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 152.

⁵⁹ Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places*, 2d ed. (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995), 41.

⁶⁰ DULAT, s.v. “*il*.”

⁶¹ DULAT, s.v. “‘*dt*.”

⁶² Heiser, *Divine Council*, 35.

⁶³ Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 41–42.

In one of the meetings of the gods, in the course of the banquet (called *dbh*, “sacrifice”), Baal is offended by some affront or misbehavior involving the maidservants and rises and spits in the midst of the assembly of the gods, *btk p[h]r bn ilm*, II AB III 13–14. Note that the expression here for gods is not *bn il*, “sons of El,” but *bn ilm*; if *ilm* is not the plural of majesty, i.e. if the final *-m* is not enclitic, then *bn ilm* would be “sons of the gods,” “divine beings,” without explicit connection with El.⁶⁴

Again, it is not necessarily the case that there was an assembly referred to as “sons of El.” The Ugaritic text could be referring to “sons of the gods,” which has no “close affinity” with the biblical text. Heiser appeals to the similarities and ignores the differences. Yet it is the differences that make all the difference. After a long discussion of the Canaanite gods, John Gray says, “Our conclusion is that the affinity between El and Yahweh lay in the interest of both in human relations. Here to be sure the Ras Shamra texts and the Old Testament, though both attesting this human or moral interest of El and Yahweh, seem, beyond this broad generality, to have little if anything in common.”⁶⁵ Not only is Heiser wrong about a “close affinity,” he is wrong that El compares to YHWH. Patrick Miller has noted the excellent work of Marvin Pope and Otto Eissfeldt in demonstrating the dissimilarities between YHWH and El:

The thrust of most of the literature pertaining to this deity has been the assumption that while El is father of the gods and the “executive” deity of the pantheon at Ugarit, he is essentially an otiose deity, whose power seems rather limited when compared to that of other deities, whose fear of other gods is obvious, and whose gradual decline in the face of Baal’s rise to prominence seems clear. . . . In the light of the texts published up to now, the above interpretation of the Ugaritic evidence is basically accurate.”⁶⁶

In fact the difference between YHWH and El is seen in the following account described by Pope:

This warning that El will take away the gods’ dominions clearly implies that it is he who sets up and deposes the lesser gods, his children. But the disrespectful behaviour of Prince Sea’s messengers, El’s ready capitulation to their demand, his apparent helplessness in the altercation that breaks out in the divine assembly, his submission to ‘Anat’s threats, is rather difficult to understand, if his authority and power are really commensurate with his nominal position. It is hard to see how the Ugaritians who composed and read and heard these ironical episodes recited could have had a firm belief in El’s supremacy (19). ROGGIA has concluded that among the Ugaritians the god El has undergone a progressive degradation. . . . The actual rule of the world, however, appears to be divided between Baal in the heavens and on the

⁶⁴ Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 48–49.

⁶⁵ John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: The Ras Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 162.

⁶⁶ Patrick D. Miller, Jr., “El the Warrior,” *Harvard Theological Review* 60 (1967), 411.

earth's surface, Mot in the netherworld, and Yam in the sea. These three gods are at time in conflict and El seems to vacillate in his favor of now one and now another of the rivals.⁶⁷

Pfeiffer notes, "Elements which Israelites and Canaanites held in common may be traced to the common traditions possessed by the two peoples concerning worship."⁶⁸ Beale makes a similar point:

From another angle, it is appropriate to ask whether anything in ancient pagan religion and its institutions resembled the truth about the true God and his designs for humanity. Certainly, pagan nations had not received any special revelation to draw them into saving relation to the true God. Nevertheless, just as the image of God is not erased but distorted in unbelieving humanity, it is plausible to suggest that some of the affinities in ancient pagan beliefs and religious institutions to that of Israel's may be due to the fact that they are garbled, shadowy representations about the being of the biblical God and of his design for his dwelling place.⁶⁹

Not only has Heiser exaggerated and misrepresented the supposed similarities, he has completely ignored the differences that make it virtually impossible to think that the Ugaritic El and the biblical YHWH have anything in common. Heiser's treatment is, frankly, not honest.

Heiser appeals to Deuteronomy in support of his claims: "These gods [of Psalm 82] are being judged for their corrupt administration of the nations of the earth, having been granted that authority at the division of the nations at Babel according to Deut 32:8–9 (LXX, DSS). This plurality cannot be explained as human beings."⁷⁰ A translation is given here: "⁸ When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel. ⁹ For the LORD's portion is His people; Jacob is the allotment of His inheritance" (Deut. 32:8–9 NASB).⁷¹ The issue concerns the final part of verse 8.⁷² Emanuel Tov makes some revealing observations about this passage:

In its probably original wording, reconstructed from 4QDeut^j and 6, the Song of Moses referred to an assembly of the gods (cf. Psalm 82; 1 Kgs 22:19), in which "the Most High, 'Elyon, fixed the boundaries of peoples according to the number of the sons of the God El." The next verse stresses that the LORD, יהוה, kept Israel for himself. Within the supposedly original context, 'Elyon and El need not be taken as epithets of the God of Israel, but as names of gods also known from the Canaanite and Ugaritic pantheon. It appears, however, that the scribe of an early text, now reflected in the Masoretic Text, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the

⁶⁷ Pope, *El in the Ugaritic Texts*, 29.

⁶⁸ Pfeiffer, *Ras Shamra*, 58.

⁶⁹ Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 175.

⁷⁰ Heiser, "Jesus' Quotation," 2.

⁷¹ 8 בְּהַנְחִיל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם יִצַּב גְּבֻלַּת עַמִּים לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: 9 כִּי חֶלֶק יְהוָה עִמּוֹ יִעֲקֹב חֶלֶל נִחְלָתוֹ: (Deut. 32:8–9)

⁷² The critical apparatus is given here: "יִשְׂרָאֵל: בְּנֵי Smr α' -θ' σ' V S (T^j) T^{ONF} (em scr) | 4QDeut^j בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים | G | ἁγγέλων θεοῦ G^{Mss} (exeg)." Carmel McCarthy, *Deuteronomy: Biblia Hebraica Quina Editione* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 93.

Targum, the Peshitta, and the Vulgate, did not feel at ease with this possibly polytheistic picture and replaced “sons of *El*” with בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, “the sons of *Israel*,” thus giving the text a different direction by the change of one word:⁷³

It is important that Tov refers to “its probably original wording.” By this statement Tov is acknowledging the fact that there is no extant ms⁷⁴ evidence to support the claim that the reading from 4QDeut^j is the “probably original wording.” Also, Tov refers to “the supposedly original context.” On the basis of his supposition about the original context, Tov constructs a hypothetical reference to the “names of gods also known from the Canaanite and Ugaritic pantheon.” On the basis of conjecture and supposition, Tov addresses the textual issue. This is a case of the probable, to the supposedly, to the hypothetical.

Consider the mss that contain the reading “sons of Israel,” and those that contain the reading “sons of God.”⁷⁵

Figure 12: Deut. 32:8 Mss

בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל “sons of Israel”	בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים “sons of God”
Masoretic Text	4QDeut ^j
Samaritan Pentateuch	Göttingen Septuagint ἀγγέλων θεοῦ
Syriac Peshitta Translation	Procopius Gazaeus
Aquila's Greek Translation	
Theodotion's Greek translation	
Symmachus' Greek translation	
Vulgate	
Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to the Pentateuch	
Targum Onqelos to the Pentateuch	
Targum Neofiti to the Pentateuch	
Fragment Targum to the Pentateuch	
emendation of the scribes	

⁷³ Emanuel Tov, *The Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 269.

⁷⁴ The abbreviation ms stands for “manuscript,” and mss stands for “manuscripts.”

⁷⁵ Dates that have been proposed for the list of mss include the following: 4QDeut^j First Century B.C.; Aquila c. 140 A.D.; Symmachus c. 200 A.D.; Syriac Peshitta Second Century A.D.; Peshitta Second Century A.D.; Theodotion Late Second Century A.D.; Targum Onqelos Second Century A.D.; Targum Neofiti 4th Century A.D.; Vulgate 4th Century A.D.; Procopius Gazaeus c. 465–528 A.D.; Masoretic Text 7th to 10th Century A.D.; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan 12th Century A.D.; Fragment Targum to the Pentateuch ?; emendation of the scribes?.

One factor in favor of the reading “sons of god” from 4QDeutⁱ is that it dates from the 1st century B.C., whereas the earliest of the mss for the reading “sons of Israel” seems to be the Peshitta, which dates from the 2nd century A.D. It is reasonable to think that if the reading “sons of god” was original, and a later scribe changed the text to read “sons of Israel,” that the later mss would have followed the later scribal change.

Carmel McCarthy declares, “That the MT ‘sons of Israel’ is a deliberate theological correction is beyond doubt, and understandable in the context.”⁷⁶ McCarthy makes this declaration on the basis of her preceding argument:

If one were to have retained the original form of Deut 32:8, it would have caused considerable embarrassment to a mentality that was particularly sensitive to suitable theological expression. For it was open to a very definite polytheistic interpretation, namely, that when the Most High apportioned the territories according to the number of the “sons of God,” the LORD was merely one of these bne Elohim, who received Jacob as his allotted heritage, in the same way that the gods of the other nations received their heritage. Since such a possible interpretation was contrary to the most elementary principles of monotheism, it is understandable that some form of theological surgery had to be operated.⁷⁷

Of course, all of this is sheer speculation. There is no evidence that there was any “embarrassment.” In fact, even if the reading “sons of God” is accepted, it does not indicate that the sons of God are “other gods” or that it implies polytheism. Heiser et al. have completely missed the parallelism of verse 8:

Figure 13: Deut. 32:8 Parallelism

When gave inheritance Elyon to <u>nations</u> ,	בְּהִנָּחֵל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם
when He separated the <u>sons of man</u>	בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם
He set the borders <u>of peoples</u> ,	יָצַב גְּבֻלַּת עַמִּים
to the number of the <u>sons of God</u>	לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים:

The word ‘nations’ (גּוֹיִם, *gôyim*) is parallel to the word ‘peoples’ (עַמִּים, *‘ammîm*), and the words “sons of man” (בְּנֵי אָדָם, *bēnê ’ādām*) are parallel to the words “sons of God” (בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, *bēnê ’ēlōhîm*). The parallelism indicates that the sons of God are in fact the sons of man. To interpret this as referring to “other gods” is reading into the text a prior assumption that disrupts the parallelism. It is another case of eisegesis.

⁷⁶ Carmel McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 213. Emphasis in original

⁷⁷ McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim*, 212–13. McCarthy refers to these scholars who do not accept the MT reading as original: T. K. Cheyne, A. Geiger, C. Steuernagel, H. Junker, G. von Rad, O. Eissfeldt. Each one of these individuals is a critical scholar who rejects the doctrine of inerrancy and rejects or modifies the doctrine inspiration.

Additionally, it is possible that there is a multitude of presently unknown factors that could have led up to the reading “sons of God.” Simply because a ms is earlier does not necessarily mean that it is better or undoubtedly original. Prior to the discovery of 4QDeutj it was “beyond doubt” that the MT had the original reading. It is in fact not “beyond doubt” that the Masoretic text (MT) is the result of a change due to theological considerations. However, it is also possible that the 4QDeutj reading might have been a deliberate change of the original reading that is preserved in the MT. One might recall that Kathleen Kenyon (1906–1978), a British archaeologist, based her dating of the destruction of Jericho on the absence of imported pottery, and she concluded that it was unoccupied at the time traditionally believed to be its destruction by Joshua. To Kenyon, it was “beyond doubt” that the city had been destroyed 150 years earlier. Kenyon’s dating was overturned by later discoveries and critical analysis. Scholars like McCarthy and Heiser arrogantly assume that their speculations are “beyond doubt.” However, they reject the MT reading for their own theological reasons. There simply is no indisputable evidence that the MT was a result of a change.

What has all of this to do with Jesus’ statement in John? All of this is the background that leads Heiser to his interpretive conclusion. As we have seen, Heiser has misrepresented and exaggerated this background in support of his view.

Heiser surveys the various takes on the “mortal view” offering criticisms and objections to each view. He then begins to present his own interpretation:

In John 10:30 the writer has Jesus startling his audience with the claim, “I and the Father are one.” As I’ve asserted above, it does not seem to make sense that the writer would undermine this exalted status for Jesus by having him essentially say in the next breath, “I get to call myself God because all of you out there in my hearing can do it too by virtue of Psalm 82.” The audience didn’t see it that way, since they react with anger. To stress the point that the quotation of Psa 82:6 in verse 34 somehow defends the idea of divine equality with God, the gospel writer follows it by having Jesus say, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (10:39).⁷⁸

Heiser’s is certainly correct that the “mortal view” does not make sense. Heiser has an alternate interpretation: “I propose that John understood the אֱלֹהִים of Psalm 82 as divine beings and has Jesus presuming the same in the debate. The effect is that the event is described in such a way as to have Jesus asserting both his divine nature and equal heavenly authority with the Father.”⁷⁹ Of course, Heiser’s interpretation relies on his interpretation of Psalm 82 as referring to “other gods” or other “divine beings.” As we have seen in the background material, this interpretation is faulty, so employing it as the grid through which to interpret Jesus’ quote is also wrong.

Heiser argues that he must first understand who receives the “word of God” as this is stated in Ps. 82:6–7: “⁶I said, ‘You are gods, and all of you are sons of the Most High. ⁷Nevertheless you will die like men and fall like any one of the princes’” (Ps. 82:6–7).⁸⁰ Heiser begins his treatment of these verses: “The speaker (“I”) in the passage is the God of Israel, the God who is standing in the

⁷⁸ Heiser, “Jesus’ Quotation,” 10.

⁷⁹ Heiser, “Jesus’ Quotation,” 11.

⁸⁰ (Ps. 82:6–7): אֲנִי־אָמַרְתִּי אֱלֹהִים אֲתֵם וּבְנֵי עֲלִיּוֹן בְּלִבְכֶּם: ⁷ אָכֵן בְּאָדָם תָּמוּתוּן וּבְאָחָד הַשָּׁרִים תִּפְּלוּ: (Ps. 82:6–7)

council in 82:1 among the אֱלֹהִים. God announces that the אֱלֹהִים of the council are his sons, but because of their corruption (vv. 2–5), they will lose their immortality.”⁸¹

Immediately there are problems. First, the text nowhere states that these beings will “lose their immortality.” The text states that they will die like men. But when men die, they do not lose their immortality. Everyone who dies, whether good or evil, continues to live forever. A being continues to live either in the presence of God, as do the saved, or separated from God, as do the judged. That the saved are immortal and continue to live after physical death was affirmed by Jesus in His response to the Sadducees: “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? He is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Matt. 22:32).⁸² That those who are judged will continue to live forever is affirmed in Revelation: “And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10).⁸³ Heiser acknowledges that angels are “spirit beings” who are “not embodied.”⁸⁴ Consequently, angels cannot die. In fact, Jesus declared that angels cannot die: “⁸⁵but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; ⁸⁶for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (Lk. 20:35–36).⁸⁵

Geisler gives an explanation of why angels cannot die:

Since they have no body, angels are not subject to decay and death: They are immortal. As noted before, Luke wrote, “Those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels” (Luke 20:35–36). In Matthew 25:41, we read Jesus’ words, “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”⁸⁶

It follows that spirit beings cannot die. The only way spirit beings can lose their immortality is if they are completely annihilated by God so that they cease to exist. But, ceasing to exist is not what happens to men when they die. Since the text states that these beings will die like men, they

⁸¹ Heiser, “Jesus’ Quotation,” 10.

⁸² Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς Ἀβραάμ· καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ἰσαὰκ καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ἰακώβ; οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ θεὸς νεκρῶν ἀλλὰ ζώντων (Matt. 22:32).

⁸³ καὶ ὁ διάβολος ὁ πλανῶν αὐτοὺς ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν λίμνην τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ θείου, ὅπου καὶ τὸ θηρίον καὶ ὁ ψευδοπροφήτης, καὶ βασανισθήσονται ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων (Rev. 20:10).

⁸⁴ *Angels*, 1.

⁸⁵ ³⁵οἱ δὲ καταξιοθέντες τοῦ αἰῶνος ἐκείνου τυχεῖν καὶ τῆς ἀναστάσεως τῆς ἐκ νεκρῶν οὔτε γαμοῦσιν οὔτε γαμίζονται· ³⁶οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀποθανεῖν ἔτι δύναται, ἰσάγγελοι γὰρ εἰσιν καὶ υἱοὶ εἰσιν θεοῦ τῆς ἀναστάσεως υἱοὶ ὄντες (Lk. 20:35–36).

⁸⁶ Geisler, *God, Creation*, 477.

³⁵οἱ δὲ καταξιοθέντες τοῦ αἰῶνος ἐκείνου τυχεῖν καὶ τῆς ἀναστάσεως τῆς ἐκ νεκρῶν οὔτε γαμοῦσιν οὔτε γαμίζονται· ³⁶οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀποθανεῖν ἔτι δύναται, ἰσάγγελοι γὰρ εἰσιν καὶ υἱοὶ εἰσιν θεοῦ τῆς ἀναστάσεως υἱοὶ ὄντες (Lk. 20:35–36).

τότε ἐρεῖ καὶ τοῖς ἐξ εὐωνύμων· Πορεύεσθε ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ οἱ κατηραμένοι εἰς τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον τὸ ἡτοιμασμένον τῷ διαβόλῳ καὶ τοῖς ἀγγέλοις αὐτοῦ (Matt. 25:41).

cannot be spirit beings or supernatural beings. They must necessarily be mortals. This is yet another instance of Heiser's practice of eisegesis, and, as Heiser said, "the wording is important."

In a table, Heiser sets out his view:

The "word of God that came" = the utterance itself in Psalm 82:6 – the pronouncement from God that was uttered in the council scene

"to whom the word of God came" = the gods (אלהים) of the divine council of 82:1b

Effects =

"Effect 1"- Jesus reminds his detractors that there are other non-human divine beings (אלהים) in their Scriptures; they are also sons of God (the Most High)

This is consistent with the fact that the phrase "sons of God" is used in the Hebrew Bible only of non-human divine beings; that is also true of Ugaritic/Canaanite religion, the original context for the terminology.

By linking his statements (10:30, 38) to Psalm 82, Jesus is claiming his own divinity—he can call himself the son of God based on Psalm 82, where other divine beings do the same thing.

The above is, by implication, claiming membership in the divine council.

"Effect 2"- John 10:30 and 10:38, however, go even further—when Jesus says that the Father is in him, and he is in the Father, and he and the Father are one, he is connecting himself to the council co-regency. In effect, he equates himself as co-regent to the lord of the council, Yahweh himself. The blasphemy charge now makes good sense.⁸⁷

Heiser claims that the phrase "sons of God" is used in the Hebrew Bible only of non-human beings. This is true only if someone accepts Heiser's interpretation of these passages. For example, Heiser argues that the "sons of God" in Gen. 6:2, 4 are in fact angels, and since, as we have shown, spirit beings cannot die, then the "sons of God," in Gen. 6:2 and 4, all of whom died in the flood, cannot be spirit beings. They must be human beings. So, Heiser is simply wrong that the phrase "sons of God" applies only to spirit beings.

Heiser's interpretation is in fact a step down from the "mortal view." Since Heiser argues that the "other gods" or other "divine beings" were created by YHWH,⁸⁸ then basically Heiser has Jesus claiming to be one of these other "divine beings," hence, a created god. Heiser attempts to avoid this conclusion by saying that Jesus is connecting Himself to the council as co-regent with God. However, this move does not work. In His prayer in John 17, Jesus said, "²⁰I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; ²¹that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. ²²The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; (Jn. 17:20–22)."⁸⁹ Jesus' statement in Jn. 10:34 is not about claiming to

⁸⁷ Heiser, "Jesus' Quotation," 12.

⁸⁸ Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?" 29.

⁸⁹ ²⁰ Οὐ περὶ τούτων δὲ ἐρωτῶ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ τῶν πιστευόντων διὰ τοῦ λόγου αὐτῶν εἰς ἐμέ, ²¹ ἵνα πάντες ἐν ᾧσιν, καθὼς σύ, πάτερ, ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ ἐγὼ ἐν σοί, ἵνα καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἡμῖν ᾧσιν, ἵνα ὁ κόσμος πιστεύῃ ὅτι σύ με ἀπέστειλας. ²² καὶ ἐγὼ τὴν δόξαν ἣν δέδωκάς μοι δέδωκα αὐτοῖς, ἵνα ᾧσιν ἐν καθὼς ἡμεῖς ἐν (Jn. 17:20–22).

be co-regent in some divine council. Jesus is claiming to be God, which is why the Jews seek to stone Him. If, as Heiser argues, there is a divine council, and the Jews of Jesus' day would have had this view, then there would be no reason for the Jews to attempt to stone Jesus if all He was saying is that He was one of the gods of the divine council. In fact, Heiser's interpretation robs Jesus' statement and of the Jews response of making any sense.

Heiser summarizes his view:

Briefly, I view John's use of Psalms 82:6 in John 10:34 as making the point (from Jesus himself) that there are other non-human sons of God. By referencing Psalm 82, which is not about "human *elohim*," Jesus is in effect tweaking his opponents by claiming to be more than human. Had Jesus/John instead quoted something like Psalm 2:7, where the Israelite king was referred to as God's son, the point would have been a claim to be the Davidic king (which, of course, his Jewish opponents could not have claimed). But instead we get Psalm 82:6 to distinguish Jesus. Situated as it is between clear claims to be one with the Father, and that the Father is in Jesus (cp. Exodus 23:20–23, where the Name—the presence/essence of Yahweh (cp. Deuteronomy 4:37)—is in the angel, who is therefore Yahweh in human form), John is both asserting Jesus is divine and distinct from other divine sons of God. In effect, Jesus is lord of the council.⁹⁰

A major problem with Heiser's view is that he wrongly assumes that there are only two ways of interpreting Jesus' quote, Heiser's or the "mortal view." Both the mortal view and Heiser's view completely miss the point of Jesus' statement because both views completely ignore the context of the interaction.

In Exodus 22:8[H-7], the *elohim* were supposed to render righteous judgment. This is precisely the problem which Jesus pointed out in 7:24 when Jesus told them not to judge on the basis of appearance, but to judge righteously: "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment."⁹¹ Jesus' statement follows from Leviticus 19:15: "You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly."⁹² The *elohim* sat in the judgment seat as God's instruments of justice. As those who are to render judgment as God's instruments, by their unrighteous judgment they have misrepresented the justice of God. Because they had perverted justice, they would be held accountable. Their exalted position would not protect them from the judgment of God upon their unrighteousness judgment.

The *elohim* are unjust judges who show partiality to the wicked. As Heiser pointed out, most commentators argue that what Jesus is saying here is that, since these judges are called gods, He is not blaspheming when He calls Himself the Son of God. Jesus is not arguing that since the word 'gods' is used one way, it is permissible for Him to use it another way. This would be an illegitimate argument. Rather, He is arguing that since they were called gods who, as instruments of justice, only *received* the Word of God, it is proper and right that He should be recognized as being God who *is*

⁹⁰ Heiser, "Jesus' Quotation," 14.

⁹¹ μή κρίνετε κατ' ὄψιν, ἀλλὰ τὴν δικαίαν κρίσιν κρίνετε (Jn. 7:24).

⁹² לֹא־תַעֲשׂוּ עֹל בְּמִשְׁפָּט לֹא־תִשָּׂא פָנֶיךָ לֹא תִהְדָּר פָּנֶי גְדוֹל בְּצֶדֶק תִּשְׁפֹּט עַמִּיתְךָ: (Lev. 19:15)

the Word of God. The *elohim* were appointed by God to be His representatives, whereas Jesus was sanctified and sent into the world to be the “representation of His essence” (Heb. 1:3 χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ).

The *elohim* are judged by God because of their unrighteous works. They were appointed to render God's justice, but they corrupted justice. They were judged because of their works. Likewise, when the Jews challenge Jesus to tell them plainly whether He is the Christ, Jesus responds, “I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me” (Jn 10:25).⁹³ In other words, just as the unjust *elohim* were judged on the basis of their unrighteous works, so Jesus should be judged on the basis of the works He has done. The entire episode is not about calling some gods and Jesus calling Himself God. It is about the works that testify to who they were and Who He is.

The judges of Israel were called *elohim* because they were to be the representatives of God for the people by administering the justice of God. This is comparable to Moses as the representative of God to Aaron: “Moreover, he shall speak for you to the people; and he will be as a mouth for you and you will be for God [לְאֱלֹהִים, *lē'ēlōhîm*] to him” (Exod. 4:16).⁹⁴ Concerning this verse, Heiser says, “Curiously, Yahweh tells him that he will be ‘as God/a god [*elohim*] to Pharaoh’ and to Moses’ brother Aaron (Exod 4:16; 7:1). It would be through Moses, of course, that God's signs and wonders would be wielded against Egypt.”⁹⁵ First of all, לְאֱלֹהִים (*lē'ēlōhîm*) should not be translated “as God.” The *lamed* preposition (לְ, *lē*) does not have a comparative meaning such as “as” or “like.” The comparative meaning is conveyed by the preposition כִּי (*kē*). In this instance, the word should be translated “for God,” or simply, “God.” Second, in Exod. 4:16 God does not say that Moses would be “as God/a god to Pharaoh.” God says that Moses would be God to Aaron. As Moses' mouthpiece, Aaron would function as Moses' prophet. God would be to Moses as Moses would be to Aaron. Third, later in Exod. 7:1, God says to Moses, “See, I make you as God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.”⁹⁶ There are a couple of things to notice from God's statement. First it is patently absurd to translate the text as “a god” to Pharaoh. Moses would not be the representative of “a god,” but of *the* God. God made the Egyptians know that He is YHWH, not merely “a god”: “Then the Egyptians will know that I am YHWH, when I am honored through Pharaoh, through his chariots and his horsemen.”⁹⁷

Jesus is instructing the Jews that they should judge based on Jesus' works. Jesus' works testify to Who He is, just as the judges' works testified to who they were. They were called gods because they were supposed to be the representatives of God to administer justice. Because of the work that He was sent to do, Jesus' works justify taking upon Himself the designation “God”? As He goes on to argue, “³⁷ If I am not doing the works of My Father, do not believe Me. ³⁸ But if I am doing them, and you do not believe Me, then believe the works in order that you might know and

⁹³ Εἶπον ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ πιστεύετε· τὰ ἔργα ἃ ἐγὼ ποιῶ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ πατρὸς μου ταῦτα μαρτυρεῖ περὶ ἐμοῦ· (Jn. 10:25).

⁹⁴ (Exod. 4:16) וְדַבֵּר-הוּא לְךָ אֶל-הָעָם וְהָיָה הוּא וְהָיָה-לְךָ לְפִי וְאָתָּה תְּהִי-לִי לְאֱלֹהִים:

⁹⁵ *Unseen Realm*, 245.

⁹⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה רְאֵה נִתְּתִיךָ אֱלֹהִים לְפָרְעָה וְאַהֲרֹן אַחִיךָ יְהִי נְבִיאָךְ:

⁹⁷ וַיֵּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה בְּהַכְּבֹדִי בַּפָּרְעָה בְּרִכְבּוֹ וּבַפָּרָשָׁיו: (Exod. 14:18)

understand that the Father is in Me and I in the Father” (Jn. 10:37–38).⁹⁸ If Jesus were merely arguing that the word ‘god’ could be applied to Him in the way it is applied to mere men, then this further argumentation makes no sense. Jesus demonstrates that they in fact have understood that He is claiming to be God in a way not predicated of mere men, but that they are just like the judges who were condemned in Psalm 82.

Jesus’ quote of Ps. 82:6 has nothing to do with using the words ‘God’ or ‘gods’ of humans or divine beings. It has to do with justifying Jesus’ claim to be God by the works that testify to who He is, just as the works of the judges were to testify to who they were. The reason the *elohim* in Psalm 82 are condemned is because they have acted unjustly, and therefore they misrepresented the nature of God. The *elohim* were judged on the basis of their works, and Jesus’ instructs the Jews to judge Him on the basis of His works. If these judges were called ‘gods’ because their works were supposed to show forth God’s justice, so Jesus calls Himself God because His works show forth that He is God.

Jesus’ statement is as much a condemnation of their unrighteous judgment as it is a defense of His claim. In fact, Jesus is forcing them to face the import of His claim. Are they simply accusing Him of claiming to be “a” god, in the way that the judges of Israel were called gods? If so, then they have no grounds for trying to kill Him. Do they realize what they are saying? Are they accusing Him of claiming to be *the* God? If so, then they have to come to grips with the testimony of His works. How can they ignore the works which He has done that demonstrate that He is in fact God? If they ignore these works, then they are guilty of judging unjustly and showing partiality to wickedness, just like their fathers. This is indeed their choice. They ignore His works that testify to His claims, and they try to seize Him.

Now, the force of the statement in 10:35–36 can be felt. Jesus said, “³⁵ If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken [καὶ οὐ δύναται λυθῆναι ἡ γραφή, *kai ou dunatai luthēnai hē graphē*]), ³⁶ do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?”⁹⁹ The word ‘broken’ is λύω (*luō*). There are a host of other Greek words that give the idea of destroying something, but this word would be used if the idea is to indicate a destruction by tearing apart. The Pharisees, by their own professions, were bound by the statements of Scripture. So when the Scripture uses the word *elohim* to refer to the judges, they would not dare deny it, or deny that it was true. And in this instance where the word *elohim* is applied to men, it is God who says it. Elohim of Israel calls them *elohim*. But the Pharisees are attempting to stone Jesus because He uses the word to apply to Himself. What Jesus is saying by this parenthetical statement is, “You can’t accept the truth of the Word of God in one place and deny the truth of the Word of God in another place. This tears apart the Scripture.” The Pharisees were morally and spiritually bound by their commitment to the truth of Scripture to acknowledge that Jesus is God. This was particularly their failure, for they should have realized, on the basis of the works that Jesus did, that He is the one prophesied, the one who was to be sent from the Father, the very Son of God. His identity would be obvious to all those

⁹⁸ ³⁷ εἰ οὐ ποιῶ, τὰ ἔργα τοῦ πατρός μου, μὴ πιστεύετε μοι· ³⁸ εἰ δὲ ποιῶ, κἂν ἐμοὶ μὴ πιστεύετε τοῖς ἔργοις πιστεύετε, ἵνα γνῶτε καὶ γινώσκητε ὅτι ἐν ἐμοὶ ὁ πατὴρ καὶ ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ πατρὶ (Jn. 10:37–38).

⁹⁹ ³⁵ εἰ ἐκείνους εἶπεν θεοὺς πρὸς οὓς ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ οὐ δύναται λυθῆναι ἡ γραφή, ³⁶ ὃν ὁ πατὴρ ἡγάσεν καὶ ἀπέστειλεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ὑμεῖς λέγετε ὅτι Βλασφημεῖς, ὅτι εἶπον· Υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ εἰμι; (Jn. 10:35–36).

who understood the significance of the works which He was doing. Just as the works of that Moses performed made known to the Egyptians that his God is YHWH, so Jesus' works testified to the fact that He was doing the very works of the Father. Jesus was not merely functioning as a representative of God's justice, as were the judges. Jesus' works testified that He is the very radiance of the Father's glory and the exact representation of His nature.

Heiser concludes his treatment of Jn. 10:34 by claiming that his interpretation ". . . is consistent with: (1) Psalm 82 understood in its original ancient Near Eastern context; (2) other instances of 'sons of God' being divine in the Hebrew Bible; and (3) John's portrayal of Jesus as God in his gospel. No other view meets these criteria."¹⁰⁰ None of this is accurate. Heiser has misunderstood Psalm 82 and Jn. 10:34. His view in fact robs Jesus' statement of its force, reduces Jesus' statement to the claim that He is one of the created *elohim*, and his view and the "mortal view" are not the only views available.

Why Does It Matter?

It matters because Heiser has misrepresented both Job and Jesus. Heiser claims that the statement in Job 38 clearly refers to "other gods" who were present and observed God's creating activity. As we have seen, Heiser actually reads into the text his always-already-present assumption to make the text say what he needs it to say. Heiser ignores the poetic parallelism of the text, and he employs an "overly literal interpretation of the expression 'sons of God.'" In fact, Job 38 is not a clear reference to "other gods."

Heiser also misunderstands Jesus' appeal to Ps. 82:6 in Jn. 10:34. Heiser argues that there are only two ways of taking the text, the "mortal view," which he rejects, and his own view. Heiser does not even consider the possibility that there could be a completely different interpretation of the text that does not fall prey to the shortcomings of the "mortal view" and does not support Heiser's claim that Ps. 82:6 is referring to "other gods." We have shown that Heiser's misunderstanding of Jesus' statement has led him to the wrong conclusion, and that Jesus' statement actually supports Ps. 82:6 as referring to human judges, not "other gods."

¹⁰⁰ Heiser, "Jesus' Quotation," 14.

CHAPTER 12

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN MYTHOLOGY

Introduction

It has become a widespread approach in OT studies to refer to ANE literature and culture as the background for biblical studies. According to Jeffrey Niehaus.

In almost two hundred years of patient archaeological research, many such parallels between the Old Testament and the ancient Near East have come to light. Archaeology has in fact altered the whole climate of Old Testament studies. No study of biblical material can now be complete without some understanding of its ancient background. Comparative studies have become virtually mandatory for a proper understanding of the Old Testament.¹

So much literature has been produced on the question of the relation between the OT and ANE literature that one could not even simply introduce the issues or discussions in a single volume. The early studies of ANE literature identified many of the similarities to the OT as accidental, but not essential. However, as Oswalt notes,

Today, the situation is turned on its head. Now it is the similarities that are understood to be essentials, while the differences are merely accidentals. What is essential is that Israel worshiped a god, as every other West Semitic religion did. The fact that the Old Testament insists from beginning to end that there is only one being worthy to be call ‘god’ is an accidental.²

The turn referred to by Oswalt is characteristic of Heiser’s approach. For Heiser, the ANE literature and beliefs form the grid through which an interpreter ought to read the OT. This chapter will briefly discuss Heiser’s approach to the relation between ANE and the OT, and will consider Heiser’s notion of what he calls “the divine council.”

¹ Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2008), 13–14.

² Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths*, 13–14.

ANE and the OT

Niehaus goes on to argue that there are two ways of comparing ANE literature to the Bible. One is to appeal to ANE literature as a way of classifying biblical material as myth or legend. The other way is to understand ANE literature in light of biblical truth. Of those who approach ANE material according to the first way, Niehaus identifies some who “. . . compare pagan and biblical data, and conclude that the latter are derived from the former via cultural influence.”³ Niehaus puts Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) and Friedrich Delitzsch (1850–1922) into this category. Heiser definitely falls into this category. He claims that in order to understand the Old Testament, we must understand it in terms of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) mythology. In one place he asserts, “*I. We’ve been trained to think that the history of Christianity is the true context of the Bible. We talk a lot about interpreting the Bible in context, but Christian history is not the context of the biblical writers.*”⁴ It is important to point out that, in 13 years of higher education, I was never taught this, nor do I know of anyone who holds this view.

In another place Heiser asserts, “So what is the proper context for interpreting the Bible? Here’s the transparently obvious truth I was talking about: the proper context for interpreting the Bible is the context of the biblical writers—the context that produced the Bible. Every other context is alien or at least secondary.”⁵ So, since the biblical writers lived in the second millennium BC and the first century AD, according to Heiser, “We need to get the worldview of the ancient world, shared by the biblical writers, into our heads.”⁶

The problem with Heiser’s claim is that he simply assumes, without justification or explanation, that, because the biblical writers lived during this time and in these cultures, they necessarily shared the prevailing worldview of this time. As we have seen, this approach is illegitimate. The apostles lived during a time in which the Greek mystery religions were prevalent in the Roman empire. As Ronald Nash points out, “Other than Judaism and Christianity, the most influential religions in the Hellenistic age were the so-called mystery religions. The mystery religions are relevant to this book because of repeated claims in this century that early Christianity was influenced (in a strong sense) by one or more of them.”⁷ Nash goes on to demonstrate that this is simply not the case. Living within a culture does not necessarily mean that an individual has adopted the worldview of the culture.

T. W. Manson addresses the same kind of approach scholars have taken concerning John’s use of the term *λογος* (*logos*) in Jn. 1:1:

I MUST preface what I have to say on this very confused and difficult problem by repeating what I have said already: that all the Christology of the primitive Church is based on the

³ Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes*, 15.

⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 16. Emphasis in original.

⁵ *Unfiltered*, 13.

⁶ *Unfiltered*, 13.

⁷ Ronald H. Nash, *Christianity & the Hellenistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984),

experience of the primitive Christians. The early Church did not begin by having a theory of divinity, incarnation, salvation—a dogmatic formula all cut and dried—and then look round for some fairly solid point in history to which they could attach it. A great deal of what passes for up-to-date critical method on the Continent and in America—happily not in this country—proceeds on these lines. The dogmas of the early Church are supposed to be derived from all kinds of sources—pagan mystery cults, late Greek philosophy, Alexandrian Hellenistic Judaism, Iranian redemption mysteries, and so on. The early Church having selected one or other of these theories, then fitted Jesus into it, or if we take account of more radical formulations of this scientific theory, created the Jesus of the Gospels out of a few fragments of tradition and its own vivid imagination playing on its own life—situation, problems, social needs, behaviour patterns, and I know not what besides.⁸

Heiser is making the same mistake that modern “scholars” have made. Heiser imposes upon the Bible the ANE worldview as the unquestioned interpretive context. Simply by *ex cathedra* declaration his reader is supposed to accept this “scholarly” consensus. Heiser and modern scholars arrive at this conclusion based on the similarities between ANE literature and the biblical text. But once again it must be pointed out that similarity of design does not necessarily mean identity of origin. Remember his use of the fallacy of division.

Why should anyone accept the notion that an ANE worldview is the grid through which we should interpret the Bible? Simply because the surrounding populations embraced various worldviews does not mean that the biblical writers imbibed any of these, and parallels do not show dependence, influence, or even literary relations.

John Walton argues, “When we study an ancient text, we cannot make words mean whatever we want them to or assume that they meant the same to the ancient audience that they do to a modern audience. Language itself is a cultural convention, and since the Bible and other ancient documents use language to communicate, they are bound to a culture.”⁹ The problem with this assertion is that it is only partially correct. As Aristotle made clear, the linguistic signs are conventional, but the “passions of the soul” are the same for all.

16a 1 First we must establish what a name is and what a verb is; then what negation is and affirmation, and the enunciation and speech.

16a 3 Now those that are in vocal sound are signs of passions in the soul [παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς, *pathēmata tēs psychēs*], and those that are written are signs of those in vocal sound.

16a 5 And just as letters are not the same for all men so neither are vocal sounds the same;

16a 6 but the passions of the soul, of which vocal sounds are the first signs, are the same for all [τὰ αὐτὰ πᾶσι, *ta auta pasi*]; and the things of which passions of the soul are likenesses are also the same.

⁸ T. W. Manson, *On Paul and John: Some Selected Theological Themes*, ed. Matthew Black (London: SCM Press, 1963), 136.

⁹ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 9.

16a 8 This has been discussed, however, in our study of the soul for it belongs to another subject of inquiry.¹⁰

When Aristotle refers to the passions of the soul, he is not referring to the emotions or desires. Rather, he is referring to the fact that the soul passively receives into the mind the *res extra animam* (“the thing outside the soul”) by virtue of the form of the object. Aquinas explains:

But here saying concerns sounds signifying by human institution; and so it is necessary that here *passions of the soul* be understood as *conceptions of the intellect*, which names, and verbs, and sentences signify, according to the view of Aristotle. So it cannot be that they signify things themselves without mediation, which appears from the mode of signifying: for this name *man* signifies human nature in abstraction from singulars. So it cannot be that it signifies a singular man without mediation; hence the Platonists held that it signified separate *idea* itself of man. But because in the view of Aristotle, this, according to its abstraction, does not really subsist, but is solely in the intellect, it was necessary for Aristotle to say that articulated sounds signify the conceptions of the intellect without mediation and things by their mediation.¹¹

John O’Callaghan explains that for St. Thomas as for Aristotle, the name, that is, the word that names something in the world, directly signifies the concept. But the concept is not a *tertium quid* (“a third thing”) that is interposed between the mind and the *res extra animam*. Rather, the concept is the form of the *res extra animam* as it comes to exist in the mind of the knower. As O’Callaghan points out, “‘Concept’ is a nominalized form of talking about our act of conceiving, not a way of referring to an additional class or category of objects or things, in addition to our acts. . . . Our conceiving is informed by the forms of things . . . there is no third thing between the conceiving intellect and *res extra animam*.”¹² So, when an Akkadian text uses the sign *ilu* to refer

¹⁰ Aristotelis, Περὶ Ἑρμηνείας/*Peri Hermeneias*, Volumen Primum, *Opera Omnia Graeca et Latine* (Parisii: Firmin-Didot et Socii, 1927) 16a 1–8. 16a1. Πρῶτον δεῖ θέσθαι, τί ὄνομα καὶ τί ῥῆμα, ἔπειτα, τί ἐστὶν ἀπόφασις καὶ κατάφασις, καὶ ἀπόφανσις καὶ λόγος. 16a3 Ἔστι μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ τῶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ παθημάτων σύμβολα, καὶ τὰ γραφόμενα τῶν ἐν τῇ φωνῇ. 16a5 Καὶ ὥσπερ οὐδὲ γράμματα πᾶσι τὰ αὐτὰ, οὐδὲ φωναὶ αἱ αὐταί: 16a6 ὧν μέντοι ταῦτα σημεῖα πρῶτως, τὰ αὐτὰ πᾶσι παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς, καὶ ὧν ταῦτα ὁμοιώματα, πράγματα ἤδη ταῦτά. 16a8 περὶ μὲν οὖν τούτων εἴρηται ἐν τοῖς περὶ ψυχῆς ἄλλης γὰρ ταῦτα πραγματείας.

¹¹ S. Thomae Aquinatis, *In Aristotelis Libros Peri Hermeneias et Posteriorum Analyticorum: Expositio* (Taurini, Italia: Marietti, 1955), 1.2.15. “Sed nunc est sermo de vocibus significativis ex institutione humana, et ideo oportet passiones animae hic intelligere intellectus conceptiones quas nomina et verba et orationes significant, secundum sententiam Aristotelis: non enim potest esse quod significant immediate ipsas res, ut ex modo significandi apparet: significat enim hoc nomen *homo* naturam humanam in abstractione a singularibus, unde non potest esse quod significet immediate himinem singularem. Unde Platonici posuerunt quod significaret ipsam ideam hominis separatam; sed, quia haec secundum suam abstractionem non subsistit realiter secundum sententiam Aristotelis, sed est in solo intellectu ideo necesse fuit Aristoteli dicere quod voces significant intellectus conceptiones immediate, et eis mediantibus res.” The translation is from John O’Callaghan.

¹² John P. O’Callaghan, “The Problem of Language and Mental Representation in Aristotle and St. Thomas,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 50 (March 1997), 527–28.

to a god,¹³ while Hebrew uses the word **אלהים**, and Greek uses the word **θεός**, each of these linguistic signs are conventional, but the concept of a divine being is signified by each. Although the linguistic signs are conventional, the passions of the soul are the same for all. In fact, the only way anyone can learn a language is to learn the conventional signs that signify or refer to the same reality.

As John McWhorter, associate professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, has pointed out;

Language does not shape thought in the way that one might reasonably suppose, nor do cultural patterns shape the way language is structured in the way that one might reasonably suppose. Rather, the way a language is structured is a fortuitously ingrown capacity. It is a conglomeration of densely interacting subsystems, wielded at great speed below the level of consciousness, endlessly morphing into new sounds and structures due to wear and tear and accreted misinterpretations, such that one day what was once Latin is now French and Portuguese.

However, the perception capacity itself is the same regardless of the language. To be sure, a feeler, hooked into a certain patch of perception, enhances the speaker's sensitivity to the relevant phenomenon, and this book in no way denies the solid evidence for that. Yet the experiments in question have shown us that the enhancement qualifies as a passing flicker, that only painstaking experiment can reveal, in no way creating a *different way of seeing the world* along the lines that a von Humboldt, von Treitschke, or anyone else would propose.¹⁴

It is certainly true that we need to understand the historical and cultural context in which the biblical authors lived and wrote, but it is not true that because the languages are different, that the world that is perceived by diverse cultures is different. It is the same extra-mental reality for all people throughout history. Cultures do not create one's way of seeing the world. It only changes the signs used to signify that same world.

Heiser asserts, "God didn't hand down a new culture for particular use in Scripture. He didn't demand that the writers he chose change their worldview before he'd use them. The biblical material simply reflects the cultural attitudes of the people who wrote it."¹⁵ Heiser is demanding that his readers change their worldviews in order to interpret the Bible, but he expects his readers to think that God did not demand that His chosen authors change their worldviews in order to write it.

But Heiser has misunderstood the nature of a culture. According to *Introduction to Sociology 3e*, "The term **culture** refers to the group's shared practices, values, and beliefs."¹⁶ Norman Goodman's definition is similar: "Culture is a characteristic of a society, not of an individual.

¹³ Jeremy Black, Andrew George, and Nicholas Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, 2d ed. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), s.v. "ilu(m)."

¹⁴ John H. McWhorter, *The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 148–49.

¹⁵ Heiser, *The Bible Unfiltered*, 21.

¹⁶ Tonja R. Conerly, et al. *Introduction to Sociology 3e* (Houston, Texas: OpenStax Rice University, 2021), 9. Emphasis in original.

Culture is all that is learned in the course of social life and transmitted across generations.”¹⁷ Abram had to change his practices, values, and beliefs to serve the Living God. God gave Abram a new set of practices, values, and beliefs. God gave Abram a new culture. Of course God in fact did demand that the biblical authors of His revelation change their worldviews in order to be used by Him to reveal Himself to the world. The authors of the biblical books were not pagans who worshiped and served Anu, or Enlil, or Enki, or Marduk. In order for God’s chosen person to write what God wanted written, would not that person have to believe in Him? By revealing Himself to His chosen representatives, those who called upon the name of YHWH effectively developed a new culture that was distinct from the surrounding pagan cultures.

In Josh. 24:2, Joshua stated that, beyond the river, before God called him, Abraham served other gods. God commanded Abram to trust Him, to leave his home, family, and culture, and to go to a place which God would show him: “Now YHWH said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you;’” (Gen. 12:1).¹⁸ That command meant that Abram would have to change his worldview in order to stop serving other gods and to start serving YHWH. In fact, this is precisely what Joshua is demanding of the people: “If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve YHWH, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve YHWH” (Josh. 24:15).¹⁹ They were commanded to make the choice of serving other gods or serving YHWH, and this choice necessarily involved changing their worldviews. By invading the land and bringing with them the worship of YHWH, they were effectively establishing a new culture into the land of the Canaanites.

The angel touched the lips of Jeremiah in order for God to send him to the people. YHWH touched the mouth of Jeremiah and said, “Behold, I have put My words in your mouth” (Jer. 1:9).²⁰ Jeremiah did not get his words from the surrounding cultures. His words that expressed his worldview were put into his mouth by God.

Consider Paul’s experience:

¹ Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ² and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ⁴ and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” ⁵ And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said,

¹⁷ Norman Goodman, *Introduction to Sociology* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 29.

¹⁸ (Gen. 12:1) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלֶתְךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ:

¹⁹ וְאִם רַע בְּעֵינֵיכֶם לַעֲבֹד אֶת־יְהוָה בְּחַרְוּ לָכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־מִי תַעֲבֹדוּן אִם אֶת־אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר־עָבְדוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר בְּעֶבֶר הַנָּהָר וְאִם אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר אִתָּם יֹשְׁבִים בְּאֶרֶץ וְאִנֹּכִי וּבֵיתִי נַעֲבֹד אֶת־יְהוָה: (Josh. 24:15)

²⁰ (Jer. 1:9) הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי דְבָרִי בְּפִיךָ:

“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶ but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do” (Acts 9:1–6).²¹

In order for God to use Paul to write the epistles of the NT that reveal the doctrines of the New Covenant, Jesus appeared to him and changed his entire world, not just his worldview. It is patently absurd to think that if any of the biblical authors held to an ANE worldview, that God would not change their worldview in order to use them to write His revelation.

Concerning Mesopotamian religion, Bottéro points out,

The Divinity was never the object of an anxious and enthusiastic pursuit: “to seek (*šê’û*) a god”, as they said, sometimes it was out of need for His protection, for His help: this was not aspire to Him, want His presence, for the sole appeasement, or happiness, of being in His company. And “*we can never have enough of Your beauty*” (p.81:24) marked admiration – it was the patron god of the Moon, splendid lamp of the night! — and not impatience for rapprochement. The Divine did not attract in the way of a desirable good, of a presence capable of enchanting the heart - as in true love.

There was absolutely nothing “mystical” about Mesopotamian religion. The gods were considered very high “authorities” (*it will be necessary to return to this fundamental metaphor of power*: p. 186), on which we depended completely humbly, obliged to Their service: distant and haughty “bosses », masters and sovereigns, and especially not friends! We submitted to Them, we feared Them, we humbled ourselves and we trembled before Them — we did not “love” Them.²²

This certainly was not the worldview of those who loved God and pursued after Him. Some time between the 19th and 17th centuries B.C., Abraham came out of Ur of the Chaldeans and

²¹ ¹ Ὁ δὲ Σαῦλος ἔτι ἐμπνέων ἀπειλῆς καὶ φόβου εἰς τοὺς μαθητὰς τοῦ κυρίου, προσελθὼν τῷ ἀρχιερεῖ 2 ἠτήσατο παρ’ αὐτοῦ ἐπιστολὰς εἰς Δαμασκὸν πρὸς τὰς συναγωγάς, ὅπως εἴαν τινὰς εὕρῃ τῆς ὁδοῦ ὄντας, ἄνδρας τε καὶ γυναῖκας, δεδμένους ἀγάπῃ εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ. 3 ἐν δὲ τῷ πορεύεσθαι ἐγένετο αὐτὸν ἐγγίζειν τῇ Δαμασκῷ, ἐξαίφνης τε αὐτὸν περιηστραψεν φῶς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ 4 καὶ πεσὼν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ἤκουσεν φωνὴν λέγουσαν αὐτῷ, Σαουλ Σαουλ, τί με διώκεις; 5 εἶπεν δέ, Τίς εἰ, κύριε; ὁ δέ, Ἐγώ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς ὃν σὺ διώκεις· 6 ἀλλὰ ἀνάστηθι καὶ εἰσελθε εἰς τὴν πόλιν καὶ λαληθήσεται σοι ὅ τί σε δεῖ ποιεῖν (Acts. 9:1–6).

²² Bottéro, *La plus vieille religion*, 87–88. “La Divinité n’était jamais l’objet d’une poursuite anxieuse, et enthousiaste : « chercher (*šê’û*) un dieu », comme on disait, parfois, c’était par besoin de Sa protection, de Son aide : ce n’était pas aspirer à Lui, avoir envie de Sa présence, pour le seul apaisement, ou bonheur, de se trouver en Sa compagnie. Et « *l’on n’a jamais assez de Ta beauté* » (p.81:24) marquait l’admiration — il s’agissait du dieu patron de la Lune, lampe splendide de la nuit ! — et non pas l’impatience de rapprochement. Le Divin n’attirait pas à la manière d’un bien désirable, d’une présence propre à enchanter le cœur — comme dans un amour véritable.

La religion mésopotamienne n’avait absolument rien de « mystique ». Les dieux y étaient tenus pour de très hautes « autorités » (il y aura lieu de revenir sur cette métaphore fondamentale du pouvoir : p. 186), desquelles on dépendait tout à fait humblement, astreint à Leur service : de lointains et hautains « patrons », maîtres et souverains, et surtout pas des amis ! On se soumettait à Eux, on Les redoutait, on s’abaissait et on tremblait devant Eux — on ne Les « aimait » pas.”

separated from the very culture that subscribed to the worldviews to which Heiser refers. Yet Abraham is referred to as the friend of God:

“Did You not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel and give it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever?” (2 Chron. 20:7).²³

“But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham My friend” (Isa. 41:8).²⁴

“and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘and Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God” (James 2:23).²⁵

God spoke face to face with Moses as one would speak with a friend: “Thus YHWH used to speak to Moses face to face [פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים, *pānîm ’el pānîm*], just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent” (Exod. 33:11).²⁶ Moses received his instruction from YHWH, not from the surrounding cultures who did not know YHWH.

Which part of which ANE worldview are we expected to believe that the biblical writers adopted or imbibed, or by which they were influenced? God did not use any Akkadians or Egyptians to write the books of the Bible. As Oswalt puts it,

From my perspective, the biblical facts cannot be accounted for by some gradual evolutionary growth away from an original base in mythical thinking. The fact that the entire Bible as it now stands is written from the perspective of the transcendent God breaking into human history and revealing himself through unique events and persons cannot be gainsaid. Either this was the perspective from the beginning of the nation or there must have been some cataclysmic experience that would have caused the systematic rewriting of all previous traditions. Outside of the exodus I see no such events.²⁷

Of course Heiser’s view is the prevailing academic view, and the price of not accepting this view is to be labeled “unscholarly.” The authors of the books of the NT were surrounded by a culture that was largely polytheistic and populated with mystery religions, but Ronald Nash has conclusively demonstrated that the NT did not borrow or adopt the views and practices of the surrounding culture.

²³ הָלֹא אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ הוֹרֵשֶׁת אֶת־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת מִלִּפְנֵי עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְתַתְּנָהּ לְזֶרַע אַבְרָהָם אֶהְבְּךָ לְעוֹלָם: (2 Chron. 20:7)

²⁴ וְאַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדִּי יַעֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר בְּחַרְתִּידָּךְ זֶרַע אַבְרָהָם אֶהְבִּי: (Isa. 41:8)

²⁵ καὶ ἐπληρώθη ἡ γὰρφή ἡ λέγουσα· Ἐπίστευσεν δὲ Ἀβραάμ τῷ θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην, καὶ φίλος θεοῦ ἐκλήθη (James 2:23).

²⁶ וְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים כַּאֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ וְשָׁב אֶל־הַמִּחֲנֶה וּמִשְׁרָתוֹ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נוּן נָעַר לֹא יָמִישׁ מִתּוֹךְ הָאֹהֶל: (Exod. 33:11)

²⁷ Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths*, 97–98.

Having dealt with a large number of theories about any supposed influence of pagan religions on the beliefs and writings of the NT authors, Nash asserts, “The question that this book has dealt with is this: Was early Christianity a syncretistic faith? Did it borrow any of its essential beliefs and practices either from Hellenistic philosophy or religion or from Gnosticism? The evidence requires that this question be answered in the negative.”²⁸

Heiser declares, “That Genesis 1–11 has many connections to Mesopotamian literature is not disputed by scholars, evangelical or otherwise. The story of creation, the genealogies before the flood, the flood itself, and the tower of Babel incident all have secure connections to Mesopotamian material that is much older than the Old Testament.”²⁹ However, having “many connections” is very ambiguous. What kind of connections? Heiser goes on to assert, “The story of creation, the genealogies before the flood, the flood itself, and the tower of Babel incident all have secure connections to Mesopotamian material that is much older than the Old Testament.”³⁰ In fact, many scholars reject the claims of the kind of Mesopotamian connection espoused by Heiser. For example, John Walton has been a proponent of relating the Old Testament to ANE literature, yet he asserts,

In the Old Testament, as we would expect, Yahweh is the sole authority responsible for carrying out the functions associated with deity. Isaiah 40:14 insists that Yahweh has no need of consultation, yet the council has not totally disappeared. It is no longer made up of gods, and its members are delegated the tasks of carrying out the decisions of the council rather than being given any actual authority or jurisdiction.³¹

Heiser refers to the fact that the “Mesopotamian material” is much older than the Old Testament, but this is misleading at best. Niehaus makes a similar claim: “The first view, that the Babylonian accounts depend on the Hebrew, is hardly tenable. The Babylonian accounts are too old for this to be possible.”³² The fact is, the documents and artifacts of Mesopotamia are older than the documents and mss of the OT, but it does not follow that the content of the Mesopotamian material is older than the content of the OT. It seems never to enter Heiser’s thoughts, or the thoughts of the prevailing academic religious establishment, that maybe the authors of the Mesopotamian literature took the events described in the Bible and adapted them to their own aims. Notice, I did not suggest that they may have taken the biblical text, but that they may have taken the *events that the biblical text describes*. But of course, that would go against the scholars and the accepted scholarly consensus.

Another question is, who decided that these connections are “secure”? Heiser assumes the connections and then uses the supposed connections to prove the connections. Again to question these “secure” connections is very “unscholarly.” Since there are an number of conflicting and contradictory interpretations of the relation between the OT and ANE literature, none of which has

²⁸ Nash, *Christianity & the Hellenistic World*, 270.

²⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 101.

³⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 101.

³¹ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 56.

³² Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes*, 21.

been definitively established or definitively disproved, how can anyone consider the question “secure”?

The assumption that because the documents and artifacts of the ancient Near East are older than the biblical texts, this somehow makes the content of the former older than the content of the later. However, this has never been demonstrated to be the case. Among contemporary OT scholars, the similarities between ANE myths and the biblical narratives have always been taken to indicate that the biblical authors have adapted, or adopted, or copied ANE literature when they composed their narratives against this literary background. But why should anyone think that the ANE myths *qua* myths are necessarily older or even contemporary with the events that are narrated in Genesis 1–11? Is it not at least as

reasonable to suppose that the ANE myths developed out of the events that the Bible reports? Based on artifacts, OT scholars assume the movement is always from ANE myths to biblical narrative. However, based on content, it is just as reasonable to assume a movement from the actual historical events to biblical narrative and ANE myths (see **Figure 14**), and the similarities are because these artifacts and documents are drawing from the same set of historical facts.

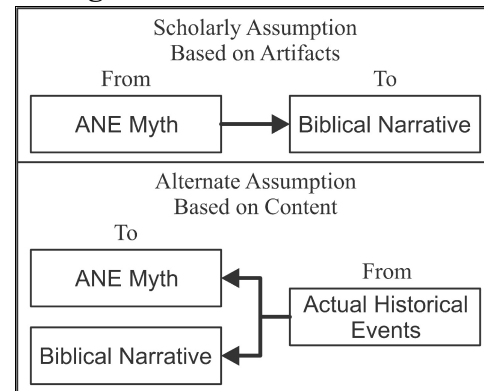
Alexander Heidel (1907–1955), an Assyriologist and biblical scholar and a Member of the Research Staff of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago asserted,

But I reject the idea that the biblical account gradually *evolved* out of the Babylonian; for that the differences are far too great and the similarities far too insignificant. In the light of the differences, the resemblances fade away almost like the stars before the sun. . . . There is, however, yet another way of accounting for the similarities between Genesis and *Enûma elish*, viz., both versions may have sprung from a common source of some kind.³³

Granted much has been discovered and learned since the time of Heidel. However, the basic issue has not changed. The similarities are still few, and the differences are still critical, and no one has yet demonstrated borrowing, or adopting, or adapting, or literary dependence. Again it must be asserted that similarity of design does not necessarily indicate identity of origin. One cannot legitimately assume that because there are similarities that this necessarily indicates borrowing, adopting, adapting, or influence.

David A. Kaden, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, Ithaca, New York, and course instructor at Cornell University, asks the question, “To what, if anything, does the word God

Figure 14: Artifacts vs Events



³³ Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 138–39.

refer?”³⁴ Kaden appeals to the popular notion that the biblical text reflects or mirrors various deities of the Ancient Near East (ANE).

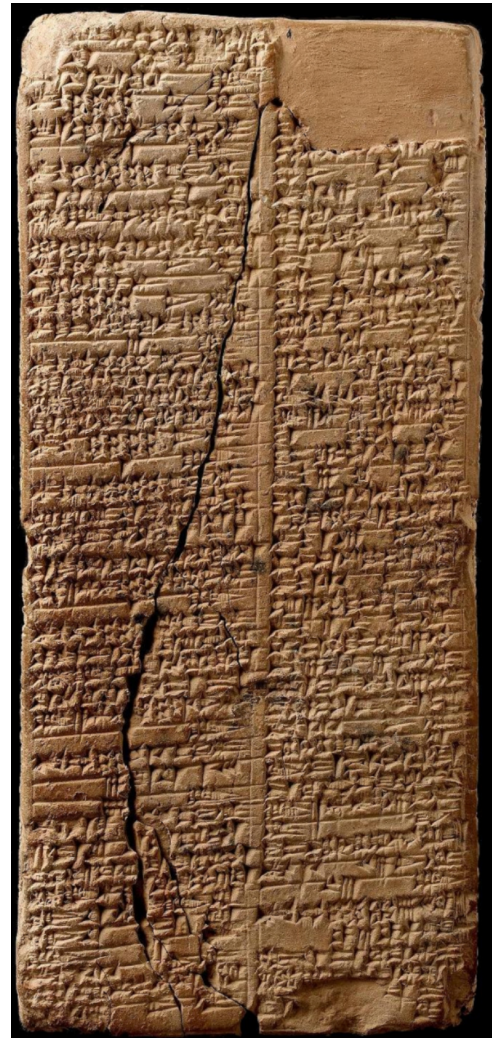
Answering this question with the Bible as a starting point is complicated by the fact that God in Scripture is a composite figure, an amalgamation of personalities borrowed from various ancient deities, as scholars Mark Smith, Jack Miles, and others have pointed out. God as a warrior and controller of the weather mirrors attributes of the ancient Canaanite deity Baal. God as a high god and the head of a divine council mirrors attributes of the ancient Near East high god El. God as a warrior in the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) mirrors attributes ascribed to Chemosh by the Moabite king Mesha.³⁵

Kaden has moved from similarities to the belief that God is a composite of characteristics from extra-biblical writings. Kaden assumes that the supposed similarities between Baal and God necessarily show that the biblical authors borrowed from the Canaanite texts. However, as Samuel Sandmel has shown, much of these efforts are guilty of parallelomania.³⁶ Discussing Paul’s supposed borrowing from *The Book of Wisdom*, Sandmel identifies three factors that are significant in the problem of parallelomania:

Three items are to be noted. One, that some passages are allegedly parallel; two, that a direct organic literary connection is assumed to have provided the parallels; and three, that the conclusion is drawn that the flow is in a particular direction, namely, from Wisdom to Paul, and not from Paul to Wisdom. . . .

We might for our purposes define parallelomania as that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and

Figure 15: Weld-Blundell Prism



³⁴ David A. Kaden, *Christianity in Blue: How the Bible, History, Philosophy, and Theology Shape Progressive Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 31.

³⁵ Kaden, *Christianity in Blue*, 31.

³⁶ Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 81, No. 1 (Mar., 1962), 1.

derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction.³⁷

In order to show borrowing, there are certain prior claims that must be demonstrated. First, one must show that the relevant passages are in fact true parallels, not surface similarities. True parallels need to go deeper than simply noting similarities in word use, or similarities in names, or similarities in expression. Second, and perhaps the most difficult task, is that the parallels must be explained by a causal connection. If a biblical passage is about wisdom, it is to be expected that there would be similarities with other ancient writings that are also about wisdom since they are about the same subject matter. But these similarities do not show borrowing or even influence of one to the other. This means that one cannot simply assume that one text is caused by another, or that one text borrowed from another, or that one text was influenced by another simply because there are similarities. Also, if there are confirmed similarities, one cannot simply assume in which direction the relation moves. And, as we have seen, simply because one document is older than another is not sufficient to demonstrate that the relation moves from the older to the more recent.

Much has been made of the similarities between the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the biblical flood account. However, the Weld-Blundell Prism (see **Figure 15** above), which was created in 1800 B.C., is the most complete surviving list of the Sumerian kings dating from about 3200 to 1800 B.C. In Column 1, which indicates the beginning of the list going back to about 3200 B.C., in lines 39–40 (see Table #14 below) is the reference to the Deluge. This reference indicates that the Deluge predates the composition of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* by about 1000 years. What this shows is that the content of the Prism predates the composition of the *Epic*. So also, the content of the biblical text predates the *Epic* showing that the direction is not necessarily from ANE to the Bible, but can be explained in term of both documents drawing from prior historical tradition and/or historical events.

Table #14: Weld-Blundell Prism Lines 39–41

39. <i>a-ma-ru ba-úr-ra-ta</i>	39. The Deluge came up (upon the Land).
40. <i>egir a-ma-ru ba-úr-ra-ta</i>	40. After the Deluge had come,
41. <i>nam-lugal an-ta ĕ-dé-a-ba</i>	41. The rulership which descended from heaven. ³⁸

Demonstrating literary or cultural dependency is extremely difficult, and sometimes it is literally impossible. OT scholars assume that the similarities necessarily indicate some literary context and that these similarities necessarily indicate that the biblical authors adopted, or adapted, borrowed from, or were influence by ANE literature. Yet these same scholars have never been able to substantiate the claims that there is literary dependency or that the content of biblical narratives

³⁷ Sandmel, "Parallelomania," 1.

³⁸ S. Langdon, ed., *The Weld-Blundell Collection: Historical Inscriptions, Containing Principally the Chronological Prism, W-B. 444*, vol. II, *Oxford Editions of Cuneiform Texts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 9.

find their origin within the temporal context of ANE mythologies. For all the scholarly rhetoric, the assertions of OT scholars is so much subjective speculation. Where in the biblical narrative does any author claim that he has adapted, or adopted, or borrowed, or employed the literature or a story from ANE myth? The only reason for thinking this are the apparent similarities. But similarity of design does not necessarily mean identify of origin, nor do resemblances necessarily indicate literary context or influence.

After a brief account of Mesopotamian civilization that was a composite of several people groups, W. G. Lambert points out,

Thus Babylonian civilization was a highly composite thing, and it is no longer scientifically sound to assume that all ideas originated in Mesopotamia and moved westwards. This is pan-babylonism. Parallels to Genesis can indeed be sought and found there, but they can also be sought and found among the Canaanites, the ancient Egyptians, the Hurrians, the Hittites, and the early Greeks.³⁹

Lambert goes on to consider the creation days 2 and 3 and analyzes the relation between ANE literature and the Genesis account. Concerning day 2 in the Genesis account in which the expanse is created, Lambert concludes, “To sum up discussion of the second day, there is one close parallel between Genesis and *Enūma Eliš*, but no evidence of Hebrew borrowing from Babylon.”⁴⁰ The only apparent parallel is the separating of the waters.

How likely is it that the author(s) of Genesis was carrying around a copy of *Enuma Elish* or some other ANE documents from which were adapted his own literary productions? As Walton put it, “. . . when literary pieces are compared to consider the question of dependence, the burden of proof is appropriately on the researcher to consider the issues of propinquity and transmission—that is, would the peoples involved have come into contact with one another’s literature, and is there a mechanism to transmit said literature from one culture to another?”⁴¹ Heiser certainly has not demonstrated these necessary factors. Except for what are classified as similarities, no one, as far as I am aware, has demonstrated that the ANE literature was readily available to biblical authors. As I have argued elsewhere, supposed similarities are not sufficient to show literary context or literary dependence or even literary influence.⁴²

Nash lists 9 questions that should be asked about supposed parallels and influence, 6 of which have been adapted to the question of the supposed Mesopotamian and Ugaritic influence on the writers of the OT:

³⁹ W. G. Lambert, “A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis,” in *“I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood”: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 98.

⁴⁰ Lambert, “A New Look,” 105.

⁴¹ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 10.

⁴² See my *A Critique of William Lane Craig’s In Quest of the Historical Adam* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2022).

1. What is the evidence for the claim? Do not be put off with generalizations. Ask for “chapter and verse” of the evidence that supports the theory.

Heiser does not present evidence beyond what he claims are connections or similarities. Where does any OT author claim that he adapted or borrowed or imbibed or thought on the basis of an ANE worldview? Similarities are not sufficient to support Heiser’s conclusions. There are similarities between the OT creation account and the Chinese creation account, yet noone argues that the OT authors borrowed or were influenced by the Chinese account. Geographical proximity is not sufficient to show literary influence. How can we account for these similarities? Since the many similar creation accounts from many different and geographically dispersed groups are all talking about the same thing, similarities are to be expected without positing borrowing or influence.

4. Is the language used to describe the evidence faithful to the original source material? It is a lot easier to claim dependence if the source material is presented in OT terminology?

Heiser frequently presents the ANE material in the language of the OT, which makes it easier for his readers to think there is a real or “secure” connection. Since the languages were different, as were the modes of expression, the researcher should show what are believed to be similarities by demonstrating any supposed similarities in the target language in modes of expression as close as possible to the source language. Heiser does not do this, which gives the impression that the supposed similarities are closer than they may actually be. This is, frankly, not honest.

5. Are the alleged parallels really similar, or are the likenesses a result of either exaggeration, oversimplification, inattention to detail, or—once again—the use of OT language?

Heiser and company are adept at exaggerating the similarities and ignoring the critical differences. Discussing the term ‘nephilim,’ in Genesis 6, Heiser claims, “In reality, it doesn’t matter whether ‘fallen ones’ is the translation. In both the Mesopotamian context and the context of later Second Temple Jewish thought, their fathers are divine and the *nephilim* (however translated) *are still described as giants*. Consequently, insisting that the name means ‘fallen’ produces no argument to counter a supernatural interpretation.”⁴³ But, as a matter of fact, it does indeed make a difference if the word means “fallen ones,” because, if it means “fallen ones,” it does not mean “giants.” Heiser exaggerates the similarities, oversimplifies the minor differences and ignores the critical differences. Heiser is reading into the text of Genesis 6 a translation of Num. 13:33: “There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight” (Num. 13:33).⁴⁴ But in the Numbers passage, the “Nephilim” were not divine, or semi-divine, or supernatural beings. They were human beings. If Gen. 6:4 indicates that the Nephilim were the offspring of the sons of the God and the daughters of the man, an interpretation that is very controversial, the text states that they were “men” (אַנְשֵׁי, *’ansê*), not divine or semi-divine beings, or angels. Heiser’s view is very controversial, yet he completely

⁴³ *Unseen Realm*, 105.

⁴⁴ (Num. 13:33) וַיֹּאמֶר רָאִינוּ אֶת-הַנְּפִלִים בְּנֵי עֲנָק מִן-הַנְּפִלִים וַנְּהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כַּחַגְבִּים וְכֵן הָיוּ בְעֵינֵיהֶם:

ignores the debated aspects of the text as if his interpretation is the only possible one. This is, frankly, not honest.

6. In the case of any genuine parallel, is the point of analogy significant? Does it relate to an essential Christian belief or practice?

Heiser's claims about parallels with ANE literature relates to the Christian commitment that there is only one God. As Paul put it, "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).⁴⁵ As we have shown, Heiser's interpretation of the OT in terms of ANE literature leads him to believe that there is more than one God.

7. Is the parallel the sort of thing that could have arisen independently in several different movements? For example, could it have arisen from common language?

Of course, all the parallels to which Heiser points could have arisen independently from the traditions and oral stories passed down through the various cultures from those who initially reported the events.⁴⁶

Anne Birrell gives the opening statements of a Chinese creation myth:

Long ago, before Heaven and earth existed, there were only images but no forms, and all was dark and obscure, a vast desolation, a misty expanse, and nothing knew where its own portals were. There were two gods born out of chaos who wove the skies and designed the earth. So profound were they that no one knew their lowest deeps, and so exalted were they that no one knew where they came to rest. Then they divided into Yin and Yang and separated into the Eight Poles. The hard and the soft formed, and the myriad living things took shape. The dense cloudy vapor became insects, and the pure vapor became humans. (*Huai-nan Tzu, Ching shen*, SPPY [Ssu-pu pei-yao] 7.1a).⁴⁷

This Chinese myth grew up independently. In fact, almost every culture from ancient times has its own creation myth. No doubt some will object that the Chinese creation myth was not within the historical or cultural context of either the ANE literature of the Bible. But this objection does not work since this claim is based on the similarities between the ANE myth and the biblical account, not on geographical location. If similarities of content indicate literary or cultural context, then why cannot the similarities with Chinese myth also indicate literary context?

The Arapaho were a native American tribe that, according to some historians, date back about 3000 years. According to David and Margaret Leeming, "The Arapaho creator is a personified version of the flat pipe so important in their ceremonies. The Great Spirit is a formless projection of his thoughts. In the beginning there was water everywhere and on it floated Flat Pipe all alone. The Great Spirit called down to Flat Pipe suggesting that he create beings to help him build a world

⁴⁵ εἷς γὰρ θεός, εἷς καὶ μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων ἄνθρωπος Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς (1 Tim. 2:5).

⁴⁶ Nash, *Christianity & the Hellenistic World*, 266–68.

⁴⁷ Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993),

around him.”⁴⁸ The Arapaho creation myth grew up independently, yet there are similarities with the biblical account.

Consider the strikingly similar creation myth from the Chelan native Americans:

This story was told by the Chelan Indians, who used to live beside a long lake in the central part of the state of Washington. The lake is still called Lake Chelan (pronounced *shá-lān*), meaning “Beautiful Water.”

Long, long ago, the Creator, the Great Chief Above, made the world. Then he made the animals and the birds and gave them their names— Coyote, Grizzly Bear, Deer, Fox, Eagle, the four Wolf Brothers, Magpie, Bluejay, Hummingbird, and all the others.

When he had finished his work, the Creator called the animal people to him. “I am going to leave you,” he said. “But I will come back. When I come again, I will make human beings. They will be in charge of you.”

The Great Chief returned to his home in the sky, and the animal people scattered to all parts of the world.⁴⁹

These and many other creation stories by peoples over the world have similarities with the biblical account, yet their myths grew up independently. Similarities of design do not necessarily mean identity of origin.

Nash’s 9th question is,

9. Even when we discover prior to, or contemporaneous with, early Christianity a significant parallel to an essential Christian belief, there is one final question to ask: Does the fact that the biblical writer knew of a Mesopotamian belief or event prove that what he knew had a formative or genetic influence on his own essential beliefs?⁵⁰

Heiser’s attitude comes through that those who reject his arguments are “uneducated and untrained” in these matters and therefore should just all bow to his expertise, without dispute. Heiser seems to think he is doing historical study and biblical study, but what he is actually doing is bad philosophy and bad hermeneutics.

Heiser is also adept at constructing straw-man arguments. In another place he declares,

The denial that other *elohim* exist insults the sincerity of biblical writers and the glory of God. How is it coherent to say that verses extolling the superiority of Yahweh above all *elohim* (Psa 97: 9) are really telling us Yahweh is greater than beings that don’t exist? Where is God’s glory in passages calling other *elim* to worship Yahweh (Psa 29:1– 2) when the writers don’t

⁴⁸ David Adams Leeming with Margaret Adams Leeming, *Encyclopedia of Creation Myths* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 1994), s.v. “Arapaho Creation.”

⁴⁹ Margot Edmonds and Ella E. Clark, *Voices of the Winds: Native American Legends* (New York: Castle Books, 2003), 4.

⁵⁰ Nash, *Christianity & the Hellenistic World*, 268.

believe those beings are real? Were the writers inspired to lie or hoodwink us? To give us theological gibberish?⁵¹

Of course Heiser completely misrepresents the argument. There is no denial that the text refers to *elohim*. The argument is that the *elohim* are not what he says they are. It is a straw-man to present the argument as if what opponents are saying is that *elohim* do not exist. This is, frankly, not honest. The biblical text certainly affirms the existence of *elohim*, but they are not gods. They are false gods. The people of Israel often believed that the idols were representations of actual gods. This was the case as asserted in Isaiah: “They will be turned back and be utterly put to shame, who trust in idols, who say to molten images, ‘You are our gods’” (Isa. 42:17).⁵² The Babylonians believed that their idols represented actually existing beings. God is declaring to His people that He is greater than the idols precisely because they are not gods.

Anu was the sovereign god, the father and founder of the divine dynasty. The following is an address or prayer to Anu. A portion of this has been given above.

- 1 You are the one who holds the royal regalia.
Prince of the gods!
Your word is authoritative
In the council of the greatest gods!
- 5 O Lord of the shining Tiara.
Charged with a marvelous radiance,
You who ride the great Cyclones,
Princely standing on the noble royal Dais!
- 10 The heavenly gods listen
To Your sovereign words
And all the infernal gods
Only approach You with trembling!
At Your voice, all the gods bow
Like reeds in the storm!
- 15 If your word carries everything like the wind,
It also makes pastures and aquades prosper!
In Your voice, even when angry.
The gods return to their homes!
Let all the gods come towards you
Of Heaven and Earth,
- 20 With Their gifts. Their offerings!
- R.1 May all kings bring you their heavy tributes!
Than all people.

⁵¹ *Unseen Realm*, 35.

⁵² (Isa. 42:17) נִסְגּוּ אַחֲרָיִם יְבִשׁוּ בִשְׁתֵּי הַבְּטָחִים בַּפֶּסֶל הָאֲמָרִים לְמַסְכָּה אֲתָם אֱלֹהֵינוּ:

- Standing, every day, before You,
 5 They offer their oblations to you,
 Their adorations, their prayers⁵³

Anu (or An) was believed to be an actually existing being who could be praised and petitioned for help.

Enlil was one of the most important gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon: “According to one Sumerian poem, the other gods might not even look upon his splendour. Sometimes he is said to be the offspring of An, and brother of the goddess Aruru. He is also described as a descendant of Enki and Ninki (‘Lord and Lady Earth’), not connected with the god Enki.”⁵⁴ Mesopotamian religion depicted these idols as actually existing, living beings. The fact is, according to the living God, they were nothing but wood and stone.

According to the *Britannica*,

Berosus (flourished c. 290 BC) was a Chaldean priest of Bel in Babylon who wrote a work in three books (in Greek) on the history and culture of Babylonia dedicated to Antiochus I (c. 324-261 BC). It was widely used by later Greek compilers, whose versions in turn were quoted

⁵³ Jean Bottéro, *La plus vieille religion En Mésopotamie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 76–77.

1 *C'est Toi qui détiens les insignes royaux.*
Prince des dieux!
Ta parole fait autorité
Dans le concile des plus grands dieux!
 5 *Ô Seigneur à la Tiare brillante.*
Chargée d'un éclat merveilleux,
Toi qui chevauches les grands Cyclones,
Princièrément debout sur la noble Estrade royale!
 10 *Les dieux célestes prêtent l'oreille*
À Tes paroles souveraines
Et tous les dieux infernaux
N'approchent de Toi qu'en tremblant!
À Ta voix, tous les dieux se courbent
Comme roseaux sous la tempête!
 15 *Si Ta parole emporte tout, comme le Vent,*
Elle fait aussi prospérer pacages et aiguades!
À Ta voix, même courroucés.
Les dieux regagnent Leur demeure!
Que s'avancent vers Toi tous les dieux
Du Ciel et de la Terre,
 20 *Avec Leurs présents. Leurs offrandes!*
 R.1 *Que tous les rois T'apportent leurs lourds tributs!*
Que tous les peuples.
Debout, chaque jour, devant Toi,
 5 *T'offrent leurs oblations,*
Leurs adorations, leurs prières

⁵⁴ Black, *Gods, Demons and Symbols*, 76.

by religious historians such as Eusebius of Caesarea and Josephus. Thus Berossus, though his work survives only in fragmentary citations, is remembered for his passing on knowledge of the origins of Babylon to the ancient Greeks.⁵⁵

The following portion from the surviving fragments of *Babylonica* by Berossus shows that the Babylonians believed that Enlil and the “other gods” were actually existing beings:

THIS is the history which Berossus has transmitted to us. He tells us that the first king was Alorus of Babylon, a Chaldæan; he reigned ten sari: and afterwards Alaparus, and Amelon who came from Pantibiblon: then Ammenon the Chaldæan, in whose time appeared the Musarus Oannes the Annedotus from the Erythræan sea. (But Alexander Polyhistor anticipating the event, has said that he appeared in the first year; but Apollodorus says that it was after forty sari; Abydenus, however, makes the second Annedotus appear after twenty-six sari.) Then succeeded Megalarus from the city of Pantibiblon; and he reigned eighteen sari: and after him Daonus the shepherd from Pantibiblon reigned ten sari; in his time (he says) appeared again from the Erythræan sea a fourth Annedotus, having the same form with those above, the shape of a fish blended with that of a man. Then reigned Euedoreschus from Pantibiblon, for the term of eighteen sari; in his days there appeared another personage from the Erythræan sea like the former, having the same complicated form between a fish and a man, whose name was Odacon. (All these, says Apollodorus, related particularly and circumstantially whatever Oannes had informed them of: concerning these Abydenus has made no mention.) Then reigned Amempsinus, a Chaldæan from Laranchæ; and he being the eighth in order reigned ten sari. Then reigned Otiartes, a Chaldæan, from Laranchæ; and he reigned eight sari. And upon the death of Otiartes, his son Xisuthrus reigned eighteen sari: in his time happened the great deluge. So that the sum of all the kings is ten ; and the term which they collectively reigned an hundred and twenty sari.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ “Berossus,” *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Berossus>. Accessed 7/21/2024.

⁵⁶ I. P. Cory, “Berossus: From Apollodorus. Of the Chaldean Kings,” in *The Ancient Fragments: Containing What Remains of the Writings of Sanchoniatho, Berossus, Abydenus, Megasthenes, and Manetho* (London: William Pickering, 1828), 19–20. Ταυτα, μεν ο Βηρωστος ιστορησε. Πρωτον γενεσθαι βασιλεα Αλωρον εκ Βαβυλωνος Χαλδαιον. Βασιλευσαι δε σαρους δεκα. και καθεξης Αλαπαρον και Αμηλωνα τον εκ Παντιβιβλων. ειτα Αμμενωνα τον Χαλδαιον, εφ ου (φησι) φανηναι τον μυσαρον Ωαννην τον Αννηδωτον εκ της Ερυθρας. (οπερ Αλεξανδρος προλαβων ειρηκε φανηναι τω πρωτω ετει. ουτος δε μετα σαρους τεσσαρακοντα. ο δε Αβυδινος τον δευτερον Αννηδωτον μετα σαρους εικοσι εξ.) ειτα Μεγαλαρον εκ Παντιβιβλων πολεως. βασιλευσαι δε αυτον σαρους οκτωκαιδεκα. και μετα τουτον Δαωνον ποιμενα εκ Παντιβιβλων βασιλευσαι σαρους δεκα. κατα τουτον παλιν (φησι) φανηναι εκ της Ερυθρας Αννηδωτον τεταρτον την αυτην τοις ανω εχοντα διαθεσιν, και την ιχθυος προς ανθρωπους μιξιν. ειτα ηρξαι Ευεδωρεσχον εκ Παντιβιβλων, και Βασιλευσαι σαρους οκτωκαιδεκα. επι τουτου (φησιν) αλλον φανηναι εκ της Ερυθρας Θαλασσης ομοιον κατα την ιχθυος προς ανθρωπον μιξιν, ω ονομα Οδακων. (Τουτους δε φησι παντας τα υπο Ωαννου κεφαλαιωδως ρηθεντα κατα μερος εξηγησασθαι. περι τουτων Αβνδινος ουδεν ειπεν.) ειτα αρξαι Αμεμψινον Χαλδαιον εκ Λαργγων. Βασιλευσαι δε αυτον ογδοον σαρους δεκα. ειτα αρξαι Ωτιαρτην Χαλδαιον εκ Λαργγων. Βασιλευσαι δε σαρους η. Ωτιαρτου δε τελευτησαντος τον υιον αυτου Ξισουθρον βασιλευσαι σαρους οκτωκαιδεκα. επι τουτον τον μεγαν κατακλυσμον (φησι) γεγενησθαι. ως γινεσθαι ομου παντας βασιλεις δεκα· σαρους δε εκατον εικοσι.

The people of Israel sometimes believed that their idols represented actually existing beings. Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal: “Then they [the prophets of Baal] took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, ‘O Baal, answer us.’ But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made” (1 Kgs. 18:26).⁵⁷ The people believed that Baal was an actually existing being who could act on their behalf.

Niehaus gives an interesting example and proposal. Although the quote is long, it is important to include the whole:

For example, we are told that David gave Solomon “the plans of all that the Spirit had put in his mind for the courts of the temple of the LORD and all the surrounding rooms, for the treasuries of the temple of God and for the treasuries for the dedicated things” (1 Chron. 28:12). Those plans included the weight of gold and silver for the lamp stands and their lamps and for the tables and the weight of gold for the forks, sprinkling bowls, pitchers, and dishes, as well as for the altar of incense (1 Chron. 28:14–18). “‘All this,’ David said, I have in writing from the hand of the LORD upon me, and he gave me understanding in all the details of the plan” (1 Chron. 28:19).

Thutmose III (1490–1436 B.C.) erected a holy of holies for Amon and received divine guidance, not only for the temple construction, but also for fashioning the temple’s liturgical equipment:

... a great vase of electrum . . . [. . .] silver, gold, bronze, and copper . . . the Two Lands were flooded with their brightness, like the stars in the body of Nut [i.e., the sky goddess], while my statue followed. Offering tables of electrum . . . I made it for him out of the conceptions of my heart, by the guidance of the god himself.

When a pagan king makes the same claim that a biblical king does, and when that claim is a spiritual one and involves divine guidance, an evaluation that says the biblical king is just understanding these things the way any ancient Near Eastern monarch would understand them does not do justice to the data. David either got guidance from God by “the hand of the LORD” upon him, or he did not. If he did not, then his statement to the contrary makes him either a liar or a deceived, and perhaps a self-deceived man. Since nothing elsewhere in the Bible gives us any reason to think that David’s statement was in error, we can only conclude that it was true. If it was true, then David’s experience of inspiration, or divine guidance, was a genuine experience that produced the results that God wanted. But how are we then to understand the similar claims of divine guidance made by Thutmose III? It would be most bizarre if an Egyptian who predated David by centuries made an almost identical claim to divine guidance for making temple furnishings for his god and made that claim by coincidence. Or, to put it

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וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־הַפָּר אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן לָהֶם וַיַּעֲשׂוּ וַיִּקְרְאוּ בְּשֵׁם־הַבַּעַל מִהַבְּקָר וְעַד־הַצִּהְרִים לֵאמֹר הַבַּעַל עֲנֵנוּ וְאֵין קוֹל וְאֵין עֲנָה וַיִּפְסְחוּ עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה: (1 Kgs. 18:26)

another way, the true God just happened to do to David what Thutmose claimed his god did for him a few centuries earlier.⁵⁸

There is an enormous difference between following similar practices, such as the ones described by Niehaus, and claiming that biblical authors had the same worldview as may be evident in ANE literature. Heiser assumes that the biblical authors had the same worldview, and he assumes this because of similarities between the biblical accounts and various texts from ANE literature. Actually, there is no evidence that there was an “ANE worldview” that was generally held by all Mesopotamians, nor was there one identifiable culture for all Mesopotamians. Heiser has not only misrepresented any possible relation between the OT and ANE literature, but he has also misrepresented the nature of Mesopotamian culture as if it was composed of one identifiable worldview.

A Divine Council?

Heiser holds that these *elohim* constitute a divine council. Heiser addresses the question, “What does God Need with a Council?” He is certainly right that, “God doesn’t *need* a council.”⁵⁹ However, Heiser doesn’t go on to address the next obvious question: “If God does not *need* a council, then why does He have one?” Heiser claims that the fact that God does not *need* a council is not an argument against God *having* one. But why isn’t it? In fact, that God does not *need* a council may not be a decisive argument, but it *is* an argument against the existence of a divine council.

Heiser retorts, “God does not *need* people. But, he uses them.”⁶⁰ And the entire Bible shows how God uses human beings and for what and why He uses them. According to Heiser, the members of the council “. . . carry out his will in that realm [the unseen realm], acting as his representatives. They are his heavenly council in the unseen world.”⁶¹ Are we to think that God created a group of beings who have no function other than carrying out God’s will and acting as His representatives? And, aren’t those beings angels? If the function of the council is simply to administrate the nations, then this hardly seems to rise to the level of a ‘council.’ According to OED, a council is, “An advisory or consultative meeting; an assembly held for the purpose of consultation or deliberation.”⁶² God uses human beings to administrate the affairs of nations, but humans are not thereby part of some council. Daniel presents a behind-the-scenes view of angels, both good and evil, who are involved in the administration of nations, but Heiser does not include angels in God’s council. Heiser has avoided the question. If the members of this council are supposed to carry out God’s will and be His representatives, and since angels and humans do that job, angels in the unseen realm and humans in the earthly realm, why does God have a council?

⁵⁸ Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes*, 178–79.

⁵⁹ *Unseen Realm*, 32. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ *Unseen Realm*, 32. Emphasis in original.

⁶¹ *Unseen Realm*, 43.

⁶² OED, s.v. “council.”

The question still remains. Why does God have a council if He does not *need* one? Of course the answer to this question must come from Heiser's appeal ANE mythology. For example, Heiser describes the Ugaritic myth about the divine council of El. Heiser claims that God's divine council has a structure like that of Ugarit: "The Old Testament has a three-tiered council structure like that at Ugarit."⁶³ Of course, there is nowhere in Scripture that teaches that there is a "three-tiered council. According to Heiser, these *elohim* are God's ". . . heavenly council in the unseen world."⁶⁴ This council is supposedly involved in counseling God in the decision making process: "There are other glimpses of this kind of divine decision making, where God's decree and genuine participation on the part of his council are both evident."⁶⁵

Walton describes the nature of a council in the ancient world:

In the ancient world, major decisions among the gods were made in the community of the gods. Most likely a perception modeled after human government of an early period, this view understood the gods as deliberating and governing as an assembly. The divine council is evidenced in many of the Ugaritic texts as well as in a wide variety of texts from Mesopotamia. Egypt, on the other hand, understands its gods as operating in much more individualistic ways. There is little to suggest assembly rule, though there is a concept of a king of the gods as well as a hierarchical structure among the gods.

The assembly in Mesopotamia was made up of the great gods, whose number, when designated, was fifty; among them were seven who determined destinies. This assembly carried the highest authority since it represented the collective community of deities.⁶⁶

According to Heiser, in the ancient world that is the context in which the biblical authors taught that God has a "divine council," the council was an advisory and decision making body. Walton lists several functions of the council:

1. In the disputation *Two Insects*, the assembly creates heaven and earth and the various types of animals and assigns them their roles.
2. The assembly is called together to decide either human or divine court cases.
3. In the *Gilgamesh Epic* the decision to send the flood is made in the council. In *Atrahasis* both that decision and the earlier attempts at limiting human population came from discussions in the assembly. Thus the fate of humankind is seen as the business of the assembly.
4. The assembly grants kingship both in the divine realm and the human realm, where cities are granted kingship as well as individuals.
5. In a similar way the decision to remove kingship and decree the fate of cities is the decision of the council in the city laments.

⁶³ *Unseen Realm*, 46.

⁶⁴ *Unseen Realm*, 43.

⁶⁵ *Unseen Realm*, 53.

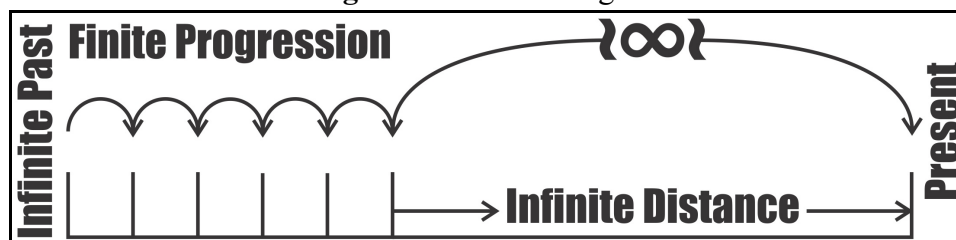
⁶⁶ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 54–55.

Hence the council can be seen in the role of decreeing destinies in general, both in the divine and human realm, and making ad hoc decisions that arise in the process of governing the world.⁶⁷

If the “divine council” as Heiser depicts it is patterned after the council in Ugarit, there is a serious theological and philosophical problem with the notion that God is involved in a decision making process. A decision making process is by definition a process, and a process necessarily involves a temporal progression. If God is involved in a decision making process, then God is involved in a temporal progression. What Heiser is implying, then, is that God is temporal. But God cannot be temporal. Some argue that God is infinite. But, as we have shown above, God cannot be infinite if by ‘infinite’ we mean God exists in an infinite series or an infinite progression. This would necessarily involve the existence of an actual infinite. But there cannot be an actual infinite series, as William Lane Craig has conclusively demonstrated.⁶⁸ J. P. Moreland schematizes the argument this way:

1. It is impossible to traverse (cross over) an actual infinite by successive addition.
2. The temporal series of past events has been formed by successive addition.
3. Therefore, it cannot be actually infinite.
4. But, since it is not infinite, it must be finite (i.e., it must have a first term).
5. And that is what we mean by saying the universe had a beginning.⁶⁹

Figure 16: Infinite Regress



This argument is illustrated in the graphic in **Figure 16**. In order to arrive at the present, the past has been formed by a finite progression of successive moments. However, by adding together finite moments, one can never arrive at an infinite number of moments. Regardless of how many moments have been added, an additional moment can always be added to increase the number of moments in the whole. But, an infinite number of moments is a number to which another moment cannot be added. Since an infinite number of moments separates the past from the present, and since by adding successive finite moments to the past one cannot reach an infinite, one could never arrive

⁶⁷ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 55.

⁶⁸ See William Lane Craig, *The Existence of God and the Beginning of the Universe* (San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers 1979), and *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1979).

⁶⁹ J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 28.

at the present from an infinite past. But, the present has certainly arrived, therefore, the past must not be infinite. But, if the past is not infinite, it must be finite, and as a finite past, it must have had a beginning. It necessarily follows that if God is involved in a progression, even a decision making progression, then God must be temporal. And if God is temporal, He must have had a beginning. And if God had a beginning, there must have been a Beginner to cause God to begin to be. Of course this is precisely what one finds in ANE mythology. Even Marduk was born.⁷⁰

Additionally, about what would a council counsel God? Would they suggest courses of action that God has not considered? Would they evaluate God's decisions or God's plans? Would they recommend actions that God should take? God does not *need* a council because God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, immutable, impassible, and all of the other orthodox classical attributes. Isaiah declares that there are no counselors or advisers whom God consulted or from whom He received counsel:

¹² Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and marked off the heavens by the span, and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance and the hills in a pair of scales? ¹³ Who has directed the Spirit of YHWH, or as His counselor has informed Him? ¹⁴ With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge and informed Him of the way of understanding? (Isa. 40:12–14).⁷¹

It is perhaps revealing that Heiser does not deal with this passage anywhere that I can find among his writings. He does make reference to Isaiah 40 in one place: “These sorts of denial statements constitute the heart of the idea that, by the time of Deutero-Isaiah, in whose material (Isa 40–55) such denials are frequently found, Israelite religion had dispensed with the belief that other אלהים existed.”⁷² Rather than actually dealing with these verses, Heiser simply sweeps them under the carpet of Higher Criticism. The problem is, Higher Criticism is a failed approach, and simply appealing to the speculations of Higher Criticism does not address the issue.

I could not find any reference to these verses in his dissertation in which the focus is upon a “divine council” and “other gods.” Of course an author is free to include and exclude what he chooses in his own writings. But it is not unreasonable to expect him at least to say *something* about these verses since they specifically deal with the notion of counselors or advisers. Heiser does refer to Isa. 40:3–6: “A conversation ensues within the council in Isaiah 40:3–6, wherein the prophet

⁷⁰ “81. Within, the *Apsû* Marduk was born; 82. Within the holy *Apsû* [Marduk] was born.” *Enûma Elish*, in Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, Tablet I.21.

⁷¹ ¹² מִי־מָדַד בְּשֹׁעֲלוֹ מַיִם וְשָׁמַיִם בְּזֶרֶת חֶפֶן וְכֹל בְּשֹׁלֶשׁ עָפָר הָאָרֶץ וְשָׁקֵל בַּפֶּלֶס הָרִים וְגִבְעוֹת בְּמֹאזְנִים:

¹³ מִי־חָפֵן אֶת־רוּחַ יְהוָה וְאִישׁ עֲצָתוֹ יוֹדִיעָנּוּ: ¹⁴ אֶת־מִי נֹעֵץ וְיִבְיִנְהוּ וְיִלְמְדוּהוּ בְּאֶרֶחַ מִשְׁפָּט וְיִלְמְדוּהוּ דַּעַת וְדֶרֶךְ

תְּבוּנוֹת יוֹדִיעָנּוּ: (Isa. 40:12–14)

⁷² Michael S. Heiser, “Does Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible Demonstrate an Evolution From Polytheism to Monotheism in Israelite Religion?” *Journal for the Evangelical Study of the Old Testament* 1.1 (2012), 6.

becomes a participant (reading ‘and I said’ with the Dead Sea Scrolls text of the passage at v. 6).⁷³ It is important to include the text to see if Heiser’s assertion is accurate:

³ A voice is calling, “Clear the way for YHWH in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley; ⁵ Then the glory of YHWH will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of YHWH has spoken.” ⁶ A voice says, “Call out.” Then he answered, “What shall I call out?” All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of YHWH blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever (Isa. 40:3–8).⁷⁴

A voice saying something and an answer being given hardly constitutes a conversation. And the text says absolutely nothing about a council. In fact, the text does not even identify the voice or the one who answered. John the Baptist identifies himself as the voice crying in the wilderness: “He said, ‘I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, “make straight the way of the Lord,” as Isaiah the prophet said’” (Jn. 1:23).⁷⁵ This has nothing to do with some “divine council.” Heiser simply reads into the text what he wants it to say. According to verses 12–14, the supposed function of a council is the very thing that Isaiah says cannot be done. God not only does not *need* a council, He does not have one because such a council could not provide any council to the all-knowing, all-powerful God of the Bible.

We have briefly looked at 1 Kgs. 22:21–22. Heiser attempts to present this as an instance of God’s council:

¹⁹ Micaiah said, “Therefore, hear the word of YHWH. I saw YHWH sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right and on His left. ²⁰ YHWH said, ‘Who will entice Ahab to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said this while another said that. ²¹ Then a spirit came forward and stood before YHWH and said, ‘I will entice him.’ ²² YHWH said to him, ‘How?’ And he said, ‘I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ Then He said, ‘You are to entice him and also prevail. Go and do so.’ ²³ Now therefore, behold, YHWH has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; and YHWH has proclaimed disaster against you” (1 Kgs. 22:19–23).⁷⁶

⁷³ Angels, 41.

⁷⁴ ³ קול קורא במדבר פנו דרך יהוה ישרו בערבך מסלך לאלהינו: ⁴ כל־נִיָּא יִנְשֵׂא וְכֹל־הַר וְגִבְעָה יִשְׁפְּלוּ וְהָיָה הָעֵקֶב לְמִישׁוֹר וְהָרָקְסִים לְבִקְעָה: ⁵ וְנִגְלָה כְּבוֹד יְהוָה וְרָאוּ כָל־בָּשָׂר יַחְדָּו כִּי פִי יְהוָה דִּבֶּר: ⁶ קוֹל אָמַר קְרָא וְאָמַר מֶה אֶקְרָא כָל־הַבָּשָׂר חֲצִיר וְכָל־חֲסִדוֹ כְּצִיץ הַשָּׂדֶה: ⁷ יָבֵשׁ חֲצִיר נָבֵל צִיץ כִּי רוּחַ יְהוָה נִשְׁבָּה בּוֹ אֲכֹן חֲצִיר הָעֵם: ⁸ יָבֵשׁ חֲצִיר נָבֵל צִיץ וּדְבַר־אֱלֹהֵינוּ יָקוּם לְעוֹלָם: (Isa. 40:3–8)

⁷⁵ εφη· Ἐγὼ φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ· Εὐθύνατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, καθὼς εἶπεν Ἡσαΐας ὁ προφήτης (Jn. 1:23).

⁷⁶ ¹⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר לְכֵן שָׁמַע דְּבַר־יְהוָה רָאִיתִי אֶת־יְהוָה הֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּאוֹ וְכָל־צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם עֹמְדִים עָלָיו מִיְמִינוֹ וּמִשְׁמָאלוֹ: ²⁰ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה מִי יִפְתֹּחַ אֶת־אֲחָאָב וַיַּעַל וַיַּפֵּל בְּרִמָּת גִּלְעָד וַיֹּאמֶר זֶה בָּכָה וְזֶה אָמַר בָּכָה: ²¹ וַיֵּצֵא הָרוּחַ וַיַּעֲמֵד לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי אֶפְתָּנוּ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּמָה: ²³ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲצַא וְהִיתִי רוּחַ שָׁקֶר בְּפִי כָל־נְבִיאָיו וַיֹּאמֶר תִּפְתָּח וְגַם־תִּוְכַל

That this passage is an extended metaphor is evident in the statement, “I saw YHWH sitting on His throne.” Since God cannot be circumscribed to a location, God does not literally sit on a throne. Also, there is no sense of a council here. God is enlisting representatives to carry out His plan. There is no debate. One says one thing, another says another, and God gives the task הָרִוּאֵה (*hārûah*). There is no “counseling” going on in this text. As Donald Wiseman points out, “The ‘host of heaven’ are not astral deities or a heavenly court such as is reflected in Ugaritic myths, but God’s servants doing his bidding.”⁷⁷

Heiser simply imposes his paradigm of ANE mythology on the text and interprets it accordingly. No doubt someone will respond that I have imposed my own paradigm on the text and interpreted it accordingly, and this is certainly the case. But again, this is the point. It is not simply a matter of reading the text at “face value” as Heiser wants his readers to think. For Heiser to present his case as if it is simply the “face value” and therefore must be correct, is, frankly, not honest.

Why Does It Matter?

“When one is looking for something — influence, for example — one fails to find it only if one is lacking in ingenuity. But that same ingenuity is ingenious enough to construct the object of its search, and to take that construction for a discovery.”⁷⁸ Neither Heiser nor any other author has demonstrated that the biblical authors borrowed, adopted, adapted, or were influenced by ANE literature. What has been shown is that there are similarities. Heiser seeks to capitalize on the similarities, but he either ignores or rejects the differences. As we have said several times already, similarity of design does not necessarily indicate identify of origin.

According to Walton,

If we do not bring the information from the ancient cognitive environment to bear on the text, we will automatically impose the parameters of our modern worldview, thus risking serious distortion of meaning. Consequently the objective of this book is to improve the exegetical analysis of the Old Testament based on information derived from the ancient world. We will therefore not take an apologetic approach.⁷⁹

And what guarantee does one have that an interpreter will not impose the parameters of his modern worldview on the study of ancient cognitive environment? And in fact, what is the problem with one’s modern worldview? Were the people of ancient cultures so radically different from modern people that there is no common worldview ground? Is not Walton using an aspect of his “modern worldview” to argue that we must bring the information from the ancient cognitive

צֶא וְעִשְׂהוּ כֵן: (1 Kgs. 22:19–23)

⁷⁷ Donald J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 9, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 199.

⁷⁸ Patrick Riley, *The General Will Before Rousseau: The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), x.

⁷⁹ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 30.

environment to bear on the text? In fact, there is a sense in which historical awareness is a product of modern culture. As Patricia Osmond and Marianne Pade report,

From the early fourteenth century onward, little-known texts of Latin writers, or missing portions of their work, were beginning to surface. The humanist movement encouraged a return to the sources, and Renaissance manuscript hunters added substantially to the corpus of all Latin historians. Works that had not been independently transmitted also became the focus of scholarly attention. . . . The growing knowledge of ancient historians and interest in antiquarian and philological studies induced scholars to take a more critical view of evidence and to compare literary accounts with non-literary sources (such as codes of law, coins, inscriptions, and archaeological remains), as well as with each other.⁸⁰

With the Renaissance cry, *ad fontes* (“to the sources”), the European world of scholarship began to develop an historical awareness. Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola (1463–1494), an Italian Renaissance nobleman and philosopher, expressed the spirit of Renaissance humanism in *De Hominis Dignitate* (*On the Dignity of Man*):

In fact, those who follow any philosophical school, of St. Thomas for example or of Duns Scotus, who are now the most widely accepted, try their doctrine in the discussion of a few questions. I, on the other hand, set out not to swear by anyone’s word, to attend all the philosophy masters, to examine all the positions, to know all the schools. Therefore, since I have to say of all philosophers in order not to seem defender of a determined thesis if I neglect others, the questions proposed could not fail to be limited as a whole, even if those referred to each were few. Neither blame me if I come as a guest wherever events take me. In fact, this principle was observed by all the ancients, that by examining each author they should not possibly neglect any writings. And this principle observed in particular Aristotle whom Plato called ἀναγνώστης [reader] precisely for this reason; and undoubtedly it is a narrow-minded one to close oneself in the Portico or the Academy.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Patricia Osmond and Marianne Pade, “Historiography, Classical,” in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. Paul F. Grendler (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1999), 3.155–56.

⁸¹ Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, *De Hominis Dignitate*, 1, *Edizione Nazionale Dei Classici Del Pensiero Italiano* (Firenze: Vallecchi Editore 1942), 139–41. “Quelli infatti che seguono una qualunque scuola filosofica, di San Tommaso per esempio o di Duns Scoto, che ora sono i più largamente accolti, cimentano la loro dottrina nella discussione di poche questioni. Io, invece, mi sono proposto di non giurare sulla parola di nessuno, di frequentare tutti i maestri di filosofia, di esaminare tutte le posizioni, di conoscere tutte le scuole. Perciò, dovendo io dire di tutti i filosofi per non sembrare difensore di una tesi determinata qualora ne trascurassi altre, le questioni proposte non potranno non essere molte nel loro insieme, anche se erano poche quelle riferite per ognuno. Né mi si biasimi se giungo ospite dovunque mi portano le vicende. Da tutti gli antichi, infatti, fu osservato questo principio, che esaminando ogni autore non trascurassero possibilmente nessuno scritto. E tale principio osservò in particolare Aristotele che appunto perciò Platone chiamava lettore; e senza dubbio è proprio di una mentalità ristretta chiudersi nel Portico o nell’Accademia.” “Qui enim se cuipiam ex philosophorum familiis addixerunt, Thomae videlicet aut Scoto, qui nunc plurimum in manibus, faventes, possunt illi quidem vel in paucarum quaestionum discussione suae doctrinae periculum facere. At ego ita me

The Renaissance had provided the Reformers with the tools needed to challenge the institutional organization of the Roman Catholic Church. At least since Augustine, the Roman Catholic Church had used the Latin Vulgate as the Bible from which theology and piety were extricated and systematized.

Jerry Bentley characterizes the relation of Renaissance humanism to biblical studies:

Humanist scholars of the Renaissance . . . explored and charted virgin territory in New Testament scholarship: they studied the original Greek text of the New Testament instead of the Latin translations used by western scholars during the Middle Ages; they based their analyses on philological and historical criteria instead of the theological considerations that governed medieval study of the New Testament; they opened the door on a new era of scholarship by developing the methods, principles, and insights employed by students of the New Testament all the way up to the present day; they prepared and published editions of the New Testament that scholars relied upon until the late nineteenth century. These humanists may therefore be recognized as the founders of modern philological scholarship on the New Testament.⁸²

During the Middle Ages, biblical studies were designed to use the text in such a manner as to provide insights on the present. There was no sense of the historical context or the historical situatedness of biblical passages or biblical books. The historical awakening of the Renaissance forced early modern scholars to view the Bible as a book composed in an ancient historical setting that must be studied in its own right in order to be able properly to interpret the text.

As true as the cautions may be, Walton's fear of imposing a modern worldview on ancient texts and Heiser's claim that "We need to get the worldview of the ancient world, shared by the biblical writers, into our heads"⁸³ are each an aspect of their modern worldview about worldviews. Walton also asserts, "The aid of comparative study might sometimes be needed to help with a minor detail."⁸⁴ By contrast, Heiser's imposition of his modern worldview upon the study of ancient texts, and his imposition of his own interpretation of ANE literature upon the biblical text is the real danger to orthodox Christian theology and hermeneutics.

institui, ut in nullius verba iuratus, me per omnes philosophiae magistros funderem, omnes schedas excuterem, omnes familias agnoscerem. Quare, cum mihi de illis omnibus esset dicendum, ne, si privati dogmatis defensor reliqua posthabuissem, illi viderer obstrictus, non potuerunt, etiamsi pauca de singulis proponerentur, non esse plurima quae simul de omnibus afferebantur. Nec id in me quispiam damnet, quod me quocunque ferat tempestas deferar hospes. Fuit enim cum ab antiquis omnibus hoc observatum, ut omne scriptorum genus evolventes, nullas quas possent commentationes illectas praeterirent, turn maxime ab Aristotele, qui eam ob causam ἀναγνώστης, idest lector, a Platorie nuncupabatur, et profecto angustae est mentis intra unam se Porticum aut Academiam continuisse."

⁸² Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3.

⁸³ *Unfiltered*, 13.

⁸⁴ *Unfiltered*, 13.

CHAPTER 13

PHILOSOPHY

Introduction

An excellent example of the kind of reasoning that has become a required perspective in biblical and theological scholarship is expressed by Bob Becking, Chair of Wetenschap van het Oude Testament (“Science of the Old Testament”), at Utrecht University: “A text never equals the reality to which it refers. A text may present a version of reality by describing a selection of features from the real world. This selection is organized in a specific way and presented from the perspective of the narrator.”¹ First of all, it must be pointed out that this is a philosophical statement, not a biblical one. Secondly, is impossible not to take note of the self-referential problem in Becking’s statement. If a text never equals the reality to which it refers, then Becking’s own text does not equal the reality to which it refers. So, either Becking’s text is from his own perspective, in which case it is not universally true of all texts since it does not equal the reality to which it refers, or it does equal the reality to which it refers, in which case Becking’s statement falsifies itself. If Becking’s statement is true, then he is presenting only a version of reality, not the whole story, and his entire article amounts only to his own perspective, and it does not equal the reality to which he is referring. Yet he presents his statement as if it equals the reality to which he is referring. Becking’s statement is self-defeating. This is the kind of philosophical reasoning all too rampant in biblical studies.

Of course, it must be asked, “How could Becking even know that a text does not equal the reality to which it refers?” In order for Becking to know that a text does not equal the reality to which it refers he would have to know the reality to which a text refers. Since his material has to do with ancient texts, his access to the reality to which these texts refer is the ancient texts themselves or to reality itself. Since, according to Becking, these texts do not equal the reality to which they refer, then from where does Becking get the knowledge of reality by which to judge that these texts do not equal the reality to which they refer? Becking must supply that knowledge of reality and then use it to judge these ancient texts. The question then is, “Is Becking’s view of reality accurate?”

Becking expresses an aspect of the “reality” that he brings to these texts: “To me, the Bible is not a trustworthy report on events from times long passed by, it is a book in which people witness their religious view on reality. In other words: The Hebrew Bible informs us on religious views in

¹ Bob Becking, “Only One God: on Possible Implications for Biblical Theology,” in *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah*, ed. Bob Becking, Meindert Dijkstra, Marjo C. A. Korpel, and Karel J. H. Vriezen (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 195.

Ancient Israel, but from a specific perspective.”² This confession indicates the “perspective” by which Becking evaluates the trustworthiness of the OT. He comes to the text with his always-already-present belief about reality, and he employs this as the measure by which he measures whether the ancient texts equal the reality to which they refer. In other words, Becking imposes his own notion of reality upon the ancient texts and concludes that the Bible is untrustworthy. Apparently, Becking believes that his text equals the reality to which it refers.

Why does this matter, and what does it have to do with the work of Heiser? What this demonstrates is how bad philosophy molds faulty reasoning and leads to false conclusions. Not much has been said so far about Heiser’s philosophical assumptions, so we must deal with some of these. Theological and exegetical methods are not philosophically neutral. However, Heiser wants to head off any philosophical analysis of his claims:

In my judgment, describing what Israel believed about Yahweh need not involve the kind of high philosophical speculation that most modern scholarship wants to deny the ancient Israelite. Several simple ideas have been communicated to the reader by the canonical authors that allow a description that demonstrates a firm, uncompromising belief in Yahweh’s “species uniqueness” among the other gods assumed to exist. Israel did not believe the other gods were species-equal with Yahweh and essentially interchangeable. Israel did not believe that Yahweh should be viewed as the supreme god only because of his deeds on behalf of Israel. The canonical authors considered Yahweh to be in a class by himself. He was “species-unique.”³

By contrast, in the conclusion to his paper on Monotheism, Heiser claims, “The approach to divine plurality and the matter of monotheism offered here is theologically and philosophically sound, while giving primacy of place to the data of the Hebrew Bible.”⁴ It is disingenuous for Heiser to claim that he does not need to involve high philosophical speculation, and then to claim that his approach is “philosophically sound.” In fact, his approach is emphatically *not* philosophically sound.

It is understandable that Heiser does not want to get involved in “high philosophical speculation.” But philosophy is unavoidable, and not wanting to get involved in it simply means that Heiser does not want his philosophical speculations to be discussed even though, like everyone else, he cannot avoid his own philosophical assumptions. Heiser’s own concluding statement testifies to the fact that one cannot simply set aside the philosophical issues. In the above quote, Heiser claims, “Several simple ideas have been communicated to the reader by the canonical authors that allow a description that demonstrates a firm, uncompromising belief in Yahweh’s ‘species uniqueness’ among the other gods assumed to exist.” But to claim that God is “species unique” is a philosophical designation, and the philosophical issues related to this designation cannot simply be swept aside as if they do not exist, or ignored as “high philosophical speculation.”

² Becking, “Only One God,” 196.

³ Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 29.

⁴ Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 30.

Species Uniqueness

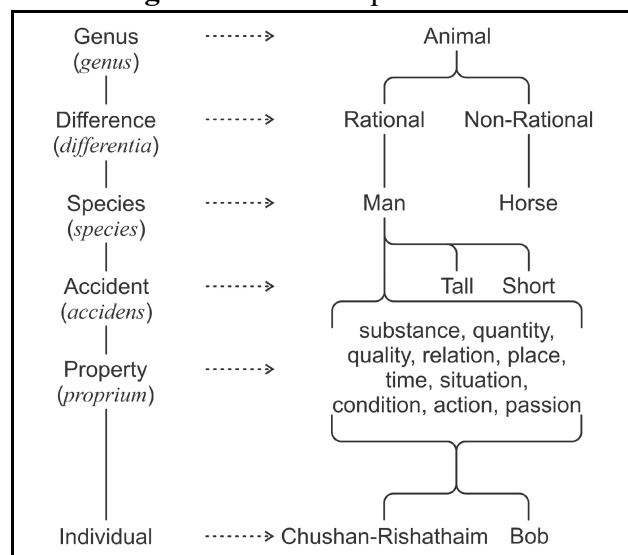
Heiser claims that God is “species-unique”:

Taking the idea of Yahweh’s uniqueness even further, it could perhaps be argued that assertions of incomparability amount to the affirmation that other gods were *ontologically* inferior to a “species-unique” being. Yahweh is distinguished as the creator of all other gods, the pre-existent One, making him ontologically distinct. By virtue of ontological superiority, Yahweh alone is sovereign and thus deserving of worship. One could object that the idea of “species uniqueness” is unintelligible with respect to divine beings, perhaps by analogy to the human world. I am human, yet no other human is me, but all humans share the same species status. Hence one can be unique in properties, which reflects the view of Rowley and others, but *species* uniqueness is a fallacy. The analogy with humankind is flawed, however, since no such claim as pre-existence before all humans is seriously offered.⁵

A species necessarily requires that there be a genus into which something or someone belongs. The genus is the group into which various species belong. So, humans, according to popular classification, are in the genus “animal” along with other animate beings. The species within a genus are distinguished by difference. The species “man” is different from the species “horse” because man is a rational animal whereas a horse is not (**Figure 17**), yet they both belong in the same genus.

According to Heiser’s argument, YHWH and the “other gods” belong in the genus אֱלֹהִים. Heiser asserts this when he says, “In view of the fact that Yahweh is credited with creating and commanding everything in heaven and earth—the ‘universe’ in Israelite thought—it is plausible that Israelites believed that Yahweh is indeed an *’elohim*, but no other *’elohim*—whom Yahweh created—are Yahweh.”⁶ So, YHWH and the “other gods” belong to a genus, but YHWH is a unique species in this genus. Now, in order for God to differ from the “other gods,” there must be some way by which He is different since a species is constituted of a genus and difference. Heiser states that YHWH is ontologically superior to the other *’elohim*. YHWH is ontologically superior to the other *’elohim* because He is the “creator of all other gods, the pre-

Figure 17: Genus Species Chart



⁵ Heiser, *Divine Council*, 16.

⁶ Heiser, *Divine Council*, 16.

existent One.”⁷ In a footnote, Heiser claims that being species unique is the basis of God’s distinction or difference from “other gods”:

Interestingly, species uniqueness is the basis for God’s distinction from the other gods in later Jewish writers. For example, 2 (Slavonic) Enoch (J) 2:2 affirms that while other gods are feckless, they exist and are temporary: “And do not turn away from the Lord, and worship vain gods, gods who did not create the heaven and the earth or any created thing; for they will perish, and so will those who worship them.” The same book later has God inform Enoch that, “There is no adviser and no successor to my creation. I am self-eternal and not made by hands” (33:4). Sibylline Oracles confess that “God is alone, unique, and supreme” since he is “self-generated [and] unbegotten” Yet in the same text one reads that, “if gods beget and yet remain immortal, there would have been more gods born than men.” See John J. Collins, “Sibylline Oracles, Fragments,” OTP 1:470 (the citations are from Fragment 1:16; Fragment 2:1; Fragment 3:4).⁸

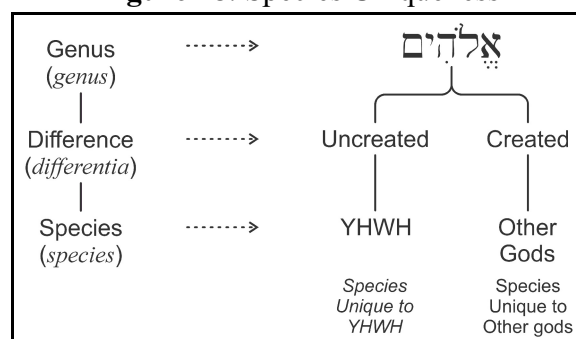
However, if YHWH is in a species by Himself, then the “other gods,” as a group, are in a species by themselves. So, the species of “other gods” is “species unique.” What is it that makes YHWH belong in a unique species? According to Heiser, that God’s is the preexistent One, the Creator of all is what makes YHWH species unique.

Heiser attempts to explain YHWH’s species uniqueness:

In briefest terms, the statements in the canonical text (poetic or otherwise) inform the reader that, for the biblical writer, Yahweh was an אֱלֹהִים, but no other אֱלֹהִים was Yahweh—and *never was nor could be*. This notion allows for the existence of other אֱלֹהִים and is more precise than the terms “polytheism” and “henotheism.” It is also more accurate than “monotheism,” though it preserves the element of that conception that is most important to traditional Judaism and Christianity: Yahweh’s solitary “otherness” with respect to all that is, in heaven and in earth.⁹

The problem is, this does not explain anything. If YHWH is an אֱלֹהִים, and the “other gods” are אֱלֹהִים, then what is the difference between them (see **Figure 18**)? According to Heiser, the difference is that YHWH is an uncreated אֱלֹהִים, whereas the “other gods” are created אֱלֹהִים. Heiser gives a quote from the Sibylline Oracles: “God is alone, unique, supreme.” But, since the “other gods” are not unbegotten, then, as a group, they are also unique — they are in

Figure 18: Species Uniqueness



⁷ Heiser, *Divine Council*, 16.

⁸ Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 29.n.62.

⁹ Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 29.

a unique group of created אֱלֹהִים, and yet YHWH and the “other gods” are still part of the genus אֱלֹהִים, which means that YHWH happens to be a unique אֱלֹהִים but still one of them. So, Heiser’s argument does not set YHWH apart as ultimately distinct, but only as a unique one of the group.

Now, YHWH cannot differ from the “other gods” in being an אֱלֹהִים, since that is the very way in which they are supposed to be the same. So Heiser wants to make them different by claiming that YHWH is an אֱלֹהִים, but the other אֱלֹהִים are not YHWH. But this is to make a distinction without a difference. Basically, Heiser is claiming that the others are not A because they are $\sim A$, where the $\sim$ means “non-.” He is saying, “A cat is not a dog because it is a non-dog.” Heiser is making a distinction by non-being. However, they cannot differ by non-being, since non-being is nothing, and to differ by non-being is to differ by nothing, and to differ by nothing is not to differ. To claim that one is not the other does not explain how they differ. Why is one not the other? It may indicate that they *are* different, but it does not explain in what way they are different.

It does not work to claim that species uniqueness is “the basis for God’s distinction from the other gods.” If God is species unique in His own species, then the “other gods” are either species unique in their own species as a group, or each one of the “other gods” is species unique in his own species. Since they are all species unique in their own species, then they do not differ by being species unique. By claiming that YHWH is species unique, Heiser has failed to identify what makes YHWH species unique from the other אֱלֹהִים who are species unique in their own species. Heiser has simply made a distinction that makes no difference.

If they cannot differ by being, and they cannot differ by non-being, then they must differ by some aspect(s), characteristic(s), attribute(s), or part(s). In order for YHWH to differ from the “other gods” by some aspect, characteristic, attribute, or part, YHWH and the “other gods” must be composed of these aspects, characteristics, attributes, or parts. But, as has been demonstrated above, anything that is composed cannot compose itself, since it would have to be composed and not composed in the same sense, which is contradictory. So, YHWH and the “other gods” must have been composed by some composer. This composer that composed YHWH and the “other gods” cannot itself be composed else it leads to the same contradiction and to an infinite regress. Ultimately there must be some uncomposed composer. So, what or who composed YHWH and the “other gods”? Was this composer also an אֱלֹהִים, and, if so, how did he differ from the other אֱלֹהִים?

Species uniqueness is something that sounds like it has a definite meaning, but it ultimately is meaningless. Heiser does not know what it means for YHWH to be species unique. In fact, such a category is inapplicable to YHWH since it requires that YHWH be in a genus. As has been demonstrated above, YHWH cannot belong in a genus as a species of that genus. Berkhof asserts, “In order to give a logical definition of God, we would have to begin by going in search of some higher concept, under which God could be co-ordinated with other concepts; and would then have to point out the characteristics that would be applicable to God only. Such a *genetic-synthetic* definition cannot be given of God, since God is not one of several species of gods, which can be subsumed under a single genus.”¹⁰

Aquinas has demonstrated that God cannot be contained in a genus. The quote is long, but it is necessary to include the whole in order to grasp the argument:

¹⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 41.

Whether God is Contained in a Genus

On the contrary, In the mind, genus is prior to what it contains. But nothing is prior to God either really or mentally. Therefore God is not in any genus.

I answer that, A thing can be in a genus in two ways; either absolutely and properly, as a species contained under a genus; or as being reducible to it, as principles and privations. For example, a point and unity are reduced to the genus of quantity, as its principles; while blindness and all other privations are reduced to the genus of habit. But in neither way is God in a genus.

That He cannot be a species of any genus may be shown in three ways. First, because a species is constituted of genus and difference. Now that from which the difference constituting the species is derived, is always related to that from which the genus is derived, as actuality is related to potentiality. For animal is derived from sensitive nature, by concretion as it were, for that is animal, which has a sensitive nature. Rational being, on the other hand, is derived from intellectual nature, because that is rational, which has an intellectual nature, and intelligence is compared to sense, as actuality is to potentiality. The same argument holds good in other things. Hence since in God actuality is not added to potentiality, it is impossible that He should be in any genus as a species.

Secondly, since the existence of God is His essence, if God were in any genus, He would be in the genus 'being,' because, since genus is predicated as an essential it refers to the essence of a thing. But the Philosopher has shown (III. *Metaph.*) that being cannot be a genus, for every genus has differences distinct from its generic essence. Now no difference can exist distinct from being; for non-being cannot be a difference. It follows then that God is not in a genus.

Thirdly, because all in one genus agree in the quiddity or essence of the genus which is predicated of them as an essential, but they differ in their existence. For the existence of man and of horse is not the same; as also of this man and that man : thus in every member of a genus, existence and quiddity — *i.e.*, essence — must differ. But in God they do not differ, as shown in the preceding article. Therefore it is plain that God is not in a genus as if He were a species.

From this it is also plain that He has no genus nor difference, nor can there be any definition of Him; nor, save through His effects, a demonstration of Him: for a definition is from genus and difference; and the mean of a demonstration is a definition.

That God is not in a genus, as reducible to it as its principle, is clear from this, that a principle reducible to any genus does not extend beyond that genus; as, a point is the principle of continuous quantity alone; and unity, of discontinuous quantity. But God is the principle of all being. Therefore He is not contained in any genus as its principle.¹¹

¹¹ Aquinas, *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae*, Ia.3.5.43–44. "UTRUM DEUS SIT IN GENERE ALIQUO: Sed Contra, genus est prius, secundum intellectum, eo quod in genere continetur. Sed nihil est prius Deo, nec secundum rem, nec secundum intellectum. Ergo Deus non est in aliquo genere.

RESPONDEO DICENDUM quod aliquid est in genere dupliciter. Uno modo, simpliciter et proprie; sicut species, quae sub genere continentur. Alio modo, per reductionem, sicut principia et privationes: sicut punctus et unitas reducuntur ad genus quantitatis, sicut principia; caecitas autem, et omnis privatio, reducitur ad genus sui habitus. Neutro autem modo Deus est in genere.

William Ames (1576–1633), an English Puritan theologian and philosopher, also asserted that God is not in a genus:

41. Under the notion of quantity it is said, 1. One, 2. Infinite. First, internally, since He is immense: secondly, externally, in so far as He is incomprehensible. 3. He is called eternal. But such perfections as are signified by negative nouns, such as infinite, immensity, &c. they always include in their material signification not only the negation of imperfection, but also the affirmation of the greatest perfection: for which reason they are properly called attributes.

42. One is not called a genus, but that most perfect unity which is usually called numerical and individual in creatures.¹²

It does not help to claim that God is distinct from the “other gods” because He is the “pre-existent One, making him ontologically distinct.” It is significant that Heiser fails to explain what he means by “ontologically distinct.” In the modern context, ontology has become distinct from the classical metaphysics of Aristotle and the Scholastic philosopher/theologians of the Middle Ages in that ontology is the study of things that exist; of beings. Classical metaphysics, however, was the study of being in so far as it is being, or being *qua* being. The term ‘being,’ which in English can be

Quod enim non possit esse species alicuius generis, tripliciter ostendi potest. Primo quidem, quia species constituitur ex genere et differentia. Semper autem id a quo sumitur differentia constituens speciem, se habet ad illud unde sumitur genus, sicut actus ad potentiam. *Animal* enim sumitur a natura sensitiva per modum concretitionis; hoc enim dicitur animal, quod naturam sensitivam habet: *rationale* vero sumitur a natura intellectiva, quia rationale est quod naturam intellectivam habet: intellectivum autem comparatur ad sensitivum, sicut actus ad potentiam. Et similiter manifestum est in aliis. Unde, cum in Deo non adiungatur potentia actui, impossibile est quod sit in genere tanquam species.

Secundo, quia, cum esse Dei sit eius essentia, ut ostensum est, si Deus esset in aliquo genere, oporteret quod genus eius esset *ens*: nam genus significat essentiam rei, cum praedicetur *in eo quod quid est*. Ostendit autem Philosophus in III *Metaphys.*, quod ens non potest esse genus alicuius: omne enim genus habet differentias quae sunt extra essentiam generis; nulla autem differentia posset inveniri, quae esset extra ens; qui *non ens* non potest esse differentia. Unde relinquitur quod Deus non sit in genere.

Tertio, quia omnia quae sunt in genere uno, communicant in quidditate vel essentia generis, quod praedicatur de eis *in eo quod quid est*, est esse hominis et equi, nec huius hominis et illius hominis. Et sic oportet quod quaecumque sunt in genere, differant in eis esse et *quod quid est*, idest essentia. In Deo autem non differt, ut ostensum est. Unde manifestum est quod Deus non est in genere sicut species.

Et ex hoc patet quod non habet genus, neque differentias; neque est definitio ipsius; neque demonstratio, nisi per effectum: quia definitio est ex genere et differentia, demonstrationis autem medium est definitio.

Quod autem Deus non sit in genere per reductionem ut principium, manifestum est ex eo quod principium quod reducitur in aliquod genus, non se extendit ultra genus illud: sicut punctum non est principium nisi quantitatis continuae, et unitas quantitatis discretarum. Deus autem est principium totius esse, ut infra ostendetur. Unde non continetur in aliquod genus, non se extendit ultra genus illud: sicut punctum non est principium nisi quantitatis continuae, et unitas quantitatis discretarum. Deus autem est principium totius esse, ut infra ostendetur. Unde non continetur in aliquo gener sicut principium.”

¹² Guiliel Amesii, *Medulla Theologica* (Amstelodami : Apud Ioannem Iansonium, 1656), Liber Primus.IV.41–41.13. “41. Sub notione quantitatis dicitur, 1. Unus, 2. Infinitus. Primò internè, quoniam est immensus: Secundo externè, quatenus incomprehensibilis. 3. Dicitur aeternus. Istiusmodi autem perfectiones, quae Significantur per nomina negativa, ut *infinitas*, *immensitas*, &c. includunt semper in significatio suo materiali, non tantum negationem imperfectionis, sed etiam perfectionis maximae affirmationem: qua etiam ratione sunt propriè dicta attributa.

42. Unus dicitur non genere, sed unitate illa perfectissima, quae in creaturis numerica & individualis solet appellari.”

a noun corresponding to the Latin *ens*, refers to an entity, a being. A horse is an entity, a being. A man is an entity, a being, and in some sense they are ontologically distinct. The English term ‘being’ can also be a participle, corresponding to the Latin infinitive *esse*, meaning “to be,” from *sum* (“I am”). As a participle, the English term ‘being,’ as Henry Koren points out, “implies the actual exercise by a subject of the action indicated by the verb ‘to be,’ just as the participle ‘walking’ implies the actual exercise by a subject of the action indicated by the verb ‘to walk.’” Hence when the term ‘being’ is used as a participle in the real order, it can be attributed only to things which actually exist, or are considered to exist here and now in the order of reality.”¹³ Koren goes on to explain the crucial distinction between ontology and classical metaphysics:

All sciences are concerned with beings, but they do not consider all beings, but only a particular type of being, such as plants, minerals, or quantified being. Metaphysics differs from all other human sciences because of the *extension of its material object*. It embraces everything that is or can be, whether it be material or immaterial, limited or unlimited.

With respect to the *formal object*, no other science considers beings precisely insofar as beings, as metaphysics does. Hence metaphysics differs from all other sciences because of its formal object, which is being itself.

By taking the material and the formal object together, we obtain the definition of metaphysics as *the science of being as being*.¹⁴

Ultimately, ontology is the study of beings, not being. To claim that God is “ontologically distinct” amounts to saying that God is a being that happens to be unique among all beings. As we have pointed out above, God is not *a* being. God *is* being (*esse*). Whereas created entities *have* being, that is, they have existence, the existence of created beings is really distinct from their essence. As Aquinas put it, “Now, every essence or quiddity [its ‘whatness’] can be understood without knowing anything about its ‘to be’ [*esse*]. I can know, for instance, what a man or a phoenix is and still be ignorant whether it has being in reality. From this it is clear that being [*esse*] is other than essence or quiddity, unless perhaps there is a reality whose quiddity is its being [*esse*].”¹⁵ God’s essence *is* His existence. God *is* being. God does not fall into a class, or category, of “being.” Claiming that God is ontologically distinct is a category mistake. God is metaphysically distinct, because God *is* being while all created entities *have* being.

To claim that God is “species unique” is insufficient to distinguish God from “other gods.” Heiser has managed to make God into a being like other beings, only He happens to be a unique one. This is polytheistic thinking. Now we see why Heiser does not want to get involved in “high

¹³ Henry J. Koren, *An Introduction to the Science of Metaphysics* (Saint Louis, Missouri: B. Herder Book Company, 1955), 20.

¹⁴ Koren, *An Introduction to the Science of Metaphysics*, 7.

¹⁵ S. Thomae Aquinatis, *De Ente et Essentia* (Taurini, Italia: Marietti, 1932), 4.6. “Quicquid enim non est de intellectu essentiae vel quidditatis, hoc est adveniens extra et faciens compositionem cum essentia, quia nulla essentia sine his, quae sunt partes essentiae, intelligi potest. Omnis autem essentia vel quidditas potest intelligi sine hoc quod aliquid intelligatur de esse suo; possum enim intelligere quid est homo vel Phoenix et tamen ignorare an esse habeat in rerum natura. Ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia vel quidditate, nisi forte sit aliqua res, cuius quidditas sit ipsum suum esse;”

philosophical speculation.” His efforts are irrational, but it does not take “high philosophical speculation” to see that.

Univocal Predication

Another serious flaw in Heiser’s methodology is his use of univocal predication. In univocal predication, the characteristic by which the relation is identified as a characteristic is properly attributed to each as an attribute or property that is formally contained in each. The concept has the same meaning when predicated of each. For example, when someone says that an Oak is a tree, and an Elm is a tree, the word ‘tree’ has precisely the same meaning with reference to both the Oak and the Elm because the predication is making an identification that names the essence of each. Univocal predication does not have to name the essence of things. It can name an accident that is properly contained in each, having precisely the same meaning and precisely the same application to the things that are being compared. For example, when someone says that both Bob and Mary have short legs, the reference is to an attribute that each possesses, and the meaning is the same when predicated of each. This attribute is called an “accident” because it is accidental that these two have short legs. It is part of the nature of human beings to have legs, but it is not part of the nature of being human that one’s legs be short. If that were the case, then any person who does not have short legs would not be human.

In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas posed the following arguments against univocal predication. Again the quote is long, but it is necessary to include the whole so as to grasp the argument:

[2] An effect that does not receive a form specifically the same as that through which the agent acts cannot receive according to a univocal predication the name arising from that form. Thus, the heat generated by the sun and the sun itself are not called univocally hot. Now, the forms of the things God has made do not measure up to a specific likeness of the divine power; for the things that God has made receive in a divided and particular way that which in Him is found in a simple and universal way. It is evident, then, that nothing can be said univocally of God and other things.

[3] If, furthermore, an effect should measure up to the species of its cause, it will not receive the univocal predication of the name unless it receives the same specific form according to the same mode of being. For the house that is in the art of the maker is not univocally the same house that is in matter, for the form of the house does not have the same being in the two locations. Now, even if the rest of things were to receive a form that is absolutely the same as it is in God, yet they do not receive it according to the same mode of being. For, as is clear from what we have said, there is nothing in God that is not the divine being itself, which is not the case with other things. Nothing, therefore, can be predicated of God and other things univocally.

[4] Moreover, whatever is predicated of many things univocally is either a genus, a species, a difference, an accident, or a property. But, as we have shown, nothing is predicated of God as a genus or a difference; and thus neither is anything predicated as a definition, nor likewise as a species, which is constituted of genus and difference. Nor, as we have shown, can there be any accident in God, and therefore nothing is predicated of Him either as an accident or a

property, since property belongs to the genus of accidents. It remains, then, that nothing is predicated univocally of God and other things.

[5] Again, what is predicated of many things univocally is simpler than both of them, at least in concept. Now, there can be nothing simpler than God either in reality or in concept. Nothing, therefore, is predicated univocally of God and other things.

[6] Everything, likewise, that is predicated univocally of many things belongs through participation to each of the things of which it is predicated; for the species is said to participate in the genus and the individual in the species.

But nothing is said of God by participation, since whatever is participated is determined to the mode of that which is participated and is thus possessed in a partial way and not according to every mode of perfection. Nothing, therefore, can be predicated univocally of God and other things.

[7] Then, too, what is predicated of some things according to priority and posteriority is certainly not predicated univocally. For the prior is included in the definition of the posterior, as substance is included in the definition of accident according as an accident is a being. If, then, being were said univocally of substance and accident, substance would have to be included in the definition of being in so far as being is predicated of substance. But this is clearly impossible. Now nothing is predicated of God and creatures as though they were in the same order, but, rather, according to priority and posteriority. For all things are predicated of God essentially. For God is called being as being entity itself, and He is called good as being goodness itself. But in other beings predications are made by participation, as Socrates is said to be a man, not because he is humanity itself, but because he possesses humanity. It is impossible, therefore, that anything be predicated univocally of God and other things.¹⁶

¹⁶ S. Thomæ Aquinatis, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Taurini, Italia: Marietti, 1935), 1.32. “[2] Nam effectus qui non recipit formam secundum speciem similem ei per quam agens agit, nomen ab illa forma sumptum secundum univocam praedicationem recipere non potest: non enim univoce dicitur calidus ignis a sole generatus, et sol. Rerum quarum Deus est causa, formae ad speciem divinae virtutis non perveniunt: cum divisim et particulariter recipiant quod in Deo simpliciter et universaliter invenitur. Patet igitur quod de Deo et rebus aliis nihil univoce dici potest.

[3] Amplius. Si aliquis effectus ad speciem causae pertingat, praedicationem nominis univoce non consequetur nisi secundum eundem essendi modum eandem specie formam suscipiat: non enim univoce dicitur domus quae est in arte, et in materia, propter hoc quod forma domus habet esse dissimile utrobique. Res autem aliae, etiam si omnino similem formam consequerentur, non tamen consequuntur secundum eundem modum essendi: nam nihil est in Deo quod non sit ipsum esse divinum, ut ex dictis patet, quod in aliis rebus non accidit. Impossibile est igitur aliquid univoce de Deo et rebus aliis praedicari.

[4] Adhuc. Omne quod de pluribus univoce praedicatur, vel est genus, vel species, vel differentia, vel accidens aut proprium. De Deo autem nihil praedicatur ut genus nec ut differentia, ut supra ostensum est; et sic nec ut definitio, nec etiam ut species, quae ex genere et differentia constituitur. Nec aliquid ei accidere potest, ut supra demonstratum est: et ita nihil de eo praedicatur neque ut accidens neque ut proprium; nam proprium de genere accidentium est. Relinquitur igitur nihil de Deo et rebus aliis univoce praedicari.

[5] Item. Quod univoce de pluribus praedicatur, utroque illorum ad minus secundum intellectum simplicius est. Deo autem neque secundum rem neque secundum intellectum potest esse aliquid simplicius. Nihil igitur univoce de Deo et rebus aliis praedicatur.

[6] Amplius. Omne quod de pluribus praedicatur univoce, secundum participationem cuilibet eorum convenit de quo praedicatur: nam species participare dicitur genus, et individuum speciem. De Deo autem nihil dicitur per participationem: nam omne quod participatur determinatur ad modum participati, et sic partialiter habetur et non secundum omnem perfectionis modum. Oportet igitur nihil de Deo et rebus aliis univoce praedicari.

Because God is eternal being, and man has finite being, there is an infinite distance between God and man. Univocal predication on the part of man necessarily assumes univocal being. To predicate univocally of God, then, would make God finite and rob God of His transcendence. Some refer to God's holiness as His moral purity. The problem with this statement is, against what standard of morality would one judge that God is morally pure? There is no standard of morality outside of or above God's nature by which He can be judged. So, when we talk about morality, we cannot mean precisely the same thing with reference to God and to humans. Human morality is judged against God's nature, but God is not judged against anything outside Himself. Human morality is analogous to God's nature, but it is not the univocal to God's nature.

By univocal predication, Heiser attributes to God the characteristics derived from ANE myth. According to Heiser's methodology, God's attributes are the same as those of His creatures; God is a divine being, and there are "other divine beings." In Heiser's predication, the term 'divine' means the same thing when predicated of the created *elohim* and of God, who happens to be an uncreated *elohim*. This is univocal predication. Employing ANE myth as the paradigm for interpreting the biblical text as Heiser does necessarily issues in univocal predication of the characteristics of ANE mythological entities. Heiser's god is simply an ANE mythological being writ large.

No doubt it will be argued that I am interpreting the data according to my metaphysical assumptions, and this is most certainly true. But so is Heiser. In fact, so does everyone. It is not possible to interpret without doing so with one's metaphysical assumptions, whether the interpreter is aware of these or not. An example may help to make this clearer. In John 10, Jesus said, "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (Jn. 10:9).¹⁷ Now, is Jesus literally a door? Of course not. How do we know? Because it is the nature of a door to be an inanimate object, but it is the nature of a person to be animate. So, we know that Jesus is not literally a door in the physical sense because Jesus is a Person. However, when you are talking about the natures of things, you are engaging in metaphysical thinking. When you stop at a stop sign, and a large truck is speeding toward you, you do not pull out in front of the truck lest you get struck by the truck and perhaps injured or killed. You do not pull out in front of the truck because you believe that the truck is a real, physical object that has momentum, weight, solidity, etc. But belief in the existence of the truck is a metaphysical belief.

As Francesco Olgiati pointed out,

Whether the term "being" signifies the thing, the *res*, *essentia*, *quidditas* that is endowed with existence, or whether it means existence itself, — *actus essendi*, the act of existing, —

[7] Adhuc. Quod praedicatur de aliquibus secundum prius et posterius, certum est univoce non praedicari: nam prius in definitione posterioris includitur: sicut substantia in definitione accidentis secundum quod est ens. Si igitur diceretur univoce ens de substantia et accidente, oporteret quod substantia etiam poneretur in definitione entis secundum quod de substantia praedicatur. Quod patet esse impossibile. Nihil autem de Deo et rebus aliis praedicatur eodem ordine, sed secundum prius et posterius: cum de Deo omnia praedicentur essentialiter, dicitur enim ens quasi ipsa essentia, et bonus quasi ipsa bonitas; de aliis autem praedicationes fiunt per participationem, sicut Socrates dicitur homo non quia sit ipsa humanitas, sed humanitatem habens. Impossibile est igitur aliquid de Deo et rebus aliis univoce dici."

¹⁷ ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ θύρα· δι' ἐμοῦ ἐάν τις εἰσέλθῃ σωθήσεται καὶ εἰσελεύσεται καὶ ἐξελεύσεται καὶ νομὴν εὐρήσει (Jn. 10:9).

to speak of being in metaphysics is always tantamount to speaking of reality, that is, of that which exists or can exist.

The science of being, then, having gained the first principles of all being, is applied to every other branch of knowledge concerned with real being, actual or possible. Wherever reality exists, there metaphysics asserts its sway. It reaches out to all beings, and not even Natural Theology is possible outside of it, because God, too, is being, — indeed, He is the Supreme Being. It dominates all the sciences and mocks him who would pretend to repudiate it. In his commentary on the fourth book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, St. Thomas calls attention to the fact that metaphysics is a branch of knowledge indispensable even for those who would ignore or actually despise it. Unwittingly all men are constrained to occupy themselves with metaphysics. For metaphysics treats of reality and the fundamental principles of reality, that is, of being. Hence he who wished to withdraw from its influence, would commit a sort of intellectual suicide. He would have to say: "I am speaking, but I am not concerned with reality; I am merely amusing myself with chimeras." No one can be interested in the real and prescind from metaphysics, which investigates the supreme laws of the real.¹⁸

Heiser has his metaphysical assumptions that allow him to talk about God in univocal terms. But to present this as if it is simply a matter of reading the text at "face value" is, frankly, not honest.

Heiser has a bad hermeneutical methodology because he has a bad hermeneutic philosophy. This bad philosophy has led him to wrong conclusions. There have always been Christians who have tried to come up with some unique, novel, and revolutionary interpretations. Geisler gave two points of advice that are relevant here:

1. *Avoid the Desire to Become a Famous Scholar.* There seems to be an almost irresistible temptation among many scholars, particularly younger ones, to "make a name for themselves."

2. *Avoid the Temptation to Be Unique.* My second piece of advice is closely associated with the first. It is this: Avoid the desire to be unique. The temptation to this form of pride seems to be endemic to the higher academic process.¹⁹

Although Heiser attempts to put a novel spin on the concept, he is not the first to come up with the notion that God had a council of "divine beings." Similar concepts can be seen in Gnosticism, and Marcionism, and in other adaptations of basic Christian doctrines.

Why Does It Matter?

Philosophy is not something into which someone can simply choose not to engage. In their massive tome, Moreland and Craig assert, "Since philosophy is foundational to every discipline of

¹⁸ Francesco Olgiati, *The Key to the Study of St. Thomas*, trans. John S. Zyburia (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1925), 27–28.

¹⁹ Norman L. Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (March 1999), 15.

the university, philosophy is the most strategic discipline to be influenced for Christ.”²⁰ Even Heiser warns his readers against bad philosophy: “In my experience, Christians who get warm, fuzzy feelings about Marxism have a genuine concern for the poor, but then they filter the New Testament through a very skewed understanding of both the Bible and the philosophy of Karl Marx.”²¹ He has a short chapter in *Unfiltered* about the dangers of Marxist philosophy. It is painfully clear that Heiser did not actually understand Marxism, but he was certainly right to warn against it.

Marxism is not primarily a political theory or economic theory. In fact, it is a social and theological theory. Marx employed his dissertations on politics and economics as the means of expressing his social and theological theory. That Marxism is both a social and theological system is well expressed by Reinhold Niebuhr:

I have said that these writings of Marx and Engels on religion reveal the passion for empirical observation and analysis, shared by them with many moderns; moreover, here too are clues to that remarkable development of which many students have been made aware: of an irreligion transmuted into a new political religion, canonized precisely in the writings of Marx (and the later Lenin) as sacred scripture, and preached in notoriously practical and opportune ways as the principles for a revolutionary reformation of the social order according to an immutable dogma.²²

Marxism is not a by-gone or outdated philosophy. It is alive and well among evangelicals. It is alive and well because Christians have been taught that philosophy is to be avoided. Avoiding philosophy is a sure fire way to be seduced by bad philosophy. C. S. Lewis said, “Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.”²³

It is also painfully obvious that Heiser is not familiar with philosophy. His arguments about the species uniqueness of God shows his lack of knowledge of ontology and metaphysics. Claiming that God is ontologically distinct is the same as claiming that a cat is ontologically distinct from a dog. However, the cat and the dog are both in the category of animate beings. This is what Heiser is claiming about God. God is ontologically distinct from the “other gods,” but they are all in the category of supernatural beings. Claiming that God is distinct because He is uncreated does not help his case since in ANE literature makes similar claim about the gods.

²⁰ J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 2.

²¹ *Unfiltered*, 43.

²² Reinhold Niebuhr, “Introduction,” in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels On Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), viii.

²³ C. S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), 50.

CHAPTER 14

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Hermeneutics

Heiser presents his interpretations as being “straightforward,” “face value,” and “unfiltered.” Rather than “unfiltered,” Heiser’s interpretations are filtered through his own worldview and the lens of ANE mythology. Heiser assumes without justification that his interpretation of ANE mythology must be correct. For example, even though scholars have demonstrated that there is no single cosmological view among ANE literature, and that there simply is no definitive evidence that any ANE culture held to the cosmology as Heiser depicts it, Heiser continues to argue as if there was one cosmological meta-narrative in ANE literature.

Heiser employs various tactics to make the biblical text say what he needs it to say to support his always-already-present worldview. This is evident in the many logical fallacies he commits in his interpretations: the red herring fallacy, the fallacy of division, the intentional fallacy, the fallacy of poisoning the well, the fallacy of selective reporting, the fallacy of illegitimate totality transfer, to name a few. He frequently employs eisegesis to make the text say what he needs it to say. He misrepresents the text of the Bible and other sources.

Repeatedly Heiser claims to believe certain orthodox doctrines, but by his interpretations of the biblical text he modifies or denies the doctrine, either explicitly or implicitly. Another reviewer has put it succinctly: “*The Unseen Realm*, while offering some interesting theories, rests on a weak foundation: faulty exegesis, especially of Psalm 82 and related texts, speculation and connecting intertextual dots that are conjectural and unprovable, and interpretation of Scripture through the lens of ANE literature and mythology.”¹

Theology

Heiser has misunderstood the notion of a worldview. Although a worldview is that with which we view the world, it is not like a pair of glasses through which we view everything. There are many aspects of a worldview that are the same for everyone, in all places, in all cultures throughout all history. These include the self-evident, undeniable first principles of thought and being. There are other aspects of a worldview that are mutable. Heiser has argued that God did not demand that His chosen authors change their worldviews, but in fact He did. God commanded

¹ Gary E. Gilley, *The Unseen Realm, A Critique* (Volume 25, Issue 4, July/August 2019) <https://tottministries.org/the-unseen-realm-a-critique/?print=print>.

Abram to leave his country, his relatives, and his father's house, and to serve YHWH rather than other gods. In fact, God commands all humans to change their worldviews and to believe that He is and that He is the rewarder of those who seek Him.

Heiser misunderstood the nature of culture. Culture includes a group's shared practices, values, and beliefs. Heiser seems to think that a culture is something that a member cannot alter, or something that someone need not alter in order to serve God. But this is simply false. A person cannot continue in the beliefs, values, and practices of pagan culture in order to serve God. Paul taught that we are to put off the former way of life and put on the new man:

¹⁷ So I say this, and insist in the Lord, that you no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, being alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts. ¹⁹ Because they are callous, they have given themselves over to indecency for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. ²⁰ But you did not learn about Christ like this, ²¹ if indeed you heard about him and were taught in him, just as the truth is in Jesus. ²² You were taught with reference to your former way of life to lay aside the old man who is being corrupted in accordance with deceitful desires, ²³ to be renewed in the spirit of your mind, ²⁴ and to put on the new man who has been created in God's image—in righteousness and holiness that comes from truth (Eph. 4:17–24).²

It could not have been different for OT saints as for those to whom Paul is addressing. This would be especially the case for those whom God chose to be His instruments of revelation. As Paul declared, “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).³ A person cannot see the kingdom of God without believing this.

By setting the Bible in the context of his own interpretation of the ANE mythology, Heiser was inevitably led to the position that God is a temporal being who employs a council in His decision making process. By depicting God as changing His mind and employing discursive reasoning, Heiser denies God's immutability. By depicting God's plans as having failed, been derailed, and changed due to God's reaction to earthly events, Heiser denies God's sovereignty and providence. In spite of his protests to the contrary, Heiser's god is the god of ANE myth; not the God of orthodox Christian theology.

Heiser gives lip service to the doctrine of inerrancy, yet he convicts the biblical authors of error. Heiser refers to a statement made by Paul: “¹⁴ Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, ¹⁵ but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her

^{2 17} Τοῦτο οὖν λέγω καὶ μαρτύρομαι ἐν κυρίῳ, μηκέτι ὑμᾶς περιπατεῖν, καθὼς καὶ τὰ ἔθνη περιπατεῖ ἐν ματαιότητι τοῦ νοῦς αὐτῶν, ¹⁸ ἐσκοτωμένοι τῇ διανοίᾳ ὄντες, ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ θεοῦ διὰ τὴν ἄγνοιαν τὴν οὖσαν ἐν αὐτοῖς, διὰ τὴν πώρωσιν τῆς καρδίας αὐτῶν, ¹⁹ οἵτινες ἀπηληγότες ἑαυτοὺς παρέδωκαν τῇ ἀσελγείᾳ εἰς ἐργασίαν ἀκαθαρσίας πάσης ἐν πλεονεξίᾳ. ²⁰ ὑμεῖς δὲ οὐχ οὕτως ἐμάθετε τὸν Χριστόν, ²¹ εἰ γε αὐτὸν ἠκούσατε καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ ἐδιδάχθητε, καθὼς ἐστὶν ἀλήθεια ἐν τῷ Ἰησοῦ, ²² ἀποθέσθαι ὑμᾶς κατὰ τὴν προτέραν ἀναστροφὴν τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον τὸν φθειρόμενον κατὰ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας τῆς ἀπάτης, ²³ ἀνανεοῦσθαι δὲ τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ νοῦς ὑμῶν ²⁴ καὶ ἐνδύσασθαι τὸν καινὸν ἄνθρωπον τὸν κατὰ θεὸν κτισθέντα ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ καὶ ὁσιότητι τῆς ἀληθείας (Eph. 4:17–24).

³ εἰς γὰρ θεός, εἷς καὶ μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων ἄνθρωπος Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς (1 Tim. 2:5).

hair is given to her for a covering” (1 Cor. 11:14–15).⁴ Heiser argues that Paul is in error: “His statement is scientifically false. . . Paul is clearly in error in terms of his understanding of nature on this point (he’s a pre-scientific man).”⁵ It never seems to occur to Heiser that he simply does not understand Paul. Heiser is imposing upon the text his modern notion of what the word ‘nature’ means. Paul is not talking about “nature” in terms of Heiser’s modern, scientific view. Rather, Paul is talking about the nature of the case. Paul is saying that a man should not present his appearance in such a manner as to obscure the distinction between male and female. Because Heiser reads into the text his own point of view, he denies the inerrancy of the text.

By charging the biblical authors with error, Heiser is either claiming that the text is not the Word of God, or that God made an error. It is evident that Heiser believes the latter. To avoid such a conclusion, Heiser attempts to redefine the doctrine of inerrancy, which is a quite popular tactic among some Evangelicals today.

Heiser’s bad philosophy has also led him to make irrational assertions about the nature of God. He denies that God is immutable. He claims that God had to alter his plans, or change direction, or have a do-over. He presents God as having to react to the events and actions of others or being resisted causing God’s plans to fail. Heiser makes univocal predications of God by making God in the image of ANE gods. By putting God in the genus of *elohim* he depicts God as simply one god among the “other gods.” By depicting God as being involved in a decision making process, he has denied God’s eternity. Heiser’s claim that God is “species unique” violates the basic principles of metaphysics.

By thinking of God as one of the *elohim*, he has attempted to make it reasonable to be a polytheist. His focus on a “divine council” that advises God and participates in God’s decisions makes God simply the head of a pantheon of finite gods.

By charging Paul with error, or claiming that the biblical authors believed in a flat earth, Heiser has denied the doctrine of inerrancy. He attempts to redefine critical theological terms in order to present his beliefs as if they are still orthodox. Ultimately, Heiser’s entire presentation is, frankly, “not honest.” I would add only, in an adaptation of another’s words; Heiser’s body of work fills a much needed void. A summary conclusion of Heiser’s theology might best be captured in God’s statement to Job’s companions: “for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has” (Job 42:8).⁶ This is why it matters.

⁴ ¹⁴ οὐδὲ ἡ φύσις αὐτὴ διδάσκει ὑμᾶς ὅτι ἀνὴρ μὲν ἐὰν κομᾷ, ἀτιμία αὐτῷ ἐστίν, ¹⁵ γυνὴ δὲ ἐὰν κομᾷ, δόξα αὐτῇ ἐστίν; ὅτι ἡ κόμη ἀντὶ περιβολαίου δέδοται (1 Cor. 11:14–15).

⁵ Michael S. Heiser, “Pre-Scientific Worldview ‘Problem’ and Inerrancy.” Jun 20, 2008. <https://drmsb.com/pre-scientific-worldview-problem-and-inerrancy/>. Accessed 6/27/2024.

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כִּי לֹא דִבַּרְתֶּם אֵלַי בְּכֹנֶה כְּעַבְדִּי אִיּוֹב: (Job 42:8)

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