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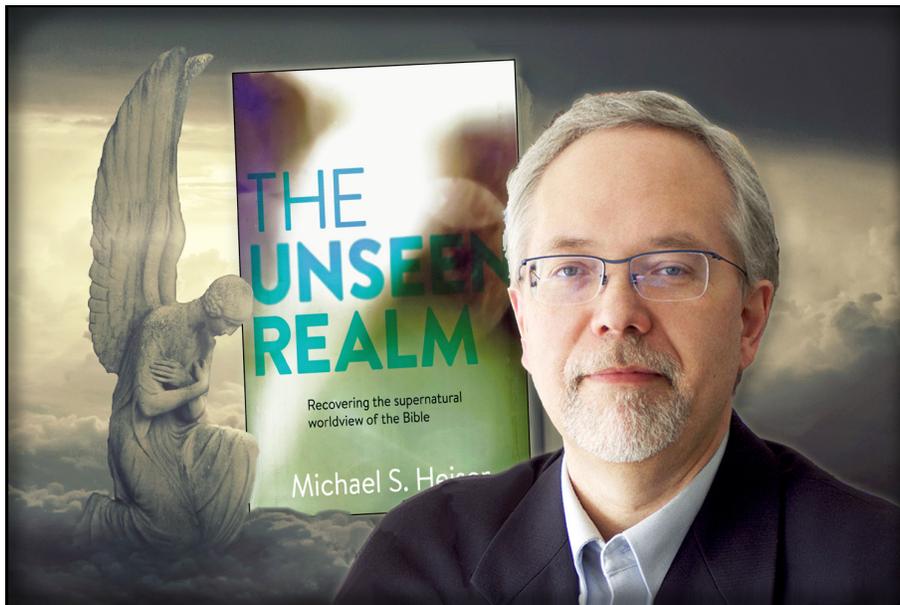
The Unseen Realm and Supernatural Worldview The Novel Interpretations and Pagan Myths of Michael Heiser

by Gary E. Gilley

Michael S. Heiser's view of Scripture and the supernatural realm has generated much attention within evangelical circles recently. He holds a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Semitic languages, is the Executive Director of the Awakening School of Theology, a team member of the AWKNG ministry at Celebration Church in Jacksonville, Fla., and is "Scholar-in-Residence" at Logos Bible Software. But what is even more significant is that he claims that he had discovered the key to understanding God and Scripture that had long been buried by the western world and unknown to the evangelical community. And his discovery comes with much fanfare by theology professors from prominent Bible colleges and seminaries. The accolades include:

"How was it possible that I had never seen that before? Dr. Heiser's survey of the complex reality of the supernatural world as the Scriptures portray it

*covers a subject that is strangely sidestepped. No one is going to agree with everything in his book, but the subject deserves careful study, and so does this book."*¹



"Michael Heiser has written an incredibly accessible and well-researched work on some notoriously thorny biblical passages. Heiser's work on the divine council has earned him respect in the scholarly community for years, and he has now made this available to all. Without a doubt, *The Unseen Realm* will encourage, (continues on page 13)

Inside this Issue:

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT TIBERIAS?	PAGE 2
BETHEL CHURCH UNSUCCESSFUL IN RAISING 2-YEAR-OLD	PAGE 3
THE FINAL JUDGMENT OF BELIEVERS	PAGE 4

Editorials

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT TIBERIAS?

I had been there numerous times, but did not realize what I was missing. Few do. I am talking about the city of Tiberias in Israel. The events that occurred there centuries ago still impact us greatly today. Not many know why. It is a largely unknown, amazing, and untold story.

Tiberias, Israel, does not seem that important of a city. After all, it is only mentioned once in Scripture: in John 6:23. Most Christians could tell you very little about it, yet Tiberias is at the core of what we believe about the Bible, its transmission, and apologetics.

How important could Tiberias be? After all, Jesus, as far as we know, never visited there. And it really does not mean a lot that the Sea of Galilee is sometimes called the Sea of Tiberias.

The city of Tiberias is on the southwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was built by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. Antipas made it the capital of the Galilee. The city's building project was launched around A.D. 17 and was completed around A.D. 22. It was named after the Roman Emperor Tiberius and was by and large a pagan city. The emperor expressed his thanks by building a palace in the city decorated with a golden roof. To ingratiate himself to the Jewish population, Emperor Tiberius also built a large synagogue. Historians

tell us that because the city was built on a cemetery it was shunned by religious Jews. Later, the ban was lifted, and the city declared clean, though the accounts conflict on how this occurred. Nevertheless, rabbinical innovations were created to overcome all contamination by the time the Palestinian Talmud was completed around the fifth century A.D.

In the sixteenth century A.D., the Jewish people developed the concept of the four holiest cities: Jerusalem, because the temple was there; Hebron, because it is the burial place of the Patriarchs; Safed because Kabbalistic scholarship was born there; and Tiberias, where the Talmud was composed and because it became the home of the Masoretes. A Jewish tradition said that the Messiah would arise from the Lake of Tiberias.

The Druze of Israel have built a religious center near Tiberias. They allege that Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, is buried there.

One of the big incentives for Jews and travelers to visit Tiberias today is the hot mineral springs. The springs have been modernized and enclosed in buildings and today are a spa resort with international fame. They draw many sick, lame, and infirm, as well as those with skin conditions. It follows that Jesus settled in Galilee not that far from Tiberias and encountered ailing people there. Jesus went where the needs were. He spent about two-thirds of His ministry around the Sea. The many healings confirmed His Messiahship.

(continues on page 21)

PERSONAL FREEDOM OUTREACH

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WHISTLEBLOWER ALLEGES \$100 BILLION MORMON SLUSH FUND

A complaint to the Internal Revenue Service charges that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has accumulated about \$100 billion that was meant for charitable purposes. A former investment manager who worked for Ensign Peak Advisors, which handles LDS church investments, filed a 74-page document with the IRS last fall. David Nielsen worked with his twin brother, Lars, in compiling the complaint.

According to *The Washington Post*, "The confidential document, received by the IRS on Nov. 21, accuses church leaders of misleading members — and possibly breaching federal tax rules — by stockpiling their surplus donations instead of using them for charitable works."

The complaint alleges that the LDS church receives nearly \$7 billion annually in donations from its members, and uses only \$6 billion to meet its yearly expenses. The remaining \$1 billion goes to Ensign to invest. The complaint estimates that the church's "portfolio has grown in value from \$12 billion in 1997, when Ensign was formed, to about \$100 billion today," the *Post* reported. The Niensens charge that Ensign has not used the money for any religious, educational, or charitable activities in 22 years.

"The church said the money was set aside for a rainy day," according to a news article in *The Western Journal*.

—MKG

REINHARD BONNKE DIES

Reinhard Bonnke, an evangelist who claimed to heal people, has died. A statement from his wife, Anni, announced his death and read, "He passed away peacefully, surrounded by his family, on December 7, 2019." He was 79.

According to *Charisma* magazine, "On Nov. 12, Bonnke posted to Facebook that he needed prayers after undergoing a right femur bone surgery operation. 'All has gone well so far, but now I have to add a few weeks of learning to walk again.' It is unclear whether complications from this operation contributed to his death."

In 1974, Bonnke founded Christ for All Nations, a mission organization that made him best known for his preaching and healing campaigns throughout Africa.

Today CfaN has nine offices in five continents, including the United States.

According to current CfaN president and CEO Daniel Kolenda, "All told, more than 79-million people made Christ their Lord as a result of Evangelist Bonnke's ministry." The ministry's website features a rolling counter indicating its "Salvation Decision Cards."

In addition to his assertion of widespread conversions, Bonnke made numerous claims of incredible healings that purportedly occurred at his services, including raising of the dead. In 2001, an HBO special examined several healings claimed by Bonnke that were clearly not healings at all. The documentary stated that in October of 1999, in the Nigerian city of Benin, 15 people were trampled to death at a Bonnke crusade. The following day a father returned with the body of his child killed in the stampede believing his daughter would be raised from the dead, but was kept from approaching Bonnke.

Throughout his life and ministry, Bonnke made close associations with prominent leaders of both the Word-Faith and signs and wonders movements, including C. Peter Wagner, John Wimber, Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, and the raucous revivals of Toronto and Pensacola.

—MKG

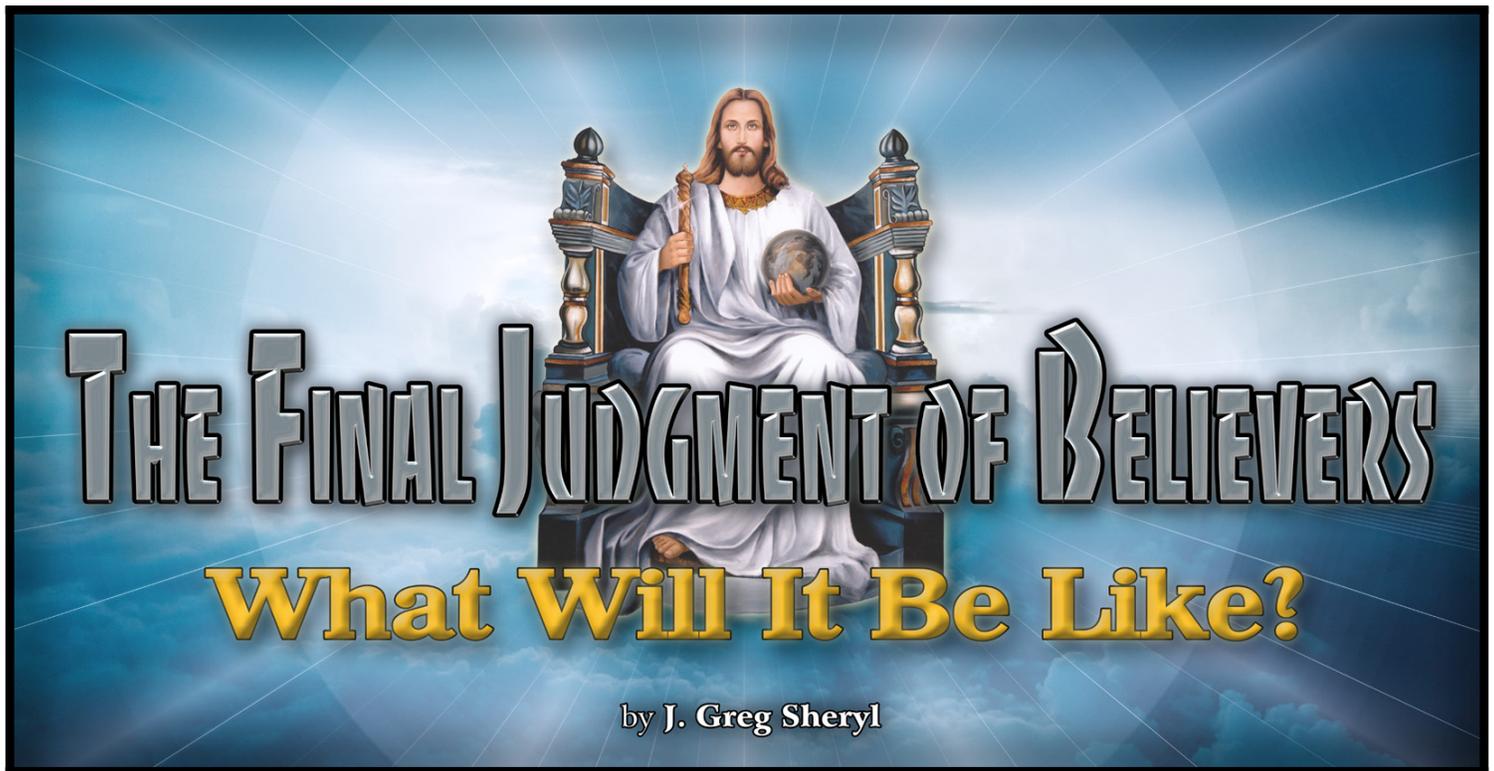
BETHEL CHURCH UNSUCCESSFUL IN RAISING 2-YEAR-OLD

Bethel Church in Redding, Calif., a church at the forefront of the modern-day signs and wonders movement, may have suffered another hit to its reputation. The church, under the direction of Bill and Beni Johnson and Kris Vallotton, has spawned what it calls the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry, which purports to train its students in the supernatural and miracles. One of the school's graduates, Tyler Johnson, says he "functions primarily in the spirit of revelation as well as healing." He also is the director of The Dead Raising Team, which says it has brought about 15 resurrections from the dead.

The boasts and beliefs of Bethel Church often produce false hope and tragic consequences. This was clearly evident last December when events at the church caught national attention.

On Dec. 14, Andrew and Kalley Heiligenthal's 2-year-old daughter, Olive Alayne, suddenly stopped

(continues on page 22)



The story is told of two little girls who were playing at one of the girl's home. The visiting girl opened a door to a room and saw an elderly woman inside reading her Bible. Her back was toward the girl. The visiting girl quickly shut the door and asked her friend, "Who is that woman and what is she doing?" Her friend said, "That's my grandmother. She's cramming for finals!"

The late apologist Walter Martin once wrote, "Of all the doctrines taught in the Bible, none is declared with more consistency and fervor than the doctrine of divine judgment."¹

Hebrews 6:1-3 says, "Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits."

So, we see that the doctrine of eternal judgment, which is here associated with the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead is, along with that

associated doctrine, a foundational Christian teaching.

Dr. Robert Lightner of Dallas Theological Seminary wrote:

"From the beginning of the Christian era belief in future divine judgment was associated with belief in the certainty of the resurrection of all men. The dead are to be raised so that they might be judged. The Apostles' Creed, [which is part of the] earliest apostolic testimony about Christ, puts it succinctly when it states that Christ 'shall come to judge the quick [i.e., the living] and the dead.'"

"That all the unregenerate will one day appear before God in judgment is clear from John's record of his revelation. He saw the dead, small and great, standing before God and judged by God; if their names were not found in the book of life, they were cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11-15)."

"Scripture is equally clear in its prophecy of the certainty of believers standing personally

before God to give an account to him. The apostle Paul reminded the Christians in Corinth and Rome of this. He told the Corinthians that all believers must one day appear before 'the judgment seat of Christ' (2 Cor. 5:10; cf. 1 Cor. 3:13-15). The Roman Christians were given the same teaching (Rom. 14:10-12)."²

Hebrews 9:27 says, "it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment."

THE GOOD NEWS

Scripture describes several judgments, but those who have trusted in Jesus as Savior will not face a judgment of condemnation. He died on the Cross to bring forgiveness and everlasting fellowship with the Father to believers.

John 3:16-18 says:

"For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be

saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

Later, in John 5:24, the apostle wrote these additional words from Jesus:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."

And Paul wrote in Romans 8:1, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (NASB).

GOD, THE JUDGE OF ALL

Judging is central to God's activities as revealed throughout the Scriptures. In Genesis, Abraham recognized that God was a judge. In speaking about the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham pleaded:

"Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25)

Elsewhere, the Lord is referred to as "God the Judge of all" (Hebrews 12:23). The Old Testament book of Psalms contains many references to God as a judge:

"Let the heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is Judge" (Psalm 50:6).

"Arise, O God, judge the earth; for You shall inherit all nations" (Psalm 82:8).

"For He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with His truth" (Psalm 96:13).

"For He is coming to judge the earth. With righteousness He shall judge the world, and the peoples with equity" (Psalm 98:9).

And in the New Testament Paul calls the Lord "the righteous Judge" (2 Timothy 4:8).

GOD WILL JUDGE CHRISTIANS

Even though it is a reality that believers will not face a judgment of condemnation by the Lord, it does not mean that believers won't face *any kind* of judgment.

The Bible says that God *will* judge Christians. This motivated the Apostle Paul to keep a clear conscience before God and men. He wrote in Acts 24:15-16:

"I have hope in God ... that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men."

Paul instructed the Christians at Rome saying that believers shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. He wrote:

"For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: 'As I live, says the LORD, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:7-12).

Likewise, Paul told the Corinthians about the judgment seat:

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10, NASB).

A RIGHTEOUS, FAIR, AND IMPARTIAL JUDGE

The Scriptures show that the Lord is a righteous judge. The Scriptures also reveal that God is an impartial judge. For instance, in Deuteronomy 10:17 we read:

"For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe."

Likewise, when Peter went to the house of Cornelius to preach the Gospel to the people assembled there, the first words that Peter spoke to them were about God's impartiality, "Then Peter opened his mouth and said: 'In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality'" (Acts 10:34).

In discussing God's judgment, Paul told the Romans, "For there is no partiality with God" (Romans 2:11). And, in his first letter, the Apostle Peter explained, "the Father ... without partiality judges according to each one's work" (1 Peter 1:17).

Thus, we see that God is righteous, and that He will judge people righteously, fairly, and impartially.

JESUS IS THE JUDGE

The Bible tells us that judgment has been delegated to the Son, the Lord Jesus. In Matthew 25:31-33 Jesus divides the nations into two categories, the sheep and the goats. Jesus begins that section of Scripture by saying:

"When the Son of man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left."

He welcomes the sheep into eternal life, but sends the goats away into everlasting punishment.

In John 5:22-23, Jesus says, "For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all

should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him."

Also, in Acts 17:30-31, Paul told the men of Athens, "God ... now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

GOD'S JUDGMENTS: HOW MANY, WHAT, AND WHEN?

Before suggesting where and when the judgment of believers might take place, let's briefly mention some of the various judgments mentioned in Scripture.

Walter Martin has noted, "At the Cross the Lord Jesus Christ was judged guilty in our stead."³ Martin then paraphrases 2 Corinthians 5:21 as, "God made Him to be sin for us, He who knew no sin, that we might be made as righteous as God by faith in Him."⁴ Martin adds, "In that sense the sins of the believers were judged in Christ. As a result, the believer is justified fully before God and has passed from death to life."⁵

Martin also wrote, "Although some Bible scholars list from three to twelve judgments, many of these judgments are merely phases or parts of judgments."⁶ In the same chapter where Martin said this, he listed six judgments,⁷ beginning with God's judgment of His Son on our behalf on the Cross.

Of course, God's judgment of Jesus on the Cross was a past judgment, which is applied to a person when they trust in Jesus as their Savior.

Robert Lightner stated:

"The agreement among evangelicals about the certainty of future divine judgment is not marred by their differences over the order of events. Their high view of God and His Word brings them all to the conclusion that divine judgment is ahead. True, God does judge sin in the present, but

Scripture makes clear that these judgments of God experienced in the here and now are not final."⁸

He then lists four future judgments, along with the supporting Scriptures:

1. The unregenerate (Revelation 20:11-15).⁹
2. Christian believers (1 Corinthians 3:13-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10-12).¹⁰
3. The devil and his demons (demons being fallen angels) (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:10).¹¹
4. Other wicked angels (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6).¹²

Lightner then observes:

"Regardless of denominational affiliation, or lack of it, and in spite of whether one believes there will be one final judgment or whether there will be a number of different judgments separated by time, all evangelicals believe in future divine judgment. They take the words of the psalmist seriously and even literally and therefore as yet unfulfilled when he said, '... for He is coming to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with righteousness, And the peoples with His truth' (Ps. 96:13)."¹³

One Bible dictionary notes:

"Although one general judgment, (into which several other judgments are merged), is often assumed by Christian theologians whose biblical interpretation is influenced by amillennial presuppositions, a thoughtful, inductive study of Scripture reveals a minimum of seven major divine judgments and as many as twelve well-defined judgments, depending on where one begins."¹⁴

This reference work also states:

"The task of identifying and hermeneutically supporting the validity of these well-defined judgments has fallen to dispensational premillennialists. [John F.] Walvoord, for example, lists seven major divine judgments. [Herman A.] Hoyt lists twelve

categories of final judgment. [Lewis Sperry] Chafer holds that there are eight 'well-defined judgments presented by the Word of God.' And [Charles C.] Ryrie lists seven future judgments. However one chooses to describe or enumerate the various judgments, God has revealed in His Word, a responsible, literal interpretation of Scripture unequivocally teaching multiple judgment events that take place at different times in God's eschatological program."¹⁵

Concerning God's future judgments, not all take place at the same time or in the same place. For instance, in the book of Revelation, after the beast and the false prophet have had a short but devastatingly prolific career, we are told of their eternal punishment prior to the devil's own eternal punishment:

"Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone" (Revelation 19:20).

Following this, Satan is bound for 1,000 years, after which he is released for a short time. During this brief period of freedom, he leads one final campaign. Following this, we read this short description of his final judgment, "The devil ... was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10).

And apparently, at some point following the devil's judgment there is a judgment of people at the so-called "Great White Throne Judgment":

"Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books

were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:11-15).

Regarding this "Great White Throne Judgment," one theological source has stated:

"Most scholars see the Great White Throne Judgment as a general judgment of the entire human race, righteous and unrighteous alike. The statement in 20:13 that the sea, death, and Hades give up their dead for judgment appears to affirm the idea of a universal judgment. No one will escape resurrection and judgment. Judgment is based on the evidence in 'the books,' probably referring to a person's words and actions during their lifetime (Rev. 20:12; cf. Dan. 7:10). People are 'judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books' (Rev. 20:12-13)."¹⁶

This source further explains:

"Along with 'the books,' another book is opened — the 'book of life' (Rev. 20:12, 15). The book of life image appears in 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27, always as a record of salvation or redemption. Those whose names are written in the book of life will be given eternal life, while those whose names are not included will suffer condemnation. ... If Christians do appear before the great white throne (a matter of debate), they can take comfort in knowing that their names are written in the book of life."¹⁷

Because, as mentioned above, there is debate over whether the Great

White Throne Judgment constitutes a general judgment of both believers and the unregenerate, some believe that the Great White Throne Judgment will only be a judgment of unbelievers.

As this same source mentions elsewhere:

"If Christians do appear at the Great White Throne, the outcome of that judgment will be life. ... What is beyond debate is that Christians will appear before the judgment seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-15; Heb. 10:30) to give an account for their deeds."¹⁸

Bible teacher and pastor Mark Hitchcock, who adheres to a pretribulation rapture of the church,¹⁹ lists what he considers to be seven future divine judgments.²⁰ These are:

1. Judgment seat of Christ for church-age believers²¹ (1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10) which takes place between the rapture of the church and Christ's second coming.
2. Old Testament saints (Daniel 12:1-3) which occurs at the end of the tribulation²² and at Christ's second coming.
3. Tribulation saints²³ (Revelation 20:4-6) which occurs at the same time as #2 above.
4. Living Jews (Ezekiel 20:34-38) which occurs at the same time as #2 above.
5. Living Gentiles (Matthew 25:31-46) which occurs at the same time as #2 above.
6. Satan and fallen angels (Revelation 20:10) which occurs at the end of the millennium.²⁴
7. Unsaved people (Revelation 20:11-15) which occurs at the same time as #6 above.

All these are judgments that truly show God is "the Judge of all" (Hebrews 12:23). While all these divine judgments are important, this article's primary concern is with the final judgment of those who have put their faith in Jesus. Therefore, we will consider four aspects in relation to the Lord's future judgment of *believers*:

1. The Judgment (or *Bema*) Seat of Christ.
2. The basis of the believer's judgment.
3. The nature of the believer's rewards.
4. Five suggestions on how to be prepared for God's judgment.

THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

We noted earlier that both Romans 14:7-12 and 2 Corinthians 5:10 speak of Christians appearing "before the judgment seat of Christ."²⁵ The word used here for "judgment seat" is the Greek word *bema*. The *bema* "was a raised platform mounted by steps and sometimes furnished with a seat, used by officials in addressing an assembly or making pronouncements, often on judicial matters. The judgment seat was a common item in Greco-Roman culture, often located in the *agora*, the public square or marketplace in the center of a city. Use of the term in reference to Christ's judgment would be familiar to Paul's 1st century readers."²⁶

Mark Hitchcock, explains:

"The term *bema* was used in three main ways in ancient Greek culture. First, it referred to a judicial tribunal where judges dispensed justice. This is the main use of *bema* in the New Testament, ... Second, it was used of the raised platform at athletic contests in the Olympics of that day. The winning athletes received their awards at the platform. During his second missionary journey, Paul established his ministry headquarters in Corinth for 18 months. While there, he taught the Word of God. In the city of Isthmia, a few miles from Corinth, the Isthmian Games were held every other year in the spring. Paul would certainly have visited those games while he was in Corinth working as a tent-maker and sharing the gospel. Paul's frequent use of athletic and awards imagery in his messages probably came from observing those games. The third main use of the term *bema* was in connec-

tion with the raised stage or stand in a military camp, where medals and rewards were conferred on soldiers who exhibited heroism and bravery in battle. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, used illustrations that would help his audience to better understand the heavenly *bema* or divine tribunal at the end of the age.²⁷

Jesus was brought before Pilate's *bema*, or judgment seat (Matthew 27:19; John 19:13). In Caesarea, Paul was brought before Festus' *bema* in Acts 25:6, 10, 17. And Herod Agrippa I made an oration from a *bema* to the people of Tyre and Sidon (Acts 12:21). Also see Acts 18:12, 16-17, for additional uses of the term.²⁸

Regarding when believers will appear before the judgment seat of Christ, the *Dictionary of Biblical Prophecy and End Times* states:

"Paul does not specify the exact time of this judgment. The main options include: (1) immediately after the believer's death, (2) following the rapture of the church, and (3) at the return of Christ. Only one thing can be said for sure: believers will be judged when they appear before Christ."²⁹

THE BASIS OF THE BELIEVER'S JUDGMENT

The first basis of judgment is our deeds. The Bible clearly declares that everyone, both believer and unbeliever, will be judged regarding their deeds. The difference between believers and unbelievers being judged regarding their deeds is that believers will not be judged for condemnation, but for receiving or not receiving — perhaps even forfeiting — rewards for their deeds. Christians will not be judged to determine whether they will go to heaven or hell. That was determined when they put their trust in Jesus. However, when those who have not trusted in Christ as their Savior are judged, their judgment will demonstrate that they *deserve* the condemnation they will receive.

Scripture demonstrates that God will repay *all* people, believer and

unbeliever, according to their deeds. In the Old Testament, we read:

"You render to each one according to his work" (Psalm 62:12).

"If you say, 'Surely we did not know this,' does not He who weighs the hearts consider it? He who keeps your soul, does He not know it? And will He not render to each man according to his deeds?" (Proverbs 24:12)

"I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings" (Jeremiah 17:10).

So, here the Lord says that He searches the heart, He tests the mind, and He will repay everyone according to his deeds.

The fact that God will judge people according to their deeds is also taught in the New Testament. For instance, the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 2:6-11:

"[God] 'will render to each one according to his deeds': eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness — indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God."

Notice again, in the passage above, that God judges impartially, as mentioned earlier.

In Revelation 22:12, Jesus said, "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work."

So, we again see that Jesus will reward everyone according to their deeds.

A final Scripture that illustrates the truth that Jesus will reward us accord-

ing to our deeds is the parable of the talents that Jesus gave in Matthew 25:14-30. Recall there how the master rewarded those servants who were good stewards over what the master had entrusted to them; and how the servant who buried his talent was cast out into outer darkness. So, in that parable, we also see the master repaying the servants according to what they *did* with what he had entrusted to them.

A special case of judgment according to one's deeds — one that appears to apply to those who perform certain ministries in the church, such as evangelism, teaching, or preaching — is found in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, which says:

"For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."

This passage is commonly used to teach that *all* Christians will be rewarded according to the quality of their service for the Lord in this life. It is possible that all Christians will, indeed, be judged by the quality of their service for Christ and it would seem to be a reasonable idea. However, while this may be what happens at the judgment for all Christians, it appears to go beyond what the passage says. Rather, the judgment spoken of here seems to be a judgment of works related to those who perform certain ministries in connection with the church (evangelism, teaching, or preaching, as noted above). The apostle speaks of those who would build on the foundation of Christ. Thus, in its context, this passage would seem to apply to those who serve the church in a way that would

involve them in trying to build on the foundation of Christ.

The second basis of judgment is our words. Also, we are told, the Lord will judge both believers and unbelievers according to their words. Jesus taught this in Matthew 12:36-37. He said:

“But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

And, no doubt, the admonition of James would find a fitting place here. James warns:

“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (James 3:1).

According to Scripture, teaching is not only a great honor because it is a gift from God (Romans 12:7; Ephesians 4:11), but also because of the eternal significance that comes with it. Therefore, the teacher has a strict responsibility to hold to the highest standard of sound doctrine and proper interpretation (hermeneutics). Sadly, many Bible teachers — even some popular ones — often have a confused understanding of Scripture thereby misleading their followers with aberrant (and even heretical) theology. James’ rebuke is a reminder that *words* which are out of harmony with *the Word* can and will affect the lives of those who give heed to these teachers, and that those teachers will be strictly judged.

While it is the obligation of every Christian to be a Berean and check out what is being taught (Acts 17:11), it is also the obligation of every teacher to be cautious and careful. He (or she) is to be diligent in being sufficiently prepared and knowledgeable in the Word to teach. Remember, not all have the Holy Spirit’s gift of teaching (Romans 12:3-8).

The third basis of judgment is our motives. There seems to be one other basis of the judgment of believers in the Scriptures: that of our motives. In 1 Corinthians 4:5, Paul indicates that

the revelation of peoples’ motives will occur at the judgment:

“Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God” (NASB).

In its context, this Scripture seems to indicate that God will reveal motives and judge believers according to their motives, which He alone knows. As a result, the Scripture tells us here not to judge before the Lord returns, for He will reveal those motives at that time, and will reward the person accordingly.

Concerning our motives, the Scriptures elsewhere tell us, “the LORD searches all hearts and understands all the intent of the thoughts” (1 Chronicles 28:9; cf. Psalm 33:13-15).

So, God knows the motives of people, and why they do the things they do. For instance, in Matthew 6:1-18, the Lord warned us not to be like the hypocrites who give to the poor, pray, and fast, all to be seen and glorified by men. This shows that the Lord not only saw *what* these people did, which had the outward appearance of being good things, but also *why* they did it: to be seen and applauded by men. Jesus tells us that such people already have received their reward and would have nothing further coming to them as a reward from the Lord.

Mark Hitchcock, while not being dogmatic about it, believes that the judgment of Christians will be public, to at least some extent. He states, “I believe the Lord’s evaluation will take place in the presence of others, including angels. After all, Jesus promised to confess his followers before them (Luke 12:8).”³⁰

He also cites Luke 19:24 in support of this view;³¹ and to these Scriptures could be added 1 Corinthians 4:5 and 1 Timothy 5:24-25. Hitchcock, however, states something reassuring, in connection with the judgment seat of Christ, when he says:

“How much of our lives will be under review at the judgment seat? Will our entire life be subject to examination, or only the portion after we became believers? Scripture is clear that we will only be judged for what we’ve done and how we’ve lived after our conversion to Christ. The apostle Paul anticipated a favorable outcome at the judgment seat, yet he had imprisoned, persecuted, and even murdered believers before his conversion to Christ.”³²

Hitchcock then cites the apostle’s words in 2 Timothy 4:6-8 as support.³³

So, the Scriptures indicate that believers and unbelievers will be judged according to their deeds and their words. And the motives of at least believers will also be judged. The main difference, and perhaps the only difference, between God’s judgment of believers and that of unbelievers is not the basis of judgment (deeds, words, and motives), but the fact that believers will not be judged for condemnation, as unbelievers will be. Rather, believers will be judged to see what rewards they will receive and what rewards they will forfeit.

By contrast, those who have not trusted in Christ as their Savior will be judged with a judgment of condemnation, because they have rejected God’s only provision for our salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ. However, the degree of their punishment in hell will be determined by their deeds and words, and possibly also by their motives.

The Scriptures appear to teach degrees of suffering in hell as was noted by the late Dr. Robert Morey in his book *Death and the Afterlife*. Referencing Matthew 11:21-24, Morey states:

“In this passage, Christ reveals that there will be degrees of punishment in hell. While all sinners in hell will be perfectly miserable, they will not be equally miserable. In determining the degree of punishment in hell, our Lord takes into account the words (Matt. 12:26, 37) and

works (Matt. 16:27; Rev. 20:11-15; 22:12) of sinners."³⁴

In addition to citing the Matthew 11 passage as teaching individual degrees of suffering in hell, Morey also cites Luke 12:47, 48; Matthew 10:15; Hebrews 10:29; John 15:22; and Romans 2:3-6 as either teaching or implying this.³⁵ He states, "According to Christ, some sinners will receive greater torment than others. Since there will be degrees of punishment, God's justice will be revealed."³⁶

THE NATURE OF THE BELIEVER'S REWARDS

It is natural to inquire what the nature of the believer's rewards will be. Hitchcock has stated:

"Although the full nature of eternal rewards is something we will never fully understand here on Earth, we can discern a few basic elements of these rewards based on what we read in Scripture."³⁷

In his book, *Heavenly Rewards*, Hitchcock lists and describes the following rewards and their Scripture references:

1. Praise and commendation from the Lord (1 Corinthians 4:5; Matthew 25:21, 23).³⁸
2. Co-ruling with Christ (2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 3:21; 5:10; 22:5; Luke 19:17-19; 1 Corinthians 6:2-3).³⁹
3. Privileges and honors⁴⁰ including "crowns" (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 2 Timothy 4:7-8;⁴¹ James 1:12; Revelation 2:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; Philippians 4:1; 1 Peter 5:1-4)⁴² and having the light and glory of God shine through us for all eternity (Daniel 12:2-3; Matthew 13:43).⁴³

Regarding this glory of God shining through us, Hitchcock states:

"No one will experience a lack of fullness or feel incomplete. One way to express this thought is that everyone's cup in heaven will be full, but some cups will be larger than others. Some will possess a greater capacity and capability to glorify the Lord."⁴⁴

The Scripture indicates that believers can lose rewards. As Hitchcock notes, "The Bible is clear that rewards can be lost or forfeited."⁴⁵ Some Scriptures Hitchcock offers in support of this include: 2 John 8; Revelation 3:11; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; and 2 Timothy 2:5.⁴⁶ Regarding the loss of rewards, Hitchcock cites Bible teacher Woodrow Kroll:

"We should never conceive of the loss of rewards as a repossession. God does not take back something he has already awarded to us. At the heavenly bema, we do not suddenly have a quantity of rewards ripped from our hands by the righteous Judge. We are not stripped of rewards as an erring soldier is stripped of his stripes. Not at all ... Loss of reward is not like handing back a trophy that was mistakenly given to you. It's not returning something you earned. It's forfeiting a reward that you could have earned but failed to do so."⁴⁷

And Hitchcock reminds us:

"Once again, we must remember that while rewards can be lost, salvation can never be forfeited (John 10:27-30; Romans 8:28-30, 35-39; Philippians 1:6). Eternal life is not fifty or one hundred years in duration. Eternal life is eternal — it can never be lost. Every believer is a child of God. We can be disinherited of rewards, but we can never be 'de-sonned.'"⁴⁸

There may, indeed, be some regrets at the judgment seat of Christ, as we realize that we could have done more, or been more, for Christ, or received greater reward. After all, we read in Revelation 21:4: "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

Might not some of those tears that God will wipe away come from our time at the judgment seat of Christ, when we see what was, and what might have been, in our lives? Hitchcock states:

"Employing a helpful illustration, Samuel Hoyt strikes an excellent balance between the remorse and rejoicing believers will experience at the *bema* judgment: 'The judgment seat of Christ might be compared to a commencement ceremony. At graduation there is some measure of disappointment and remorse that one did not do better and work harder. However, at such an event the overwhelming emotion is joy, not remorse. The graduates do not leave the auditorium weeping because they did not earn better grades. Rather, they are thankful that they have been graduated, and they are grateful for what they did achieve. To overdo the sorrow aspect of the judgment seat of Christ is to make heaven hell. To underdo the sorrow aspect is to make faithfulness inconsequential.'"⁴⁹

HOW TO PREPARE FOR GOD'S JUDGMENT

Some of this may have stimulated ideas as to how to be prepared for God's judgment. Thus, the five suggestions that follow are not an exhaustive list of how a believer might be prepared for God's judgment.⁵⁰

First, the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) indicates that we may have responsibility and authority in the next world, depending on our use or neglect in this life of whatever gifts that God has given us. Thus, one way to prepare for your future judgment is to find out and use whatever spiritual gift or gifts that God has given you for His glory and for the building up of His body, the church. In 1 Peter 4:10-11, we read:

"As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen."

Therefore, find your God-given gift or gifts, and use them for His glory, for the good of others, and for the good of His people.

Second, we can prepare for the final judgment by keeping a good conscience. The Apostle Paul, in particular, models this for us in various passages of Scripture.⁵¹ For instance, when Paul stood before the governor Felix, he told Felix in Acts 24:15-16:

“I have hope in God ... that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.”

Paul also told his spiritual son Timothy to keep “faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith” (1 Timothy 1:19, NASB). Later, he told Timothy, “I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did” (2 Timothy 1:3).

In Acts 23:1, we read, “Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, ‘Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.’” This is a challenging Scripture. We remember that Paul persecuted the church. However, based on what he said here, he evidently was doing so with a clear conscience.

Paul clearly believed in the value and the necessity of keeping a good conscience, partly so that he wouldn’t make shipwreck of his faith and partly because he knew that he would one day face the Lord for judgment. So, to be prepared for the judgment, let us imitate Paul by keeping a good conscience before God and men.

Third, another way to prepare for judgment is to be engaged in doing good deeds. In Titus 2:13-14, Paul wrote, “our great God and Savior Jesus Christ ... gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.”

In Titus 3:8, Paul said, “This is a faithful saying, and these things I

want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men.”

And Hebrews 13:16 says, “But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”

Fourth, we are to be prepared for the final judgment by abiding in Jesus. In 1 John 2:28, we read, “And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming.”

John exhorts us to abide in Jesus so that we will be confident, and not be ashamed at His coming. In John 15:1-8, Jesus said that we can’t bear *any* fruit unless we abide in Him who is the true Vine. However, if we abide in Him, we will bear much fruit. And He said that if we bear much fruit, the Father is glorified.

Concerning abiding in Jesus, Charles Ryrie wrote:

“But what about the branches that are bearing more fruit? The Father is not finished or satisfied with them. He longs that they bear much fruit, and the path to that goal is abiding or remaining in Christ (John 15:4-10). What does it mean to abide in Christ? In simplest terms, it means to keep His commandments. The Lord says that in [John 15] verse 10,⁵² and John reiterates it in 1 John 3:24.⁵³ Such a definition makes sense, for the more we obey Him the more we remain in Him. When we disobey, we remove rather than remain. The one who keeps God’s Word will bear much fruit simply because he is doing God’s will as he comes to learn it from the Word.”⁵⁴

Fifth, our last suggestion on how to be prepared for our final judgment is to practice living the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are found in Matthew 5:3-12. At least some of the Beatitudes express obtaining rewards in the life to come.

CONCLUSION

Church Age believers — those who have trusted in Christ as Savior from the time of His first coming until their departure to be with Christ (through death or the rapture) — will one day stand before Jesus to be judged for how they have lived. Jesus will be the Judge. The Scriptures, however, reveal that believers will be judged not for condemnation, but to see whether their works, words, and motives will be rewarded or not.

Bible teacher William W. Orr wrote something noteworthy about the Christian’s death:

“The essence of a Christian’s death is that of a graduation. Life has been a school. Lessons have been learned. Much attention has been paid to study. Examinations have been given, but all is now past. In the perfect will of God, a believer has attained the experience and knowledge of important truths. Now comes the day of his graduation. He will be promoted to life — the exceedingly abundant life.”⁵⁵

It seems fitting to close this article with this story recounted by Mark Hitchcock:

“After serving as a missionary for 40 years in Africa, Henry C. Morrison became sick and had to return to America. As the great ocean liner docked in New York Harbor, there was a large crowd gathered to welcome home another passenger on that boat. Morrison watched as President Theodore Roosevelt received a grand welcome-home party after his African safari. Resentment seized Henry Morrison and he turned to God in anger. ‘I have come back home after all this time and service to the church and there is no one, not even one person, here to welcome me home.’ Then a still, small voice spoke to Morrison and said, ‘Henry — you’re not home yet.’”⁵⁶

And neither are we. But one day we will be. Let’s prepare for that day,

when we will stand before Jesus, Who will judge us for what we have done with our lives during the brief time that we were here.

Endnotes:

1. Walter R. Martin, *Essential Christianity*. Santa Ana, Calif.: Vision House, 1980, pg. 103.

2. Robert P. Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1995, pg. 255.

3. *Essential Christianity*, op. cit., pg. 105.

4. Ibid. The NKJV translation of 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "He [i.e., God] made Him [i.e., Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him [i.e., Jesus]."

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., pp. 105-108.

8. Robert Lightner, *Last Days Handbook*. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997, pg. 67.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., pp. 67-68.

11. Ibid., pg. 68. Lightner here notes Revelation 20:10, which mentions that the beast (commonly known as the Antichrist) and the false prophet have preceded the devil into the lake of fire. Because the beast and the false prophet are already in the lake of fire would seem to constitute a separate judgment, even though there is no record of them standing before God to be judged. The fact that they are thrown into the lake of fire in Revelation 19:20 would constitute a judgment, despite the apparent lack of a judicial proceeding prior to their experiencing eternal punishment.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., pg. 69, ellipsis in original.

14. David R. Nicholas in Mal Couch, general editor, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1996, s.v., "Judgments, Various," pg. 225.

15. Ibid.

16. J. Daniel Hays, J. Scott Duvall, C. Marvin Pate, *Dictionary of Biblical Prophecy and End Times*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007, s.v., "Great White Throne Judgment," pg. 195.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., s.v., "Last Judgment," pg. 257.

19. The pretribulation rapture of the church refers to the belief that Jesus will return in the clouds and "snatch away" (i.e., rapture) those who have believed in Him, from the time of His first coming until that time (i.e., "church-age believers"). They will be taken from the earth to be with Him in heaven during an unprecedented time of horror and anguish upon the earth (called the tribulation or the Great Tribulation). Following this time of tribulation upon the earth, Jesus will

return to the earth, which is the Second Coming of Christ. This is a popular view of the end times among contemporary Evangelicals, although it is far from universally accepted by all Evangelicals.

20. Mark Hitchcock, *Heavenly Rewards*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 2019, pg. 151. The information below is taken from the chart that Hitchcock has on this page.

21. Church-age believers are those believers who live between the first coming of Christ and the rapture of the church.

22. The tribulation (or the Great Tribulation) is a period of unprecedented trials and anguish taking place upon the earth, immediately preceding Christ's Second Coming to the earth.

23. The phrase "Tribulation saints" refers to those who have become Christians on earth during the time of the tribulation (or the Great Tribulation).

24. According to the pretribulation view of end times, this is the millennium, a 1,000-year period of Christ ruling on the earth from Jerusalem after His Second Coming. Other Christian end-time views understand the millennium differently. I heartily recommend Lightner's *Last Days Handbook*, op. cit., for understanding the various evangelical views of the end times. Also the helpful pamphlet, *Four Views of the End Times*, published by Rose Publishing, surveys the four primary eschatological beliefs that have been the most widely accepted in the church: historical premillennialism, amillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, and postmillennialism. The pamphlet was written by Timothy Paul Jones, professor and associate vice president at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

25. Many Bible translations of Romans 14:10, including the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the English Standard Version (ESV), have "God" instead of "Christ" in this verse.

26. *The NET Bible*. Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C., 2005, pg. 2255, from study note 16 on 2 Corinthians 5:10, italic in original.

27. *Heavenly Rewards*, op. cit., pp. 35-36, italics in original.

28. J.D. Douglas, Merrill C. Tenney, editors; revised by Moises Silva, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011, s.v., "judgment seat," pg. 791. All the examples and Scripture references above are from this dictionary entry on the cited page number.

29. *Dictionary of Biblical Prophecy and End Times*, op. cit., s.v., "Judgment Seat of Christ," pg. 236.

30. *Heavenly Rewards*, op. cit., pg. 70.

31. Ibid., pp. 70-71.

32. Ibid., pg. 73.

33. Ibid., pp. 73-74.

34. Robert A. Morey, *Death and the After-*

life. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984, pp. 153, cf. pg. 250. While Morey cites the verses as "Matt. 12:26, 37," the reference should actually be Matthew 12:36, 37.

35. Ibid., pp. 153-154.

36. Ibid., pg. 154.

37. *Heavenly Rewards*, op. cit., pg. 76.

38. Ibid., pp. 76-77.

39. Ibid., pp. 77-81.

40. Ibid., pp. 81-88.

41. Ibid., pp. 82-83. While Hitchcock cites the verses as "1 Timothy 4:7-8," the reference should actually be 2 Timothy 4:7-8.

42. Ibid., pp. 84-85.

43. Ibid., pp. 87-88.

44. Ibid., pg. 88.

45. Ibid., pg. 59.

46. Ibid., pp. 59-62.

47. Ibid., pg. 60, ellipsis in original. Hitchcock here references Woodrow Kroll, *Facing Your Final Job Review: The Judgment Seat of Christ, Salvation, and Eternal Rewards*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2008, pp. 123-124.

48. *Heavenly Rewards*, op. cit., pg. 59.

49. Ibid., pg. 69, italics in original, quoting from Samuel L. Hoyt, "The Negative Aspects of the Christian's Judgment," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June 1980, pg. 131.

50. For the reader who is interested in more information and further exposition on God's judgment of believers and how to be prepared for it (including rewards for believers), I recommend Hitchcock's excellent, comprehensive volume, *Heavenly Rewards*.

51. The Apostle Paul wasn't the only one in Scripture who wrote of the importance of keeping a good conscience. Peter, for instance, also wrote of the importance of having a good conscience in 1 Peter 3:16. And the author of Hebrews clearly understood the importance of having a clear conscience in Hebrews 13:18.

52. "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10).

53. "Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us" (1 John 3:24).

54. Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1997, pg. 49.

55. William W. Orr, *The First Five Minutes After Death*. Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1973, pg. 29.

56. *Heavenly Rewards*, op. cit., pg. 141, referencing "Not Now But Later," the weekly devotional of Philip De Courcy for July 7, 2015, from Know the Truth website. Accessed at: www.ktt.org/resources/truth-matters/not-now-later.

correct, and challenge many of our views on the spiritual realms revealed in the Bible — showing us the reality of things unseen!”²

And:

“This is a ‘big’ book in the best sense of the term. It is big in its scope and in its depth of analysis. Michael Heiser is a scholar who knows Scripture intimately in its ancient cultural context. All — scholars, clergy, and laypeople — who read this profound and accessible book will grow in their understanding of both the Old and New Testaments, particularly as their eyes are opened to the Bible’s ‘unseen world.’”³

So, what does Heiser teach and how concerned should the discerning Christian be?

It all began when Heiser was examining Psalm 82:1, which states, “God stands in the congregation of the mighty; He judges among the gods.” From that verse, the key he says he discovered was: “*The God of the Old Testament was part of an assembly — a pantheon — of other gods.*”⁴ In his book, *The Unseen Realm, Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, Heiser cites the verse from the Lexham English Bible,⁵ which reads: “God [*elohim*] stands in the divine assembly; he administers judgment in the midst of the gods [*elohim*].”⁶

As Heiser tried to interpret the meaning of this verse, his view apparently received little support from conservative theologians. So, he found it necessary to look beyond evangelical scholarship which had, he believed, ignored his newly discovered key. Heiser tells his readers:

“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 maintain-

ing 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.”⁷

In the process, Heiser scrapped his former reliance on systematic theology, along with creeds, confessions, and denominational preferences that had filtered out and rejected his new discovery,⁸ and went about putting the pieces together himself. He writes:

“We need to lay our theological systems aside, answer these questions like an ancient Israelite would have, and embrace the results. ... It’s time to peel those layers away.”⁹

In essence, Heiser, like so many others recently, believes he has discovered truth that virtually everyone else has missed. Others, who are at least somewhat supportive of his thesis, are not primarily from the evangelical sphere but are scholars — a term he falls back on repeatedly — from theologically liberal circles. Who these “scholars” are and what they believe is unknown to this writer. Nevertheless, Heiser assures us:

“I still believe in the uniqueness of the God of the Bible. I still embrace the deity of Christ.”¹⁰

The word “still” seems unnecessary and should leave one deeply concerned as to where Heiser may land in his theological understanding, taking others with him. But for now, his goal is for all who accept his ideas “to be able to see [the Bible] like ancient Israelites or first-century Jews saw it, to perceive and consider it as they would have. I want *their* supernatural worldview in *your* head.”¹¹ If we do this, he assures us, “*You’ll never be able to look at your Bible the same way again.*”¹²

Before delving into his main thesis, or itemizing the details, it is useful to understand that Heiser believes the supernatural worldview of the ancient biblical writers has been papered over by the western worldview of the post-Enlightenment mindset along with a modern ignorance of the ancient Near East way of understanding

reality. Heiser seeks to pull away from the modern means of processing life and restore the lens he believes the biblical writers used.

At the heart of his discussion is what he terms the divine council composed of *elohim*, or gods. How the *elohim* should be understood, and who the gods are that the pagan nations worshipped, is at the heart of his discussion. Heiser believes that the gods exist, not as taught in polytheism, but as created *elohim* (or gods) assigned by Yahweh to rule over the nations. In time, many of the gods rebelled and sought to pollute humans under their authority.

As will be seen below, while Heiser offers some insights worth consideration, there are numerous holes in his arguments. And even if his overall concepts proved to be correct, one wonders how it matters in a practical sense. The concern here is that in elevating the *elohim*, Heiser lowers the true *Elohim* in the process. Now, on to a more detailed analysis wrapped around two prominent worldviews Heiser believes he has detected in Scripture.

THE DIVINE COUNCIL WORLDVIEW

A divine council worldview teaches that the “gods” or *elohim* in Psalm 82 are divine beings who apparently have a higher level of responsibility than angels, who are primarily messengers. These “gods” are consistently called “divine” throughout Heiser’s book without any real definition.

“Divine” in standard English dictionaries, as well as common use, references deity and not something that was created, such as people or even angels. If an author wants to use a word in an atypical fashion, his readers would expect a definition indicating his esoteric use. This Heiser does not do. Clearly, Heiser presents Yahweh as the supreme God, the Creator of all the other gods.¹³

Still, to see these beings as divine, or in some sense gods, is problematic. He believes that God created a divine family but never says when.¹⁴ He

dismisses the common interpretation of Psalm 82, and its New Testament counterpart found in John 10:34. Heiser admits that most agree that Jesus said that these *elohim* were men.¹⁵ But Heiser rejects the consensus view and claims these texts reveal that Yahweh established a divine council, which takes an active role in His decision-making process. In other words, this divine council counsels God.¹⁶

Based upon this perceived worldview, Heiser seems to find the divine council scattered throughout Scripture. For example, the “us” in Genesis 1:26, almost universally understood by conservative Bible students as teaching plurality within the Godhead and communication within the Trinity, is really a discussion, Heiser claims, among members of the divine council:

“Many Bible readers note the plural pronouns (*us; our*) with curiosity. They might suggest that the plurals refer to the Trinity, but technical research in Hebrew grammar and exegesis has shown that the Trinity is not a coherent explanation. The solution is much more straightforward, one that an ancient Israelite would have readily discerned. What we have is a single person (God) addressing a group — the members of his divine council.”¹⁷

In addition, Heiser asserts that when Yahweh made humans in His image, He also made them in the image of the divine council beings, who are also made in the image of God.¹⁸ Although this is never specifically stated or implied in Scripture, and at no point in the Bible are any created beings except humans said to be made in God’s image. Heiser sees the divine council functioning and giving God counsel in the “unseen realm,” while God’s people form God’s human, non-divine council on earth.¹⁹

Applying these ideas in the eternal state gets more complicated. Heiser sees believers being made divine and joining the divine council in the un-

seen realm.²⁰ Again we must wrestle with the undefined “divine.” In what sense will humans be made divine? Will they become angels or other heavenly beings? Nothing in Scripture teaches such. Will they be made immortal? People are already immortal in that, once born, they will never cease to exist. Will they become demigods or even gods? Certainly not. The Bible indicates that humans made in the image of God are uniquely physical in substance.

While heavenly beings are spirits (Hebrews 1:4), men and women are created with physical bodies and will live eternally, both physically and spiritually (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Therefore, exactly how do physical beings link up with spiritual beings to form a single divine council in the eternal state and for what purpose? Heiser offers neither convincing biblical support for a combined divine council nor a reason why such a council is needed in eternity future.

LIFE IN EDEN

Heiser believes the divine council sat and ruled in Eden before the fall and thus for a time the “gods” lived among humans (Adam and Eve). He conjectures that it was God’s design for humankind to expand Eden, bringing God’s glory and perfection to the rest of the earth.²¹ Of course, this would mean that God’s physical creation, apart from Eden, was flawed and therefore dependent upon Adam and Eve to bring it to perfection²² and “advancing God’s kingdom rule,”²³ which He apparently did not have yet.

Every component of this theory has substantial problems. God could not create flawed material and then pronounce it good. Heiser has no basis on which to say Adam and Eve were commissioned to bring this supposedly flawed creation to perfection. The same could be said of his assertion that the rest of the universe outside of Eden needed to be brought under the rule of God and His kingdom. The first couple was directed to subdue the earth (Genesis 1:26-28), but it is a huge and scriptur-

ally unsupported leap to conclude that the earth was flawed prior to sin’s corruption and needed to be perfected by people.

The picture given in Genesis is that God made all things good; nothing was flawed; nothing needed to be brought to perfection via the efforts of Adam and Eve, and God’s kingdom rule was firmly in place. With the entrance of rebellion, corruption, and sin into the universe, the need to restore the kingdom becomes the major theme of Scripture. The kingdom restoration would come about through the redemptive work of Christ, not through the efforts of either divine or human councils.

Heiser theorizes, again without biblical warrant, that had humanity not fallen it would have been glorified and become part of the divine council, ruling on earth together as one council.²⁴ Recovering what Adam lost, the kingdom of God becomes “the real focus of the Bible,” Heiser asserts.²⁵ At this point a number of collaborative threads are tied together and become points of emphasis and part of the supporting cast for Heiser’s thesis.

ANCIENT NEAR EAST HERMENEUTICS

First, it becomes clear that ancient Near East (ANE) mythology guides and dominates Heiser’s interpretations. This is the faulty hermeneutical lens Heiser wants to restore to the modern church. Throughout the book, the reader is introduced to a variety of teachings including:

The ANE pagans believed in a divine council structure much like Yahweh’s. Heiser tells us, “At Ugarit²⁶ the divine council had three levels: the highest authority (El, who did most of his ruling through a coruling vizier, Baal), the ‘sons of El,’ and messenger gods (*mal’akim*).”²⁷

These pagan myths taught that an Ugaritic council met in a garden similar to Eden:

“The council of El met on a mountain or lush garden. These were not different places. Rather,

the same place was described in two different ways. The abode of El had an abundant water supply, as it was situated at the 'source of the two rivers' in the 'midst of the fountains of the double-deep.'"28

ANE people believed animals could speak, which is why Eve was not surprised when the serpent spoke to her. Heiser writes:

"One of the things that always bothered me about the [Genesis 3] story was why Eve wasn't scared witless when the serpent spoke to her. There's no indication that she thought the incident unusual. ... The truth is that an ancient reader would not have expected Eve to be frightened. Given the context — she was in Eden, the realm of Yahweh and his *elohim* council — it would have been clear that she was conversing with a divine being."29

An understanding of Genesis 6 — which will be examined later — is partially based on the ANE worldview. Here, Heiser maintains:

"Genesis 6:1-4, too, has deep Mesopotamian roots that, until very recently, have not been fully recognized or appreciated. ... Genesis 6:1-4 is a polemic; it is a literary and theological effort to undermine the credibility of Mesopotamian gods and other aspects of that culture's worldview. Biblical writers do this frequently. The strategy often involves borrowing lines and motifs from the literature of the target civilization to articulate correct theology about Yahweh and to show contempt for other gods. Genesis 6:1-4 is a case study in this technique."30

The divine council is composed of beings called Watchers, drawn from intertestamental literature, not Scripture. In a footnote, Heiser says:

"The well-known texts of 1 Enoch have the offenders of Gen 6 as divine (the sons of God are called Watchers in 1 Enoch, a

term that, as our next chapter shows, derives from a Mesopotamian context)."31

And Heiser further adds, "The divine transgression before the flood is retold in several Jewish texts from the intertestamental period. At least one has the divine offenders [i.e., Watchers] coming to earth to 'fix' the mess that was humankind — to provide direction and leadership through their knowledge. They were trying to help, but once they assumed flesh, they failed to resist its urges. The more common version of events, one with a more sinister flavor, is found in 1 Enoch 6-11."32

Because some Mesopotamian myths claimed a divine council of 70, so too does Yahweh: "It is interesting to note that the number of the nations in Gen 10 is seventy ... This is precisely the number of the sons of El in the divine council at Ugarit."33

The idea that Israelite kings possessed a quasi-divine essence and were called sons of God is drawn not from the Old Testament narrative, but from the model set by ANE kings. Heiser declares:

"I noted that Israelite kingship possessed a quasi-divine flavor. This was common throughout the ancient Near East — civilizations believed that kingship was instituted by the gods, and therefore the king was a descendant of the gods. What that meant and how it worked varied. In Israel's case, the human king was chosen or adopted into the role of the 'son of God' to carry out Yahweh's rule."34

Because ANE pagans believed demons resided in the desert so, of course, does Israel. Heiser proposes:

"Azazel is regarded as the name of a demon in the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient Jewish books. ... The Old Testament itself does not state that Azazel was a demon. Scholars have, however, connected the name to Mot, the god of death. The identification of the term with a demon may also derive from

cosmic geography and an association of the wilderness with the forces of chaos, which are hostile to God. This would make sense on several levels, as the desert would not only be a place forbidding to life but, as ground outside the camp of Israel and Yahweh, the source of life, would have a clear association with chaos."35

Prophecy must be interpreted via an ANE worldview. Here Heiser claims:

"Many scholars and Bible students have proposed all sorts of things for interpreting what the Bible says about end times, but anything approximating precision is not possible. The reason for this is straightforward. Old Testament prophecy for the messianic solution to the salvation of humanity and restoration of Eden was deliberately cryptic. So it is with prophecy yet awaiting fulfillment. The biblical text is riddled with ambiguities that undermine the certainty of modern eschatological systems. The New Testament writers who speak about prophetic fulfillments *didn't* always interpret Old Testament literally. Much is communicated through metaphor framed by an ancient Near Eastern worldview. Consequently, our modern expectations about how a given prophecy will 'work' are inherently insecure."36

The ANE "divine council plays an important role," namely that, "The scriptural pattern is that, when God prepares to act in strategic ways that propel his kingdom forward, the divine council is part of that decision making. The council is the vehicle through which God issues his decrees."37

And, finally, Heiser enlists a "New Testament specialist in the book of Revelation" to inform his readers that, "The focus of the throne vision is God enthroned in his heavenly court surrounded by a variety of angelic beings or lesser deities (angels, archangels, seraphim, cherubim) who function as courtiers. All such descriptions of

God enthroned in the midst of his heavenly court are based on the ancient conception of the divine council or assembly found in Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and Phoenicia as well as in Israel."³⁸

Heiser assures us that most people wouldn't pick up on these clues unless, like he, they knew Hebrew and were informed of the ANE worldview.³⁹ No wonder he is the first to put this puzzle together. He apparently has knowledge and information that others do not have — at least that is what he would have his readers believe.

SATAN AND DEMONS

Heiser's view of Satan takes several twists. He interprets Isaiah 14⁴⁰ and Ezekiel 28⁴¹ to describe the fall of the devil, however his fall took place while he lived with the divine council in the Garden of Eden and his penalty was to be expelled from the garden to the underworld.⁴²

Heiser theorizes that the serpent who deceived Eve was living in Eden as a member in good standing of God's divine council until he became displeased with God's decision to create humanity and give them dominion over the earth. In an act of defiance, he decides to sabotage God's plan and is identified as "a malcontent from within Yahweh's council" and "the divine rebel" and in the process was expelled from both the divine council and Eden.⁴³

Heiser does not see what he calls "the *satan*" in Job 1-2 as a villain and he is apparently not the same spirit found in Eden. Instead, the *satan* is a member in good standing of God's divine council who is simply doing a job assigned to him by God.⁴⁴ At some point in the Job narrative, he went rogue. This should not surprise the reader of Scripture, Heiser thinks, for based on the words of Eliphaz in Job 4:14-19, any member of the divine council is corruptible and none can be trusted, because they always have the free will to rebel at any time.⁴⁵

In support of this theory, Heiser turns to Genesis 6.⁴⁶ Here he argues that "sons of God" in the text are

divine creatures — by his definition — who defected and cohabited with human women, producing the Nephilim, or giants, of Scripture and legend.⁴⁷ While such an interpretation is debated within evangelical scholarship, Heiser stakes out two positions that are more problematic and move beyond evangelical orthodoxy.

First, as already mentioned, at any time other angels and members of the divine council could choose to rebel. And such rebellion could happen throughout eternity future. If true, then the same could be applied to redeemed humans who too could fall away at any time, even from their glorified state. That is because of Heiser's view of free will, the second problematic position under this heading. Free will demands its own category.

FREE WILL AND RISK

Heiser argues that, "without genuine free will, imagers [divine or human] cannot truly represent God."⁴⁸ Therefore, even "*being in the presence of God is no guarantee that free-will beings will never stray or act out of self-will.*"⁴⁹ By contrast, conservative theologians understand Scripture to teach that both human and angelic beings were given a time of testing. Many angelic beings failed the test and fell with Satan. Adam and Eve failed their test as well and introduced sin and corruption to the human race and to creation by extension. Most believe that these unique times are now concluded for the "elect" angels and redeemed humanity.

It is a frightening thought, and without any biblical base whatsoever, to teach that the redeemed could at any point in eternity choose to sin and lose their heavenly position. While free will is viable, none of those who pass the "tests" will ever choose to rebel because their wills have been regenerated and they are kept by the power and love of Christ (1 Peter 1:3-5; Romans 8:28-39).

However, Heiser disagrees and believes God took a risk — and continues to do so — by creating creatures

with free will.⁵⁰ This is the language of the unorthodox doctrine of Open Theism, which attempts to solve the free will/divine sovereignty tension by claiming God neither controls the future nor is able to fully know the future. Thus, He takes a risk as to what choices His creatures might make, and they often make choices that are outside the sovereign will and control of God. He states his theological point thus: "*Since foreknowledge doesn't require predestination, foreknown events that happen may or may not have been predestined.*"⁵¹

Falling back on ANE support, he writes, "An ancient Israelite would have embraced this parsing of foreknowledge, predestination, sovereignty, and free will. He would not have been encumbered by a theological tradition."⁵² In other words, ancient Jews would be Open Theists because they would not have been hampered by systematic or biblical theology. This is a tragic dismissal of careful theological engagement by conservative Bible scholars over the centuries.

THE NEPHILIM

The Nephilim are another major concern for Heiser. The Nephilim of Genesis 6 are seen as offspring of rebellious divine beings who have reproduced with human women.⁵³ But how are the Nephilim, who lived after the flood (Numbers 13:33), to be explained? Heiser sees two options and neither is biblically defensible.

First is the possibility that the flood was localized and not worldwide.⁵⁴ This flies in the face of conservative scholarship and biblical language, which proclaims a worldwide flood. The second alternative, and the one which better fits Heiser's thesis, is that the same type of "behavior described in Genesis 6:1-4 happened again (or continued to happen) after the flood, producing other Nephilim."⁵⁵ Nothing of this sort is recorded in Scripture and so, at best, this second option is conjecture.

However, one of these alternatives is necessary for Heiser's theory that descendants of the Nephilim were the

Anakim, a people descended from the Nephilim who were spawned by rival divine beings.⁵⁶ It was the Anakim, Heiser believes, not the Canaanites, who Joshua and Israel came to destroy. Unfortunately, the Canaanites were collateral damage.⁵⁷ The necessity for this hypothesis becomes clearer when Heiser's second worldview is understood.

DEUTERONOMY 32 WORLDVIEW

In review, the divine council worldview maintains that Yahweh is an *Elohim* (God) who has created other *elohim* (gods), divine creatures who are members of His divine council.⁵⁸ These divine beings form not just a puppet board, Heiser believes, but actually give Yahweh counsel, are a part of the Lord's decision-making process, and are made in the image of God as humans are. Heiser sums up his divine council worldview:

"God's Edenic vision began with his announcement that humankind was his image. Yahweh had divine sons; he would also have a human family. Genesis told us that God had a divine council of imagers who represented his authority in the unseen realm and participated in his rule. It also showed us that God planned a mirror-council on earth, this time composed of human imagers. These two family-administrations were together in his presence. Heaven had come to earth at Eden. Humanity was charged with extending the earthly presence and rule of God throughout the whole earth. God wanted to live and rule with all his children in his new creation."⁵⁹

To the divine council worldview Heiser adds another, which he calls "The Deuteronomy 32 Worldview" — also described as a "cosmic-geographical perspective"⁶⁰ — based on Deuteronomy 32:8-9, which reads:

"When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the

number of the children of Israel. For the LORD's portion is His people; Jacob is the place of His inheritance."

The idea is that the nations outside of Israel, which constituted Yahweh's inheritance, "were placed under the authority of members of Yahweh's divine council."⁶¹ These lesser gods at some point — Heiser does not know when or how or why — became corrupt⁶² and established battle lines between themselves and God over control of the planet — "a cosmic turf war."⁶³ Heiser clarifies his views which parallel the worldview of ancient pagans: "The notion that different nations were allotted to different gods or heavenly beings was widespread in the ancient world."⁶⁴ Because the ANE pagans held such views, Heiser concludes that God's divine scheme would mirror them:

"The incident of Babel and God's decision to disinherit the nations drew up the battle lines for a cosmic turf war for the planet. The corruption of the *elohim* sons of God set over the nations meant that Yahweh's vision of a global Eden would be met with divine force. Every inch outside Israel would be contested, and Israel itself was fair game for hostile conquest. The gods would not surrender their inheritances back to Yahweh; he would have to reclaim them. God would take the first step in that campaign immediately after Babel."⁶⁵

The Deuteronomy 32 worldview has a number of features, all of which are troubling.

UNHOLY GROUND

In the Old Testament, only Israel would be under the direct rule of Yahweh. All other nations and geographical territories were handed over to the corrupt *elohim*. Thus only the land of Israel was holy ground. The Lord was content for a time in this arrangement, but the gods were not and they sought to destroy Israel. For Israel to venture beyond the borders of the Holy Land was to enter into the

rival gods' territory with unpleasant consequences.

One example Heiser offers was sending the scapegoat into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement. By sending the goat into the wilderness, the sins of the Israelites were being banished outside of Israel. The land of Israel was holy and "Sin had to be 'transported' to where evil belonged — the territory outside Israel, under the control of gods set over the pagan nations."⁶⁶ But there is more.

Because the word "scapegoat" (Leviticus 16:8) could actually be a proper name (Azazel), and because some nonbiblical ancient literature speaks of an Azazel as a demon in the desert, and the pagans associated Azazel with Mot, the god of death, Heiser concludes that Azazel was the god of the desert to which the scapegoat was banished.⁶⁷ The important point to note is that none of this is actually drawn directly from Scripture, but is a patchwork of potential and questionable clues taken from biblical and non-biblical sources coupled with ANE mythology.

It aligns with Heiser's Deuteronomy 32 worldview, but is not part of biblical revelation. This kind of connecting the circumstantial dots is more akin to conspiracy theorists than to biblical exegetes.

RESTORATION OF THE KINGDOM

The picture should be coming clear by now that Heiser sees the kingdom of God as "the real focus of the Bible"⁶⁸ which, in all fairness, is true of many evangelical scholars. But Heiser provides some troubling twists to his theories. For example, as we have seen, Yahweh, according to Heiser, established a beachhead for the kingdom in Eden, which in essence became His home. There the divine beings lived alongside human beings. Adam and Eve were given the task of expanding the kingdom to the rest of the planet, but when they failed their mandate a new plan had to be developed.

Complicating things was the rebellion and accompanying corruption of

many within the divine council, who subsequently cohabitated with mortal females and produced a mixed race of human/divine beings known as the Nephilim. God chooses to destroy this polluted race with a flood, along with the vast majority of the human race it had influenced for evil.

Heiser believes that some of the Nephilim either survived the flood, or the events of Genesis were repeated by another set of divine beings who later also chose to defy God and produce offspring with humans again. From these relationships, a race of people known as the Anakim would inhabit Canaan.

The Lord chose, with the counsel of His divine council, to deal with these issues by taking steps to wrestle the world out of the control of evil *elohim* and start the process of establishing His kingdom on earth by the calling of Abraham. Through Abraham, Yahweh would form a people (Israel) who would be given a "holy" land to possess. All other territories on earth were controlled by evil *elohim*, but the Lord was now staking out His territory and placing His people in a holy land as His kingdom people. But for this kingdom to take root Israel would first have to eradicate the Anakim.

Under the leadership of Joshua, this campaign had a good beginning but ultimately failed. Rather than eliminating the Anakim and establishing a holy kingdom, the people of Israel compromised with this godless race and became corrupt themselves. Eventually, the Lord expelled His people from the Holy Land and scattered them throughout the nations, which were controlled by the corrupt gods.

Yahweh's attempt to restore the Edenic kingdom through Israel had failed, but He was not defeated. The Lord now shifted to a new plan, which involved His Son. If Israel failed, Christ would not, but the future kingdom would come in stages. When Jesus came, Heiser believes, the kingdom was established on earth, but it was not consummated. In other words, Heiser be-

lieves in inaugurated eschatology or, in simpler language, the kingdom is already here but not yet in its completed state.

The kingdom is on earth presently in the form of the church. The church's task is to push out the boundaries of the kingdom, claiming more ground for Christ. At the return of Christ, all competing *elohim* will be defeated and lose their claim over the kingdoms. At such time the kingdom of God will be fully restored and governed not only by Yahweh and His divine council, but also by the redeemed and glorified human council, which will join the divine council to form a single divine council of God.

THE CROSS

Heiser correctly understands that the restoration of the kingdom ultimately would hinge upon the Cross, for Eden-like conditions are only possible if the kingdom is inhabited by reconciled and regenerated human beings. Only the Cross-work of Christ could produce such reconciliation by providing satisfaction for sin. Heiser's unique and disturbing contribution to this subject is, due to his Deuteronomy 32 worldview, that the Lord had to keep His redemption plan secret in order to fool the opposing *elohim* and trick them into falling for His trap:

"If the plan of God for the messiah's mission had been clear, the powers of darkness would never have killed Jesus — they would have known that his death and resurrection were the key to reclaiming the nations forever."⁶⁹

It is for this reason that God's redemption plan is veiled in the Old Testament. Heiser writes, "*It had to be expressed in sophisticated and cryptic ways to ensure that the powers of darkness would be misled.*"⁷⁰ While it is true that the Old Testament revelation concerning the Lord's plan of salvation was relatively vague compared to the light of the New Testament revelation (see 2 Timothy 1:9-10), the reasons could be many. However,

Heiser's position that Yahweh had to hide His plan lest the divine beings catch on and undermine it, puts the Lord in an anemic position and does not line up with the Scriptures.

For example, Isaiah 53 clearly specifies how the Lord would bring about salvation, even if the Cross is not directly mentioned. And on at least three occasions Jesus informed His disciples that He would die and be resurrected (Luke 9:22, 44; 17:25; 18:31-33), that He had come as a ransom for sin is clear (Mark 9:27). These accounts were not cryptic, even if the exact method of execution was unknown until the last hours.

If the forces of darkness are so powerful that Yahweh Himself had to keep His redemption program under wraps in order that the corrupt *elohim* could not foil His plan and if turf wars over planet earth are so contingent and fragile that the Lord dares not let the divine beings know His strategy, we are left with a God who is not only not omniscient (recall that Heiser believes Yahweh is at risk because He does not know how the future will play out due to human free will), but also not omnipotent and must fall back on secret schemes to fool the *elohim*. We are left with a God who had to outmaneuver corrupt *elohim*, rather than a God who sovereignly rules over all things including false gods.

THE CHURCH AND THE KINGDOM

Yahweh's strategy to take control of earth back from the corrupt *elohim* through the nation of Israel did not pan out. Under Heiser's scheme, it would appear that the Lord pinned His hopes on Israel, not knowing with certainty how His plan would unravel. When Israel failed, a new strategy to establish His kingdom would be devised. The kingdom now will be inaugurated through His Son and will ultimately be consummated at the Son's return. Meanwhile, what is life like in Heiser's already, not yet kingdom? Below are some of the troubling features of the already kingdom as Heiser sees it.

Heiser begins with the supersessionist view that the church is the true Israel. The Old Testament nation of Israel failed to establish the kingdom and now that task has been shifted to the New Testament church. He writes:

“Since the Church, the corporate body of believers, inherited the promises given to Abraham (Gal 3:26-29), believers are the ‘true Israel.’”⁷¹

For the church to fulfill the kingdom mandate it will be necessary for it to displace corrupt *elohim* who presently rule the nations. The corrupt sons of God who currently dominate the nations will be replaced by loyal members of God’s family, the church:

“When we inherit rule of the nations with Jesus at the end of days (Rev 3:21), we will displace the corrupted divine sons of God presently ruling the nations.”⁷²

According to Heiser, the church’s task will be expedited in that he believes that Satan is no longer the accuser of the brethren because he is now expelled from heaven.⁷³ Even though Revelation 12, which predicts Satan’s removal from heavenly access and the relinquishing of his role as the accuser of the brethren, is contextually during the Tribulation and shortly before the return of Christ, Heiser applies it to the entire church age.

Heiser sees the events at Pentecost, as found in Acts 2, as the beginning of the reversal of the confusion at Babel in Genesis 11.⁷⁴ Pentecost initiated the church’s efforts to bring in the kingdom.

The mission of church age believers, as members of God’s earthly council, is to spread the kingdom rule of God which Adam and Eve failed to do. The church, Heiser says, is on a mission to restore Eden:

“Believers have a divinely appointed purpose. Adam and Eve were supposed to make all the world Eden — to spread the kingdom rule of God so that we

could enjoy the love of God, our Father. That hasn’t changed.”⁷⁵

But there is more. When the kingdom is restored, we (human believers) will become divine:

“Believing followers of Jesus Christ are the fulfillment of God’s plan to have humanity join the divine family-council and restore Eden. But that’s still not the full story. We will be made like him (1 John 3:1-3). We will become divine.”⁷⁶

Further, “Joining God’s divine family is inextricably linked to the New Testament concept of becoming like Jesus — becoming divine.”⁷⁷ Heiser even conjectures that the elders in heaven found in Revelation 5:11 “are humans made divine.”⁷⁸ Heiser’s lack of definition for “divine” remains problematic. In what sense do regenerated humans become divine? That the redeemed will be given glorified, resurrected bodies which will enable them to live in the eternal state is taught in Scripture (1 Corinthians 15:35-57). That they will in some way be like Jesus is taught as well (1 John 3:2). But that they take on characteristics of *elohim*, or of the *Elohim*, in that they become “little gods” has more in common with Word-Faith theology than biblical orthodoxy.

On the other hand, the corrupt *elohim* will be stripped of their immortality and die like men (Psalm 82:6-8).⁷⁹ This conclusion is forced by Heiser’s faulty interpretation of Psalm 82. If the “gods” in the text are fallen members of the divine council, it becomes necessary, at some point, to turn them into mortal beings who die. Strangely, under Heiser’s system, redeemed humans become gods and corrupt “gods” become mortal. We find neither of these concepts in Scripture.

Exactly what is meant that the corrupt *elohim* die is a bit of a mystery that Heiser does not attempt to solve. Do they cease to exist? Do they suffer eternal judgment? Will they be given a second chance if by free will (an important concept in Heiser’s scheme) they change their minds and pledge

allegiance to Yahweh? We are not told.

The church is presently the holy ground similar to what Israel occupied in Old Testament times. Therefore, church discipline is to thrust someone out of holy ground and into the realm of Satan (1 Corinthians 5:5).⁸⁰

Heiser summarizes his Deuteronomy 32 worldview as follows:

“In the distant past, God disinherited the nations of earth as his coruling family, the original Edenic design, choosing instead to create a new family from Abraham (Deut 32:8-9). The disinherited nations were put under the authority of lesser *elohim*, *divine sons of God*. When they became corrupt, they were sentenced to mortality (Psa 82:6-8). The Old Testament is basically a record of the long war between Yahweh and the gods, and between Yahweh’s children and the nations, to re-establish the original Edenic design. The victory at Armageddon of the returning incarnate Yahweh over the Beast (antichrist) who directed the nations against Yahweh’s holy city is the event that topples the *elohim* from their thrones.”⁸¹

Heiser’s cosmic-geographical worldview paves the way for a theology of spiritual warfare laced with territorial demons. Many Pentecostals have developed such a theology and have taken it to illogical and disastrous conclusions.

CONCLUSION

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 the interpretation of Scripture through the lens of ANE literature and mythology. All this leads to an all-too-human God who does not know or control the future, who takes risks without certainty of the outcome, and is in a battle with demonic forces that are almost as

powerful as He is, necessitating that He hide His plans lest they are undermined. Yahweh relies on both a divine council and a human council to make decisions, which will ultimately become one divine family council in the eternal state and which will apparently aid Yahweh in decision making forever.

In Heiser's system, Scripture can only be interpreted through ANE pagan mythologies and worldviews. These worldviews, filled with gods and demigods, were to be rejected by Israel in the Old Testament. It was by absorbing the pagan teachings and lifestyle that Israel became corrupt and failed as a holy nation.

The inspired writers of the Old Testament never encouraged Israel to study ANE myths in order to understand the ways of God or to mirror them, but to repudiate them. Heiser's understanding of what is taking place is far more informed by ANE paganism than by Scripture. He is using an ANE lens to interpret the Word.

The God of Scripture is not an anemic God who takes risks, or does not know the future, or needs to hide His plans from other deities to keep them from being discovered and obstructed. Nor is He the chairman of the board of some form of divine council that helps Him make decisions. While a few examples of interaction between the Lord and His heavenly creations exist in Scripture, better explanations are available than those offered by Heiser.

The first clue that Heiser's *unseen realm* is on shaky ground is his claim that virtually no one else has realized what he has.⁸² If, after thousands of years, someone is the first to arrive at novel interpretations, and these are based more on pagan worldviews than Scripture, one can be pretty certain that something is amiss. If, in order to take these views one has to jettison all the creeds, confessions, and systematic theology developed by serious conservative Bible students, great caution is obviously in order.

Heiser's theories, while interesting in places, lack the clarity of Scripture. More seriously, adopting his concepts

of God leaves us with a supreme deity who, while ruling over all other deities, nevertheless is at risk. He lacks absolute knowledge of the future; He devises plans that may be shattered by divine and human choices; He relies on a council for decision making, and He must disguise His kingdom program for fear the *elohim* will undermine it. In the final analysis Heiser's theories leave us with a lesser god than the God of Scripture.

Endnotes:

1. John Goldingay in Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*. Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham Press, 2015, pg. 2, italics in original. Goldingay is the David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament, School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary.
2. William R. "Rusty" Osborne in *ibid.* Osborne is the Assistant Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies, College of the Ozarks.
3. Tremper Longman III in *ibid.* Longman is the Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies, Westmont College.
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 11, italic in originals.
5. The *Lexham English Bible* (LEB) is an online Bible released by Logos Bible Software and lists as its general editor W. Hall Harris, III.
6. *The Unseen Realm*, op. cit., pg. 11, brackets and italics in original.
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 12, italic in original.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15, 60, 61.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 61.
10. *Ibid.*, pg. 13, emphasis added.
11. *Ibid.*, italics in original.
12. *Ibid.*, italics in original.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 25.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29. For examples of the common interpretation of John 10:34, see William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1953, pg. 128) and Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971, pg. 525). In this latter volume, Morris writes, "The passage refers to the judges of Israel, and the expression 'gods' is applied to them in the exercise of their high and God-given office."
16. *The Unseen Realm*, op. cit., pg. 32.
17. *Ibid.*, pg. 39, italics in original.
18. *Ibid.*, pg. 41.
19. *Ibid.*, pg. 43.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 159, 310-311, 355.
21. *Ibid.*, pg. 51.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 56.
24. *Ibid.*, pg. 48.

25. *Ibid.*, pg. 38.
26. Heiser says Ugarit is "a city-state in ancient Syria, just to the north of Israel," *ibid.*, pg. 45.
27. *Ibid.*, pg. 46, italic in original.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, pg. 73, italic in original.
30. *Ibid.*, pg. 102.
31. *Ibid.*, pg. 99 (footnote 16).
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.
33. *Ibid.*, pg. 114 (footnote 7).
34. *Ibid.*, pg. 249.
35. *Ibid.*, pg. 177. Later, Heiser writes, "Conceptually, the wilderness was where Israelites believed 'desert demons,' including Azazel lived," pg. 277.
36. *Ibid.*, pg. 349, italic in original.
37. *Ibid.*
38. David E. Aune cited in *ibid.*, pg. 354. Heiser quotes Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Dallas: Word, 1998, pg. 277).
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 373.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-86.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-82.
42. *Ibid.*, pg. 82.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 74 (including footnote 1), 82, 91 (footnote 6).
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 91 (footnote 6).
45. *Ibid.*, pg. 58.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-109.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-109.
48. *Ibid.*, pg. 58.
49. *Ibid.*, pg. 59, italics in original.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.
51. *Ibid.*, pg. 65, italics in original.
52. *Ibid.*, pg. 66.
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-109.
54. *Ibid.*, pg. 189.
55. *Ibid.*, italic in original.
56. *Ibid.*, pg. 203.
57. *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.
58. *Ibid.*, pg. 31.
59. *Ibid.*, pg. 155.
60. *Ibid.*, pp. 113-116.
61. *Ibid.*, pg. 114.
62. *Ibid.*, pg. 116.
63. *Ibid.*, pg. 122.
64. *Ibid.*, pg. 119 (footnote 4).
65. *Ibid.*, pg. 122, italic in original.
66. *Ibid.*, pg. 178.
67. *Ibid.*, pp. 176-178.
68. *Ibid.*, pg. 38.
69. *Ibid.*, pg. 241.
70. *Ibid.*, pg. 243, italics in original. C.f. pp. 248, 279 (footnote 5), 330.
71. *Ibid.*, pg. 158.
72. *Ibid.*
73. *Ibid.*, pg. 281 (footnote 9).
74. *Ibid.*, pp. 296-299.
75. *Ibid.*, pg. 310.
76. *Ibid.*, pg. 314.
77. *Ibid.*, pg. 319.
78. *Ibid.*, pg. 355.
79. *Ibid.*, pg. 322.
80. *Ibid.*, pp. 342-343.
81. *Ibid.*, pg. 376, italics in original.
82. *Ibid.*, pg. 12.

The Sea of Galilee is located more than 600 feet below sea level, making the area an ideal winter resort with more than 100 hotels. Its permanent population exceeds 45,000, with Christian tourists swelling the number year-round.

In the late 1800s, Dr. David Torrance built the Scots Hospital in Tiberias, hoping to dispense pills and medicines along with the Gospel to reach Jews for Christ. The endeavor was not very successful. In 1999, the Scots Hospital became a luxury hotel. Many tourists prefer the Kibbutz guest houses because of the beautiful garden-like settings on the Sea and the more affordable prices.

Because of numerous rabbis being buried in Tiberias, it has become a place of constant pilgrimage by orthodox Jews. In some instances there is prayer directed to deceased holy men and in other cases it is even claimed that ongoing communication from the dead to the living is possible. This is strange indeed. Though they claim to give the Law priority, they ignore that necromancy is forbidden in Deuteronomy 18:10-13.

South of Tiberias archaeologists uncovered a 5,000-seat Roman theater and a structure believed to have been the headquarters of the then-surviving Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin structure would have been built sometime after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 when that body relocated for a time to Yavne, in Judea, northeast of Ashdod. Later, members of the Sanhedrin moved to Usha, then to Shepharam, then to Sepphoris, and finally to Tiberias. They stayed in Tiberias until the fifth century A.D. Shortly after that they faded from history. Only recently Israel has created what is called the Sanhedrin Trail. They have developed tourist hiking trails to the Sanhedrin cities covering 43 miles and encouraging hikers to look for artifacts from that period.

The largely untold and wonderful story of Tiberias is the most interesting and important aspect for Christians. Every Old Testament translation we have is tied to events in Tiberias.

In the eighth century A.D., a Jewish family in Tiberias known as the Ben Asher dynasty rose to prominence. The family and followers were known as Masoretes. The word Masorete was related to the word "tradition." Wishing to convey both precision and pronunciation, the Masoretes applied vowel points and Tiberian vocalization to the Old Testament.

Matti Friedman helps us understand the difficulty caused by the absence of vowels that the Masoretes overcame: "To demonstrate the problem this creates, imagine encountering the word *mt*. Is it *mat*? *Meet*? *Mate*? *Moat*? Now imagine more than 300,000 words written without vowels: this is the Hebrew Bible. There is also no punctuation, and some words are written one way but read another. And yet despite this absence of adequate

information, reading the scroll with the utmost precision is imperative" (*The Aleppo Codex*, pg. 29).

Today there are probably not many Tiberians who have a clue that the Hebrew they learned has a vowel point system of tiny marks that was created in their own city. The Ben Asher text, as we said, is the foundation and basis for all Old Testament translations today.

The earliest Masoretes were in Tiberias adding dots, strokes, and vowel signs to the Old Testament text. To elaborate just a bit more we would add that Hebrew has 22 consonants, but no actual vowels. Pronunciation of words with no vowels is extremely subjective. The Masoretes standardized the text and vocalization and all of this developed in Tiberias.

Jerome Murphy O'Connor sums it up: "the five generations of the family of Ben Asher established the pointed text of the Hebrew Bible which won universal acceptance. To Tiberias we owe the classic forms of the written and oral Law" (*The Holy Land*, pg. 363).

The Ben Asher text is known as the Keter (Crown) and as the Aleppo Codex because for centuries it was housed in a synagogue in Aleppo, Syria. It is the oldest surviving Old Testament and dates to A.D. 910-930. Now we know why Tiberias is so important and the events there inform our apologetic approach. (For more in depth information on the Keter, see Randall Price's book, *Searching for The Original Bible*, chapters 4 and 6. And for a detailed account of the history of Tiberias, see *Tiberias* by Helga Dudman.)

The transmission and preservation of the Ben Asher text is also an amazing detective story. Its original pages have been around for more than 1,000 years. While it survived a major fire, Israel has only 295 pages of its original 487. Yet there is still hope of finding the missing 192 pages. These pages are not completely out of reach because what Israel has of the Ben Asher text helps them re-create the whole of the Masoretes' work.

When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, they revealed a Hebrew text approximately 1,000 years earlier than the Ben Asher text. These newly discovered scrolls attest to how incredibly accurate the transmission process of the Old Testament was. Providential preservation was at work. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain: 1) various Old Testament portions, 2) commentaries on Bible portions, and 3) the communities' rules and regulations. Each of the items constitute about a third of the total content.

If the reader ever can visit Israel, make sure that Tiberias is on the itinerary. A stay of a few days is best. Read ahead in the sources mentioned above. If you do not hear the story of the Ben Asher text — the Keter (the Crown) — be sure to tell it yourself. It is largely unknown and untold by Christians, but is amazing and compelling. Now we understand why Tiberias is so fascinating, amazing, and so very important.

—GRF

breathing. According to a report in *USA Today*, “The family called 911 and medics attempted to revive the child at home and at a hospital, where she was declared dead. From there, her body was taken to the Shasta County Coroner’s Office.” Later that day, the toddler’s parents asked that “friends, family, and others from the church gather to pray for a miracle of resurrection.”

The church responded to the couple’s request and began hosting daily gatherings consisting of singing and praying. The day following her daughter’s death, Mrs. Heiligenthal wrote in an Instagram post, “We’re asking for prayer. We believe in a Jesus who died and conclusively defeated every grave, holding the keys to resurrection power. We need it for our little Olive Alayne, who stopped breathing yesterday and has been pronounced dead by doctors. We are asking for bold, unified prayers from the global church to stand with us in belief that He will raise this little girl back to life. Her time here is not done, and it is our time to believe boldly, and with confidence wield what King Jesus paid for. It’s time for her to come to life.”

Mrs. Heiligenthal is a part of the music ministry of Bethel Church as a singer and songwriter.

On Dec. 17, the church held its “first-ever public gathering of prayer for resurrection.” Mrs. Heiligenthal posted a video of the event on Instagram and wrote, “Day 4 is a really good day for resurrection. All hail, make way for King Jesus! Thank you so much for joining your faith to ours, we feel your strength and radical belief. Keep declaring life over Olive Alayne with us. ... This is awakening. Come alive, Olive!”

The following week, the *New York Post* reported, “The heartbroken family that tried to bring their 2-year-old girl back to life through prayer have finally given up on resurrection and are instead planning a memorial for the tragic tot, according to their megachurch.”

On its Facebook page, Bethel Church said in a Dec. 20 post, “Here is where we are: Olive hasn’t been raised. The breakthrough we have sought hasn’t come. ... And so, we are moving towards a memorial service and celebration of her life.”

According to the *Post* article, “The church admitted that the initial call for resurrection was ‘out of the norm,’ but insisted, ‘That’s what a miracle is — it’s outside the box of nature and our power.’”

Despite the belief that the child would be brought back to life, on the very day of Olive’s death, a GoFundMe page was established for the Heiligenthal family with a goal of \$100,000 and stated, “We don’t want the parents to have any concerns over finances throughout this situation.” More than 1,400 people made contributions, totaling more than \$75,000.

—MKG

TODD BENTLEY DECLARED DISQUALIFIED FROM MINISTRY

Within the hyper-charismatic, new apostolic, and signs and wonders movements there is a very high tolerance not only for strange doctrine, but also for strange practice and personal moral misconduct. But apparently there is finally a threshold that can be crossed when the leaders inside the movements will say enough is enough. And it appears that modern-day revivalist Todd Bentley has crossed that line.

According to an online post on ChristianHeadlines.com it was reported that, “A group of evangelical ministers tasked with investigating allegations of misconduct against charismatic pastor Todd Bentley have concluded that he should be biblically disqualified from ministry.”

For more than a decade (1998-2008), Bentley was a leader of Fresh Fire Ministries Canada, but his rise to fame within charismatic circles came more from being the impetus of the Florida-based Lakeland Revival in 2008. Bentley led the revival for four months, during which time divinely inspired visions and prophecies were claimed, along with claims of numerous miraculous healings, including resurrections from the dead. Those who attended the revival numbered in the hundreds of thousands, with millions more watching via the Internet.

His leadership at the revival ended as he announced his separation from his wife, Shonnah, in August 2008. He also resigned from Fresh Fire Ministries. The ministry released a statement that said, “Todd Bentley has entered into an unhealthy relationship on an emotional level with a female member of his staff.” Some of Bentley’s colleagues, including Rick Joyner (MorningStar Ministries) and Bill Johnson (Bethel Church), formed a committee to oversee Bentley’s “spiritual restoration.”

During the next decade, accusations of moral misconduct continued to follow Bentley. These included adultery, sexting, vulgar language, and substance abuse.

In January, *Charisma* magazine reported that in September 2019, Dr. Michael Brown assembled a six-member investigative panel “after revivalist Stephen Powell accused Bentley of ‘sexual misconduct’ involving male and female interns.” At the same time *Charisma* made its report, Brown posted an “Official Statement from the Leadership Panel on Todd Bentley, January 2, 2020” on his Facebook page.

In the statement Brown declared, “Todd is not qualified to serve in leadership or ministry today. There are credible accusations of a steady pattern of ungodly and immoral behavior, confirmed by an independent investigator’s interviews dating from 2008 up through 2019.” Brown also stated, “Sadly, we see no signs of true, lasting repentance. Instead, we see a steady pattern of compromised behavior ... In our view, this disqualifies

Todd from public ministry until such time that he has demonstrated true, lasting fruits of repentance, which would include: the breaking of these long-term, sinful habits; public acknowledgment of his sin, without equivocation, including asking forgiveness of those he sinned against; and submission to local church leadership until trust had been rebuilt. This would likely take a period of years.”

The panel’s declaration apparently had little impact on Bentley. The *Charisma* article noted, “Bentley doesn’t seem to agree. On Dec. 31, 2019, he announced a new school of ministry starting March 2020. Bentley says in a video that he will starting [sic] equipping students with his own curriculum. ‘I’m gonna be more hands-on in this school.’ The school will hold about 25 students and, according to Bentley, will focus on healing, the prophetic and supernatural, and power evangelism.

—MKG

COURT REVERSES VERDICT AGAINST WATCHTOWER

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society appears to have won the latest round in a court battle over a \$35 million judgment for not reporting a girl’s sexual abuse to authorities, according to a report by the Associated Press.

In its *ABA Journal*, the American Bar Association stated that, “In its 7-0 decision, the [Montana Supreme Court]

held that even though Montana law requires clergy and other officials to report child sexual abuse to authorities, Jehovah’s Witnesses fell under an exemption in this case ‘because their church doctrine, canon, or practice required that clergy keep reports of child abuse confidential.’”

Alexia Nunez alleged she was sexually abused as a child in the mid-2000s by a member of the Thompson Falls, Mont., Jehovah’s Witness congregation. In 2016, she sued the sect’s national organization for ordering the local clergy members not to report her abuse to legal authorities. In September 2018, a jury in northwestern Montana awarded Nunez \$4 million in actual damages and \$31 million in punitive damages. The following year, an attorney for the Jehovah’s Witnesses asked the Montana Supreme Court to reverse the \$35 million verdict against the Watchtower.

The high court agreed and its decision overturns the lower district court jury verdict.

The *ABA Journal* further reported, “According to the court’s opinion, it was demonstrated in this case that Jehovah’s Witnesses have an established process for receiving and investigating reports of child abuse within their congregations; that they consider this process confidential; and that the process necessarily involves multiple elders and congregation members, including the accused, [Christian Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses] elders who provide spiritual guidance, and local elders who conduct the investigation.”

—MKG

Personal Freedom Outreach – Statement of Belief

- I. The Bible as the divinely inspired, inerrant Word of God: It is in its entirety the sole authority for all matters of Christian belief and practice.
- II. The one true God. In the one true God there exist three persons, being: The Father, The Son Jesus Christ, and The Holy Spirit.
- III. Jesus Christ: His deity, humanity, virgin birth, sinlessness, death and bodily resurrection; who will personally and visibly return again to earth.
- IV. The personality and deity of the Holy Spirit.
- V. The existence and personality of Satan, his total opposition to God, and his power over the unregenerate.
- VI. The complete and total depravity of all men which makes them hopelessly lost without the new birth obtainable through faith in Jesus Christ.
- VII. The final estate of man: for the saved, everlasting life in the presence of God and for the unsaved, everlasting punishment because of their unbelief.
- VIII. The Gospel by which we are saved being summed in the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- IX. The Church being the Body of Christ, united in the Holy Spirit, consisting of those who have received Jesus Christ as Savior. A local church is an organized assembly of believers united for the purpose of carrying out the Great Commission of Christ.
- X. The Great Commission of Christ being to preach the Gospel to all men, baptizing and discipling those who have believed.



Books in Review

DAILY READINGS: THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

Edited by Nick Needham

Christian Focus Publications, 400 pages, \$19.99

Devotionals are, as they say, a dime a dozen. From daily blogs to monthly booklets to annual volumes, there are thousands of devotional publications available to the believer, all which offer a wide range of topics and target audience. A few even make their way to the bestseller lists. And while some start out as devotionals, such as *Jesus Calling*, others result from a publisher taking an author's bestseller and remarketing it as a devotional, such as *The Purpose Driven Life* or *The Prayer of Jabez*.

Devotionals can encourage, educate, inspire, strengthen, and challenge one's Christian faith and walk. The problem is that even devotionals published by trustworthy sources will stumble by using troublesome ideas and sources such as mystics like Thomas à Kempis, Teresa of Ávila, Madame Guyon, and their modern-day counterparts: Henri Nouwen, Brennan Manning, and Richard Foster. The quandary for the discerning Christian is in finding a devotional that is doctrinally sound without all the questionable detours.

Daily Readings: The Early Church Fathers is that devotional publication. It is a volume that is far and away one of the best in this genre of publications.

Its editor, Nick Needham, has taught both church history and systematic theology at several Bible colleges in the United Kingdom and is presently lecturer at Highland Theological College in Dingwall and the minister at Inverness Reformed Baptist Church. He is also the author of *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, a series of four volumes covering the history of the church.

From its very first pages, the reader will realize the scope and value of this devotional. "The early Church fathers have always had a special place in Christian theology. They were, of course, the first interpreters of the Gospel" and "They were often colourful and fascinating characters, and the theology to which they gave voice was neither dry nor abstract; their writings frequently overflow with a heart-warming spiritual-mindedness," Needham writes in his introduction.

Each entire month is devoted to one specific church father and includes Irenaeus (February), Jerome (June), Augustine (August), and Athanasius (December). The month begins with a one-page biography of the church father who follows, which familiarizes the reader with his role and significance in church history.

And Needham is careful in the selection of the church fathers he used. He doesn't deviate onto an aberrational path like other devotionals are prone to do with their sources and citations. For example, he says, "Alert readers may wonder why I've omitted the illustrious and influential Tertullian and Origen. The omission is simply due to the fact that the Church never granted them the status of 'fathers'. They were stimulating thinkers, and many of their thoughts helped following generations to a fuller understanding of Gospel truth. But taking Tertullian's and Origen's lives and theologies as a whole, they were frankly just not orthodox enough, in the judgment of the later Church to be considered fathers."

The daily Scripture citations are from the King James Version, but many of the Old Testament passages cited by the church fathers are from the Septuagint. Needham is careful to note the places in which the text or the verse numbering "differs seriously" from the Hebrew version. There are also places where the church fathers have cited the Apocrypha. But here, too, he notes these sources and cautions that there was "no universal consensus among the fathers about the divine inspiration of the Apocrypha."

In describing the daily entries, Needham writes, "I've chosen passages that express the basics of early Church belief about the nature of theology, the mystery of the Trinity, and Christ's person and work, plus 'edifying' passages that the reader can apply to himself or herself in daily life. ... By the time the reader has read through each month, my hope is not only that he or she will have been built up in faith and godliness, but will also have come to appreciate each individual father in his personal uniqueness." Needham's "hope" is realized as he delivers on all counts.

The devotional also contains a brief glossary of some important terms, along with both Scripture and source indexes. It is pocketbook size (4½" x 6½") and comes in an imitation leather binding.

This is definitely the devotional for every learning and discerning Christian. It will help the believer reflect upon and share the faith once delivered.

—MKG

Editor's Note: The publications featured in PFO's *Books in Review* section are available from **Personal Freedom Outreach** (P.O. Box 26062, Saint Louis, Missouri 63136). Please add \$3.00 to the price listed for shipping and handling. Due to occasional price changes by the publishers, the retail amounts listed are subject to change without notice. These publications are also available to those who help to financially support the work of PFO. Please see our funds appeal flyer for details.