

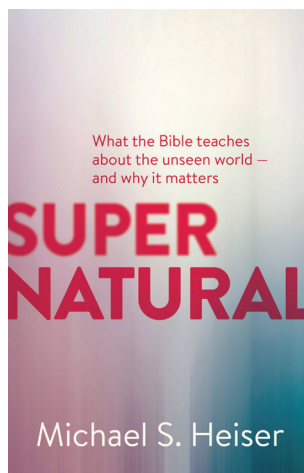
Supernatural: What the Bible Teaches about the Unseen World – and Why it Matters

By Michael S. Heiser

Lexham Press, 2015. 163 pages.

Reviewed by Pepper Potts

Pepper Potts (pseudonym) is a young American who has started her journey into the world of missions. She spent time in East Africa and recently finished a four-month internship in South Asia. She is in her third year of Bible college and looks forward to continuing to use what she is learning on the field.



Let's face it: there are some really strange things in the Bible. Who are the "sons of God" that have relations with "the daughters of men"? Does God have a divine council? Are angels and demons real? What's going on with the passage in Jude about "spirits locked up"? And does any of this matter for our daily lives and ministries? These passages reveal key truths about the unseen, spiritual realm, which surrounds us. When we learn to recognize the power of the unseen realm, it changes the way we do ministry among those who have never heard the name of Jesus. When we view the world through the lens of the biblical authors, we are able to understand and minister to people with different backgrounds from our own.

In *Supernatural*, Michael Heiser attempts to unveil for us the mysteries about the divine world. He sees a direct correlation between the truths of the unseen world and our lives and ministries. His observations and applications ring especially true for those doing ministry among unreached people groups. Understanding the divine realm helps us grasp more of the big story God is writing. It also helps us grasp the way he has chosen to use each of us, and our ministries, to draw more people into that story.

Michael Heiser is an American Old Testament scholar who specializes in the study of the divine world (and has written numerous books on the topic). *Supernatural* is the popular-level version of Heiser's more academic work, *The Unseen Realm*. It is written in an engaging style which is easy and enjoyable to read for believers of a variety of backgrounds. Although I believe he writes primarily with the average American believer in mind, the applications he draws out are broad enough for believers in other contexts, and certainly for those who minister cross-culturally. His argument is grounded in the biblical text and the historical context to help us understand what is really going on in the divine realm. He quotes Scripture extensively from both the New and Old Testaments. Having done his own research on the topic, he does not cite other authors and scholars.

Most valuable is the practical angle Heiser brings to each topic. He doesn't stop with looking at what the Bible says; he takes time to explore how it might intersect with and impact life and ministry. Each chapter ends with a section discussing why the particular topic in that chapter matters for our lives and ministries.

For example, in chapter eight, Heiser unpacks the concept of sacred space and speaks about how any space that God occupies is holy. He then brings that concept to our world and talks about how we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and therefore our lives are sacred space (86). Another thread which Heiser repeatedly emphasizes throughout the book is the idea that many Christians (primarily western Christians) do

not take the power of supernatural beings seriously (134). These powers are real, and some of them are terrible. They want to thwart God's plan to advance his kingdom. When we as cross-cultural church planters forget that the forces we fight against are real spiritual powers, we become lazy in our ministry.

On the other hand, Heiser emphasizes that we need to be careful not to swing too far in the other direction, remembering that the power of Jesus is greater (116). This truth helps us to minister more effectively in contexts where spiritual powers are feared. The power of Jesus is greater, and God's kingdom is coming: this is the good news the world needs to hear. Through this book and observing cultures in East Africa and South Asia, I realized that having an insufficient view of the spiritual realm makes ministering to people who believe in supernatural powers more difficult. Although Heiser is a Bible scholar and doesn't have overseas ministry experience, the implications for life that he draws from the discussion of the divine realm are hugely important to the life of a cross-cultural church planter.

Heiser's book follows a clear flow of thought from the beginning to the end by reading like a story. Each chapter builds neatly upon the chapter before, which results in a full picture of what the Bible says about the supernatural world and what it means for us. Heiser makes the case that if we viewed the world through the same lens as the Biblical authors, we would see that the unseen realm is full of real spiritual powers and that these powers have a fundamental connection to our lives, purpose, and ministry. He begins by discussing how God's family consists of both human and divine beings (32-33). Both have been given authority to rule under the authority of God. Both humans and divine beings have chosen to rebel and reject God's authority at various points in history. The result was God dividing up the nations and placing them under the authority of divine beings instead of his gracious rule (48). But he isn't done with the nations: God kept the nation of Israel for himself and had a plan from the beginning to use them to bring the nations back to himself (64).

Heiser spends time in the middle of the book discussing the ways that Israel was to be set apart and used by God to bring the other nations back to himself. He describes how God is different than other divine beings and how the nation of Israel, their land, and their temple, had to be holy, sacred spaces for God's indwelling presence. In light of this, Heiser views Israel's conquest of Canaan as God reclaiming his land for himself (94).

The book then presents how Jesus was the solution to the problem. The nation of Israel failed to bring all the other nations back under God's rule, and so God himself had to come down in human form to address the problem (98). In Jesus' arrival on earth, the battle against evil and rebellion was taken to a new level. Heiser takes his reader on a journey through the gospels, looking at the ways Jesus revealed the supernatural realm in his life, death, and resurrection. He devotes all of chapter twelve to how the phrase "Son of Man" (from Daniel 7) is applied to Jesus with all its significance.

The story continues with the beginning of the church. Heiser shows his readers how the events at Pentecost are crafted to be a reversal of what took place at Babel. Beginning with Israel, all the nations are coming back under the rule of the Most High God. Each individual believer is now the holy space that the presence of God occupies (129-130). As Christians, we are engaged in the battle against the darkness. As Christians, we are sons of God – partakers in the divine nature through Jesus (149). And when God's rule is fully established on earth through the second return of King Jesus, Christians will rule alongside him, even over the angels (157). Everything we do in our lives as Christians matters and affects the spiritual war going on around us. The scary thing is that many don't often recognize this.

This topic can certainly be controversial. Many western Christians don't acknowledge that the supernatural realm is real and that evil supernatural beings possess real power. Perhaps it makes us uncomfortable to think there are other gods out there. Heiser recognizes

that many are skeptical of his claims (13). He faithfully turns to Scripture to show how he formed his beliefs about the supernatural world and urges the reader to come to the same conclusion. Some people may object to his use of historical context to inform his understanding of the meaning behind the biblical text. However, I think this is one of the greatest strengths of Heiser's work. He has taken the time to learn about the culture in which the Bible was written, and explains how this informs our understanding of the supernatural, which the biblical authors take so seriously.

Throughout the book, Heiser takes us on a journey through the biblical text. At times he reaches into the historical context to give us an idea of how the original readers and authors might have thought. One of the most poignant sections is his explanation of the significance of Peter's declaration at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus was the Christ. Heiser shows us from history that this location was viewed as ground zero for the dark powers. Peter's bold declaration and the transfiguration in the next passage were effectively challenging the evil powers to try and stop God's plan if they could (114). But of course, God's plan can never be thwarted because His power is enormously greater than any other.

At the end of each chapter, Heiser takes us on a journey of discovery for application to our lives. For example, he discusses the way Paul and the other early believers had a supernatural perspective on life. They understood their role in God's story was to take the gospel to places where the name of Jesus had not yet been named. They knew that doing this involved fighting against the demonic powers. Heiser notes that there are still places on earth where the demonic powers rule (145). As cross-cultural church planters, we are taking the gospel to places that are still under the sway of dark spiritual forces. Our role in the story is the same as Paul's. We must work to understand the weightiness of our responsibility. Although Heiser draws specific conclusions, the overarching theme is that God intends for his rule to be extended once more over the entire world. We, as part of God's family, are also a part of this plan.

We are supposed to be engaged in the battle against the darkness and the spreading of God's kingdom. This is our mission.

This is where I feel the book is particularly valuable for those engaged in overseas disciple-making. As Christians, we are the family of God, we are his representatives, we are the ones restoring God's rule. As overseas workers, we find ourselves in contexts that are currently under the rule of dark divine powers. I clearly remember the first time I experienced something in East Africa that made me think about the actual power of these dark forces. At an Islamic school during their time of prayer, I felt an oppressiveness that I would later attribute to the presence of spiritual beings. For me, this book confirmed those powers are real. I was encouraged by the reminder that the power of Jesus, which dwells within me, is greater than the power of any dark divine power. I carry that power with me as I travel down my street or to the other side of the world. As Heiser writes,

Each of us is vital to someone's path to the kingdom and the defense of that kingdom. Each day affords us contact with people under the dominion of darkness and opportunities to encourage each other in the hard task of fulfilling our purpose in an imperfect world. Everything we do and say matters, though we may never know why or how. (163)

This book will either open your eyes to the reality of the supernatural realm for the first time or remind you of its power. It will encourage you as you engage daily in the fight against darkness. Go forth and shine the light of God's kingdom!

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