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BOOK REVIEW

Michael Heiser. *Demons: What the Bible Really Says about the Powers of Darkness*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020. xvii + 321 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-1-6835-9289-1. $16.99.

Michael Heiser is currently the executive director at Awakening School of Theology and Ministry in Jacksonville, Florida, and a former scholar-in-residence at Faithlife Corporation. While Heiser's two earlier works, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (2015) and *Supernatural: What the Bible Teaches about the Unseen World—and Why It Matters* (2015) covered a broad range of topics related to supernatural elements in the Bible, *Demons* is much more focused and functions as a follow-up to *Angels: What the Bible Says about God's Heavenly Host* (2018). In his introduction, Heiser laments that the average Christian's understanding of demons is built on presuppositions derived from church traditions rather than a "close study of the original Hebrew and Greek texts" (xv) in combination with their respective cultural contexts. *Demons*, along with Heiser's preceding publications, works to combat some of these erroneous assumptions while also providing a helpful starting point for further interest and research. Heiser's central premise is that there are three discernible divine rebellions in the Bible: the serpent in Gen 3, the sons of God who procreate with human women in Gen 6:2–4, and the divine "princes" whose rulership over the nations is mentioned in Dan 10.

Demons begins with an overview of the pertinent words and phrases used to describe malevolent spiritual forces in the Hebrew Bible (HB). Heiser casts a fairly wide net that includes some entries that other scholars might protest against, but he provides sufficient internal and external evidence that the powers he

discusses are best understood as malevolent supernatural beings. Heiser argues that they were seen as sinister supernatural forces who were closely connected to death; who brought death through the causation of disasters, illnesses, and general chaos; and who, despite being "members of God's heavenly host . . . have chosen to rebel against his will" (6). His conclusion is not that the HB is polytheistic, but that it promotes hierarchical henotheism. From here, Heiser goes on to examine how the Greek translators of the HB handle the various terms discussed previously. He shows that the translators of the Septuagint "transparently" cross the line from implying that beings like the sons of God are divine beings to explicitly stating that they are.

In section 2 Heiser explores how Second Temple Jewish texts expand upon and clarify ideas already present in the HB. The author argues that Second Temple demonology is neither an alien construction entirely born out of Zoroastrian and Greek influences nor mere fanciful speculation but is the natural evolution of themes and ideas already present in the HB combined with authors' fertile imaginations. One of the more noteworthy conclusions that Heiser comes to in this section is that the writers of the Second Temple period were perhaps more aware of the ancient Near Eastern context of the HB than most modern readers are; for instance, Heiser draws connections between the serpent of Gen 3, the Mesopotamian divine snake-guardian *kurību*, and the Hebrew *śĕrāpîm* to give context for why Second Temple-era authors believed the serpent to be a fallen member of God's inner court.

Chapters 5 and 6 draw out the implications of Heiser's interpretation of the sons of God in Gen 6 as divine beings. Modern interpretations of this passage tend to demythologize this text, but Heiser argues that the sons of God were indeed divine beings who rebelled against God to procreate with human women. What separates Heiser's view from pre-modern interpretations is his consideration of evidence from scholar Amar Annus's work on the *apkallu* of Mesopotamian flood narratives and *maṣṣarē*, "watchers," of the Akkadian flood narratives (Amar Annus, "On the Origin of the Watchers: A Comparative Study of the Antediluvian Wisdom in Mesopotamian and Jewish Traditions," *JSP* 19

[2010] 277–320). These “watchers” were the magically wise and powerful antediluvian ancestors of the kings of Mesopotamia. Heiser argues that Gen 6 is counter-propaganda against these “culture heroes” (122) of Mesopotamian myth.

Chapter 7 makes connections between a number of passages that suggest that there was a third divine rebellion among the “sons of God” who had been given authority to govern all nations except for Israel. Heiser argues that prior to their rebellion, these “lesser *elōhîm*” were originally given the task of administering the nations as intermediaries between God and humanity after God had severed direct ties with them but that following their rebellion, they were engaged in “sowing chaos in the nations” (151–52). Heiser shows that this belief is shared across much of the HB, including the tower of Babel narrative in Gen 11, the divvying of the nations in Deut 32:8, the divine council in Ps 82, and the national “princes” of Dan 10. Chapter 8 goes on to show how integral this notion was to Jewish literature of the Second Temple period.

In the third section of *Demons*, Heiser moves on to examine the New Testament’s demonology, starting with an overview of the various titles given to demonic beings and their cosmic roles and abilities. One key focus of these chapters is how the NT reflects its Second Temple background, which is both assumed and reinforced by most of the NT writers. In particular, Heiser demonstrates how the third rebellion of divine national rulers is an integral belief shared by most—if not all—writers of the NT.

In Heiser’s fourth and final section he shifts from the work and tone of a biblical theologian to that of a pastor in order to answer pre-emptively any lingering questions and debunk specific myths that he recognizes as widespread. Heiser counters a range of myths, from the scholarly notion that there is no belief in demons present in the OT to the more popular notion that demons can perceive human thoughts.

It is clear that Heiser has widely researched this topic: he displays an impressive aptitude for keeping several plates spinning simultaneously as he makes connections across both Testaments, a wide scope of intertestamental literature, and extrabiblical texts from the ancient Near East.

There are, however, a few connections, particularly with regards to darkness, death, and evil, that deserve some criticism: first, Heiser builds his argument for demons being connected to death on the conclusion that *ʾereṣ* is a term that is regularly used to refer to the underworld. The three verses Heiser provides are not sufficient to confirm that this is a common metaphor, and he relies too heavily on the assumption that elements in parallel lines in Hebrew poetry are equivocal. The rest of his evidence stems from material outside of the HB, and therefore does not prove that this view was necessarily held by the HB's writers. Second, since the realm of the dead is to be avoided, Heiser believes that the evil nature of these spirits is heightened by their connection to the realm of the dead. This assumes that death entities are inherently *morally* evil rather than just *functionally* evil. Heiser is correct in connecting the morally evil serpent in Gen 3 with the functional evil of death that he brings about, but Heiser does not show how other malevolent supernatural beings are particularly affiliated with death. My third criticism related to death and evil is a more personal grievance related to my forthcoming dissertation: Heiser regularly refers to malevolent beings as the "powers of darkness" who are contrasted against a light-aligned God. As my dissertation will clarify once it has been completed, darkness does indeed quite regularly represent death, but it is also used to describe God's holy presence and is not used as a metaphor for moral evil in the HB.

A more significant issue is his use of the word "demon" as a catch-all. Heiser admits that there is no term equivocal to "demon" in the HB, but he proceeds with "demon" nonetheless. Heiser notes that "evil spirit" is the predominant term used by pre-Christian Jewish authors (194)—long after his conclusions have been made. Heiser would have been better off using a less anachronistic and loaded term.

Where Heiser seems to struggle the most is in his heavy reliance on Second Temple interpretations of earlier texts. In his first chapter, there are a number of words and phrases that Heiser discusses that do not necessarily refer to demons in the original context, but are only later expanded upon by Second Temple era writers to include demonic associations. While Heiser finds

significant evidence for the third rebellion across both Testaments and in intertestamental literature, there is a paucity of evidence from the HB provided for the first and second rebellions. For Protestant readers in particular, the persuasiveness of Heiser's arguments rests considerably on whether or not the interpretive expansions of OT texts that are found in the so-called Apocrypha can be accepted as normative or at least not pure fiction.

Similarly, Heiser succeeds in sufficiently showing the development and acceptance of the first and third rebellions by the writers of the NT, but he does not show sufficient evidence that they also accepted the second rebellion of the "watchers." Heiser's use of Annus's work certainly helps strengthen his argument, but Heiser does not sufficiently demonstrate how or why the writer of the Book of the Watchers (1 En. 1–36) moved from counter-propaganda to metaphysics. Heiser concedes that Jewish writers in the Second Temple period were at times speculating about these rebellions and were not even consistent in how they separated these rebellions, a truth that casts doubt on the idea that these intertestamental texts can be accepted as accurate sources. Heiser says that such differences are "perfectly consistent with God's providential oversight in inspiration" (60), but this issue requires further discussion and argumentation in order to convince most Protestant readers. To say that the writers of the NT import some theology from Second Temple literature does not necessarily mean they give their full approval to all of it.

Overall, Heiser's book is certainly worth reading despite my misgivings. While I may remain not fully convinced of the stable development and NT acceptance of the first two rebellions, Heiser does make a rather compelling case for the third rebellion. He provides persuasive evidence of this rebellion being an idea that finds its origin in the OT, is developed rather than fabricated in the intertestamental period, and is then picked up by the authors of the NT. Moreover, Heiser points out a number of NT passages that appear to rely quite heavily on this cosmic geography.

Heiser casts a wide net with respect to his audience; when he does delve into the original languages, he provides enough information for those unfamiliar with biblical languages without

being distracting for those who have studied these languages. I would most certainly recommend this book to fellow biblical scholars—particularly to maintain the scholarly momentum that Heiser builds here. For pastors, this book could prove to be a valuable resource for offering correction against erroneous beliefs held by their congregations and even themselves, but these corrections come with the risk of potential errors that Heiser introduces. There might exist the temptation to skip to chapter 4 to grab the quick and easy-to-digest answers, but doing so would be at the reader's impoverishment. I would also recommend reading *Demons* at least in concert with *Unseen Realm* and *Angels* and at best in their order of publication, since there is some information that is handled in greater depth in Heiser's previous works. In conclusion, *Demons* explores, in a way that is accessible to all, a topic that is often misunderstood, abused, or ignored by scholars. While some of Heiser's conclusions are not sufficiently established, the questions he raises are nonetheless worth considering and developing further.

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