

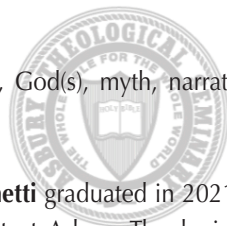
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Toward a Supernatural Biblical Hermeneutic

Abstract:

Many people who live and learn in the west, including Christian laity and scholars, inadvertently accept a materialistic cosmology in which the material world is all that exists, with the exception of God. This perspective is contrary to how the majority of ancient and modern people view the world. This essay seeks to analyze how this materialistic worldview is seen in biblical studies, and then proposes that biblical scholars should presuppose a supernatural worldview as a key aspect of their hermeneutics. A supernatural hermeneutic would not only benefit western interpreters of the ancient world of the Bible, but also help westerners understand how many in the majority world read the Bible today.

Key Words: supernatural, God(s), myth, narrative, worldview, Relevance Theory

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Introduction

“[I]n antiquity, all gods exist” (Fredriksen 2006: 241). With this provocative quote, Paula Fredriksen highlights what is often neglected in scholarly discussions of biblical views of the supernatural realm.¹ Most western biblical scholars are inevitably children of the Enlightenment, and as such, attribute the presence, implicit or explicit, of supernatural beings in the Bible as either ancient misinterpretations of their experiences or as their quaint and primitive beliefs. A classic example of such interpretations is Rudolf Bultmann’s “demythologizing” endeavor. He interpreted ancient supernatural worldviews through a twentieth century existential lens despite understanding the supernatural cosmology that the biblical writers and audiences accepted (i.e., the existence and intervention of supernatural entities) (Bultmann 1984: 1–43).² This essay will disagree with such modern interpretations and suggest that in order to have a more robust biblical hermeneutic it is imperative to be sympathetic of the supernatural worldview of the ancient biblical writers and audiences.

I will first briefly highlight modern approaches to mythology and the supernatural in recent biblical scholarship. Second, I will briefly sketch Greco-Roman views on divine beings. Third, I will highlight issues in biblical scholarship concerning the relationship between the Bible, story, subversion, and the supernatural worldview of the Bible *vis-à-vis* pagan cultures. This section will focus on how there are implicit elements of this worldview that would have been assumed by the biblical writers and audiences that modern interpreters should make explicit in contemporary interpretations.³ Finally, I will suggest questions and presuppositions for interpreters to have for a supernatural hermeneutic.

Modern Discussions on Myth and Gods

Bultmann’s important “New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation” manifests both a strength and a weakness of classical post-Enlightenment readings of the supernatural in the Bible (1984:1).⁴ On the one hand, Bultmann is fully cognizant of the supernatural worldview that the New Testament assumes. He is especially aware of the interaction between the natural and supernatural realms: “But even the earth is not simply the scene of natural day-to-day occurrences.... rather, it, too, is a theater for the working of supernatural powers, God and his angels, Satan and his demons. These supernatural powers intervene in natural occurrences and in the thinking,

willing, and acting of human beings" (1984:1). On the other hand, Bultmann argues that since modern people no longer share the same worldview as the biblical authors and audiences, it is necessary to reject these supernatural elements. He argues that it is better to read the biblical stories, especially the story of Jesus's passion, death, and resurrection, in existential terms for it to remain relevant and powerful to modern audiences (1984:9).

Bultmann did not have the only modern approach to supernatural aspects of the Bible, however. Robert D. Miller helpfully summarizes a variety of modern approaches to the study of mythology (Miller 2014:551–553). These include the relationship between science and mythology, where both are seen as etiologies, the former focusing on origins of the natural world, and the latter having more transcendental meaning. Another school of thought argued that the ancient world had a "mythopoeic" mindset, which would suggest that their manner of viewing the world is essentially different than how moderns view the world. Other scholars advocated for the "myth and ritual" perspective, which argued that myths and rituals were oral and physical counterparts to each other, in that the ritual would enact the story proposed in the myth, and the myth would give the explanation for the ritual. Another perspective would be a sociological one, where the myth serves as a social unifier and also helps explain the power structures present in a society. A different approach would be a Jungian perspective. This perspective advocates for a psychological understanding of myth, which in turn universalizes much in mythology. Since there are many experiences that are common to humanity, this would explain why there are similarities between myths of unrelated people groups. Another view on mythology is structuralism, where myth is viewed in relation to other myths, and without this structure, meaning would be lost. Lastly, Miller explains how Eliade's approach to mythology relates to people's religious experiences and serves pedagogic roles among a group of people.

What these different interpretations of mythology have in common is that they focus on modern interpretations of the function and purpose of mythology. They seek to understand how ancient, or even modern non-Western cultures, view mythology, but do so through the eyes of the Enlightenment and the philosophical precepts that arose after this time. Rather than seeking the supernatural perspective that ancient audiences would have presumed, they view the question through their own cultural lens. While this is an understandable thing to do, it is helpful to interact with ancient mythology and stories with the language and perspectives of

the ancients themselves. If a majority of ancient Mediterranean peoples accepted an active supernatural worldview in which gods and spirits interacted with each other and with humans, much is lost in modern hermeneutics when post-Enlightenment biblical scholars neglect this key component of ancient ways of thinking.⁵

Ancient Pagan Discussions on Myth and Gods

David Litwa helpfully summarized how some Greco-Roman authors viewed these topics of mythology and the supernatural. Asclepiades of Myrea (1st c. BC), for example, argued that there are historical (*historia*), fictional (*plasma*), and mythical (*mythos*) stories. In his view, myths were often so fantastical that they were believed to have not occurred historically (Litwa 2019:2). Litwa also cites Plutarch's view on myth, saying:

'Mythos,' he [Plutarch] opined, *'means a false story [logos] resembling the truth [eikōs alēthinōi]. Accordingly, it is far removed from actual events [ergōn].'* Plutarch posited an ontological hierarchy based in part on his Platonic philosophy. The actual events (*erga*) are considered most real, while the historical narrative (*logos*) relating those events is a second-order representation. Even less real is *mythos*, a third-order simulation of the second-order account (*logos*). (2019:3)⁶

Thus, these authors view history as a better communicator of truth than myth. However, this ancient distinction between modes of communicating truth did not inherently predispose ancient authors or audiences negatively or positively toward belief in supernatural entities and their intervention in human affairs. These ancient criticisms of myth are more related to the form or genre of communication of truth than the idea of supernatural occurrences.

It is also important to consider Palaephatus and what Litwa calls "the principle of uniformity." He argues that Palaephatus posited that ancient stories of fauns, centaurs, and minotaurs were not to be interpreted literally because they knew that those creatures did not exist in their own time. Succinctly, "anything that exists now existed in the past and will continue to exist in the future" (2019:15). However, it is important to distinguish between ancient interpretations of myths as historical or fabulous (especially regarding genre), and their understandings about the divine realm. For, it would not be accurate to say that ancients did not

believe in divine intervention on human affairs (Ferguson 2003:149).⁷ The epic stories of Homer, Hesiod, and other ancient myths were foundational for ancient Greek beliefs of how the gods dealt with people, beliefs that, though at times changed and adapted, persisted well into the common era (2003:153, 164, 172–173, 176, 178).

One ancient author who struggled to define and describe the difference between myth, history, and divine intervention was Diodorus Siculus (1st c. BC). In his *Library of History*, Diodorus surveyed world mythology and linked it with moments of divine intervention. Diodorus can claim, on the one hand, that myths of Hades are fictitious, even though he says they contribute to the piety of the people (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.2), and on the other hand, he claims:

These five deities [Zeus, Hephaestus, Gê Meter, Oceanus, and Athena], they say [the Egyptians], visit all the inhabited world, revealing themselves to men in the form of sacred animals, and at times even appearing in the guise of men or in other shapes; nor is this a fabulous thing (καὶ τοῦτο μὴ μυθῶδες ὑπάρχειν), but possible (ἀλλὰ δυνατόν), if these are in very truth the gods who give life to all things. (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.12 [C. H. Oldfather, LCL])

It is possible to ascertain here the principles explored above. On the one hand, there were some ancient thinkers, such as Diodorus, who understood the difference between history and myth, claiming that stories of Hades should be considered “fictitious” (μυθολογία). However, he also utilizes Egyptian stories that claim that the gods came to earth and acted, thus defending divine intervention. For authors such as Diodorus, these two ideas are not mutually exclusive.

There was still some skepticism about the gods among some Greek and Roman philosophers. In his survey of Greek and Roman perceptions of the divine, Kabiro wa Gatumu argues that “[t]he Epicureans thrived in the first century CE and they may represent a tradition that denied the popular belief that supernatural powers influenced human life” (Gatumu 2008:121). In Gatumu’s view, Epicureans and some other philosophically inclined groups would criticize popular beliefs concerning the gods because of their simplistic and philosophically inept understandings of the divine world and the gods’ interactions with humans. However, despite there certainly being critiques of popular views of the gods, “[t]he Epicureans’ view was perhaps

a minority as the popular spirit of the age recognized supernatural powers that were not remote" (2008:121). Gatumu concludes: "The sober elite rejected the popular beliefs and sought to correct the flawed conclusion that the masses derived from popular belief. But the insatiable curiosity of the masses seems to have rendered the attempts of the elite ineffective. As it seems, the masses valued magic, divination and astrology since they enabled them to deal with the spiteful supernatural powers" (2008:124). This suggests that in order to understand ancient conceptions of the divine, it is necessary to take into account both what the intellectual elites proposed, but also what the common people believed, which would affect how ancient texts that deal with the gods are read.

More broadly than the intellectual elite, different peoples in the Greco-Roman world thought that the gods and various spiritual entities were present in many different spheres. Many were present in the natural world, as Artemidorus (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 2.34) argues: "Of the gods, we say that some belong to Olympus (or similarly to the aether), some to the heavens, some to the earth, some to the sea and the rivers, and some to the underworld" (Rives 2007:16).⁸ These deities influenced those spheres, as was taught in classical texts such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. One characteristic that can be identified with the spiritual realm in the Roman empire was a greater emphasis on demons, and their relation to the gods and humans. Often, Greeks and Romans saw demons as lower spirits than the gods (e.g., Zeus or Poseidon), but as beings that greatly influenced humans, for good or ill (2003:236–237).⁹ Spiritual entities had great influence in the ancient Roman mind, where authors such as Pliny the Elder (*Nat.* 3.39–40) argued that there was divine favor and intervention on behalf of the Roman empire in order to propagate the values of the gods to the nations through Roman rule. The emperor's claim to divine sonship and divine favor gave their rule validity not only from a human perspective, but also from a divine perspective for many within that ancient Greco-Roman mindset (Long 2013:138–142).¹⁰ Thus, for many ancient Greeks and Romans during the time of the composition of the New Testament, the divine world interacted with nature, human societies, and the Roman empire at large. While not everything in their myths were taken as actual historical occurrences, the pagan worldview of divine intervention on the human plane finds important parallels, with significant differences, in biblical texts.

Toward a Supernatural Hermeneutic

After having briefly surveyed modern and Greco-Roman approaches to mythology and the supernatural, it is important to analyze how the Bible, and for the purposes of this essay, particularly the New Testament, understands the supernatural world. This section will emphasize that the ways stories portray reality play an important role in defining the identity of early Jews and Christians, and that by making explicit assumed and implicit elements of ancient thought, the cosmic conflict found in the New Testament can be viewed as conflicting stories between biblical and pagan worldviews that strive for supremacy.

One methodology that may help bring out aspects of ancient supernatural worldviews would be Relevance Theory (Wilson 1994:37–58).¹¹ Gene L. Green states that “Relevance theory explores the nature of *intentional* (not accidental), *overt* (not covert) communication” (Green 2010:77).¹² Furthermore, “What a speaker or writer communicates is always something much larger than what is encoded in the sign system. What we communicate is a combination of explicit and implicit information” (2010:78). Green helpfully summarizes how relevance theory may help with biblical hermeneutics:

For the recovery of the biblical communicator’s intended message, the original ancient readers and hearers of the text had to attend to textual and contextual information. The “context” of an utterance consists of all the assumptions that are accessed in the interpretation of an utterance and not simply all the information accessible to the ancient author and his audience. This information was drawn from their common cognitive environment, including the discourse in which an utterance is embedded and their encyclopedic memory. (2010:84)

This summary’s highlight of “common cognitive environment” is key. By emphasizing that people often share assumptions and common knowledge, modern interpreters could assume that the existence and intervention of divine powers would be understood by the vast majority, if not the totality, of biblical writers and audiences. While their perspectives on the gods may not have been monolithic—for, indeed, what group of people is entirely monolithic in thought?—their shared cognitive environment would have allowed for explicit and implicit references to the gods of the ancient world. This is especially true if, following N. T. Wright and Paula Fredriksen (see

below), modern interpreters consider the importance of story within a social setting and the rivalry that competing stories may have in forming a groups' understanding of reality.

Fredriksen draws from both the Jewish story as well as the Greco-Roman social and religious context to understand the relationship between the gods and people to explain the worldview of the early Church, especially with respect to Paul. She highlights how many first century Jews, especially early Jesus followers, interpreted the story of Israel—beginning in the patriarchal narratives, through the exodus, monarchy, exile, and exilic and post-exilic prophetic voices—through apocalyptic and eschatological lenses where God would not only redeem Israel, but also the nations (2017:8–31). Fredriksen's work on "divine ethnicity" provides a divine-human link that can be seen in the Jewish narrative, up to and including the New Testament story (2018:193–212). These ideas would have been influential in Diaspora settings and would have been especially relevant for Jews who lived in cities. Fredriksen further explains:

The gods were everywhere, not only in the public and private buildings of ancient municipalities, but also on insignia of office, on military standards, in solemn oaths and contracts, in vernacular benedictions and exclamations, and all throughout the curriculum of the educated. It was impossible to live in a Greco-Roman city without living with its gods. (2017:34)

This highlights how ubiquitous pagan religion and their gods were for early Jews and Christians. While there were evidently some Jews and Christians that felt more comfortable with these religious and cultural aspects of pagan cities, there were others who did not feel comfortable with the presence of the pagan gods because of how they viewed the scriptures and what it taught about idols and the gods of the nations.¹³

In addition to Fredriksen, Wright's emphasis on the importance of story and worldview in early Judaism and the early Church is highly useful for interpreting the supernatural world in the New Testament.¹⁴ Wright states that "Stories are a basic constituent of human life; they are, in fact, one key element within the total construction of a worldview" (Wright 1992:38). This is especially important because, as Wright argues:

[W]orldviews, the grid through which humans perceive reality, emerge into explicit consciousness in terms of human beliefs and aims, which function as in principle

debatable expressions of the worldviews. The stories which characterize the worldview itself are thus located, on the map of human knowing, at a more fundamental level than explicitly formulated beliefs, including theological beliefs. (1992:38)

Herein Wright highlights explicitly what many understand implicitly: that human beings often assume certain aspects of their worldview either without giving it much thought or without the need to make it explicit when communicating with other people that are part of the same worldview.

Furthermore, people often influence each other and their worldview through the stories that are told and how certain foundational events are interpreted. Present day Christians naturally interpret their reality through a biblical lens, along with many others (e.g., Christian tradition, cultural context, family history, etc.).¹⁵ Wright correctly posits that ancient Jews and early Christians were no different:

For most Jews, certainly in the first century, the story-form was the natural and indeed inevitable way in which their worldview would find expression, whether in telling the stories of YHWH's mighty deeds in the past on behalf of his people, of creating new stories which would function to stir the faithful up in the present to continue in patience and obedience, or in looking forward to the mighty deed that was still to come which would crown all the others and bring Israel true and lasting liberation once and for all. (1992:39)

Wright's discussion on the importance of worldview and its many implicit components, as well as the Jewish and Christian emphasis on story as a key element to their worldview, highlight the importance to also add that the supernatural was part of their story and their worldview. Early Jews and Christians lived in a world of antagonistic world powers that had powerful gods behind them, which made their reception of the deeds and words of God subversive for the world in which they lived.¹⁶

Stories and the supernatural play important roles in how the biblical narrative articulates God's interaction with the world, and how it is different from how Israel's ancient neighbors viewed the world. John Oswalt states, "the ruling idea in the worldview that gives myth its distinctive character is continuity. This is the idea that all things that exist are part of each other. Thus, there are no fundamental distinctions between the three realms: humanity, nature, and the divine" (Oswalt 2009: ch. 3).

This perspective is helpful in ascertaining the difference between biblical and non-biblical views of supernatural beings. This makes one ask, if Fredriksen's view quoted above (that "in antiquity all gods exist") is correct, how does that relate to how the Bible speaks about the God of Israel and other supernatural beings as opposed to pagan conceptions of the divine? Two points can be made: First, there are clear differences between pagan views on supernatural beings and how the Bible presents them. Second, Fredriksen's claim that "in antiquity all gods exist" is accurate for both biblical and pagan views on the divine.

In line with the second point, modern terminology that describes ancient worldviews can and should be used if helpful, but should also be set aside when it creates more confusion than clarity. "Monotheism" is one such term (2006:241–243).¹⁷ Michael S. Heiser points out that scholars tend to qualify and further define the term "monotheism" to the point that its purpose to succinctly clarify the biblical data is defeated (Heiser 2008:28–29). Both Heiser and Fredriksen agree on the idea that in antiquity, and in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the belief in the existence of multiple spiritual beings, often called gods (whether אֱלֹהִים or θεοί) is present throughout the biblical text. Larry Hurtado, despite maintaining the term "monotheism" as part of his vocabulary, sustains that an inductive approach to the primary sources of first century Judaism and Christianity would demonstrate that these religious groups believed in the existence of heavenly beings, both faithful and unfaithful to the God of Israel, while maintaining exclusive worship of one God (Hurtado 1998:3–26). If they are correct in their interpretation of the Bible's agreement with wider ancient pagan religions—that the gods exist—this should have important bearing on modern biblical hermeneutics, exegesis, and theology.

However, while there are similarities between biblical and pagan views on the existence of multiple gods, there are also clear differences. Oswalt is especially insightful regarding the first point above. Whereas in pagan mythology ancients believed in the continuity between the divine, natural, and human realms, the biblical authors made it clear that each realm is separate from each other. Succinctly, Oswalt states: "[f]rom start to finish, the Bible resists the principle of continuity" (2009: ch. 4). Thus, while it is clear that the Bible presents its views on Baal (e.g., 1 Kgs 18:20–36) differently than the *Baal Cycle*, or that its views on Zeus and Hermes (Acts 14:11–18) are different from those of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, this does not mean that the Bible does not believe that there are supernatural entities—

whether called “gods” or another term—that exist and form part of the cosmic struggle presented in the Bible.¹⁸ This grand narrative is arguably a key, yet often neglected, element of the worldview and story of both ancient Israelites and early Christians.

Wright provides a helpful principle regarding the relationship between story, worldview, and subversion that can be applied to the supernatural worldview of the biblical writers and audience and how this relates to the stories of their pagan neighbors. He states that first century Jews “told stories which embodied, exemplified and so reinforced their worldview, and in so doing threw down a particularly subversive challenge to alternative worldviews” (1992:41). There are several biblical stories and passages that exemplify this principle. Whether it is YHWH defeating Baal (1 Kgs 18), the use of El-Baal motifs for the God of Israel in Dan 7, the subversive nature of the whole book of Revelation, or even the Christian proclamation of Jesus as Lord, the Bible communicates the message that the powers of this world, whether human or spiritual, are subservient to that of YHWH and the Lamb (to use the language of Revelation).¹⁹ It is important to link Wright’s view on telling the “right” story with Hurtado’s perspective of exclusive worship of the God of Israel to better understand how the New Testament texts exalt YHWH in Jesus against the supernatural entities that the pagan powers of the ancient world followed.

Benefits of a Supernatural Hermeneutic

The above discussion on modern interpretations on myth and the supernatural (such as “demythologizing”), pagan views on the divine, and biblical views on the supernatural realm all raise questions regarding present day biblical hermeneutics and exegesis. I would suggest three areas in which the above discussion would help scholars—indeed, Christians of any background—better understand how the supernatural may intersect with biblical hermeneutics. First, this emphasis would be helpful for western Christian scholars to understand and communicate better with majority world scholars and Christians. Second, this emphasis would aid scholars to be more sympathetic toward ancient supernatural readings of the Bible by understanding their worldview better. Third, relevance theory may help in discovering elements in the biblical-theological narrative in which there are implicit supernatural queues that ancient audiences would have easily understood, but that modern western audiences often miss.

An important aim in this short essay is to critique the legacy of materialistic readings of the Bible that authors such as Bultmann left on modern biblical studies scholarship. As Craig Keener has claimed, the rejection of a supernatural reading of the Bible—in which scholars deny the existence of other divine beings other than the biblical God, as well as their interaction with each other and with humans—is a modern philosophic presupposition that is imposed on ancient worldviews and on the biblical text (2011:7).²⁰ Furthermore, a majority of present day people do not accept this materialistic worldview and many Christians from the majority world claim to experience supernatural phenomena similar to what is described in the Bible (2016:88–98). To insist on a nonsupernaturalist reading of the Bible would fundamentally skew one’s interpretation of many biblical passages. Christian exegetes would do well to consider supernatural readings in order to communicate better with Christian scholars in non-western parts of the world. In fact, there are examples of majority world scholars who advocate for a supernaturalist reading of scripture. A brief example would be how many pastors and scholars interpreted the Bible in Latin America during the twentieth century. With the advent of many politically revolutionary movements, “Liberation Theology” became a common way of viewing the Bible that sought to free the poor and oppressed from oppressive structures of human power (Míguez 2001). Even though this perspective emphasized human and material liberation more than spiritual and supernatural freedom, in more recent times charismatic movements have returned a supernatural reading of scripture in many Latin American circles, especially among common people, but also among some scholars and theologians (2001:96). In the African continent, Kabiro wa Gatumu argues that, while there are definite differences, “[t]he African worldview stands in close proximity to the biblical worldview” concerning the existence of supernatural powers and their interactions with humans (2008:58). In this sense, there is stark contrast between how many in Africa view the world, which is in many ways similar to how the ancient biblical writers and audiences viewed it, and how Western scholars view the world. These two brief examples from Latin America and Africa strongly suggest that it is necessary to understand the supernatural worldview of the Bible first so that one can then better dialogue with present day perspectives, whether advocates of Liberation Theology or those who more readily accept a supernatural worldview in modern contexts.

Presupposing materialistic readings of supernatural elements of the Bible has the potential of intellectually ousting majority world biblical studies scholars as unscholarly or backwards thinking. It is important to recognize that when a scholar either focuses or neglects supernatural readings of the Bible as valid, it is often more closely related to their philosophical presuppositions—their models—than their methodology and exegesis (Schökel 1985). It is important for biblical scholars to understand and accept that, regardless of their own philosophical presuppositions about the supernatural, many people in the ancient and modern world believe in an active supernatural realm that interacts with the known material and human realm. Thus, accepting this supernatural model would benefit scholars that work with most any critical methodology, since the methodology seeks to highlight a particular angle in an ancient text, and much of what is underpinning is potentially related to the supernatural. Western biblical scholars should understand and accept that the validity of supernatural readings is too often based on a *priori* thinking, and that going beyond this presupposition is key for western biblical scholars to better communicate with people who view the world differently than them.

In addition to being more sympathetic and understanding of modern people who hold to a supernatural worldview, focusing on this perspective in biblical hermeneutics is important to also be more sympathetic and understanding of ancient authors and audiences. If this was, broadly speaking, how the biblical authors and audiences viewed the world, then biblical hermeneutics and the historical-critical method ought to include a supernatural worldview when interpreting scripture. If this worldview is as prevalent in antiquity as this essay has suggested, then scholars such as Fredriksen do well to suggest the “retirement” of vocabulary that have strong philosophic baggage and confuse ancient perspectives on “monotheism” or the populations of the divine realm (2006:243). Furthermore, Michael Heiser would be correct when he argued that “a theology of the unseen world [i.e., a supernatural worldview] that derives exclusively from the text understood through the lens of the ancient, premodern worldview of the authors informs every Bible doctrine in significant ways” (2015:13).²¹ While this may sound to some as too big of a claim, spending any amount of time in ancient literature and realia, biblical and non-biblical, would inform one soon enough that it is key to account for ancient stories of God, the gods, angels, demons, and how all of those beings interact with humans.²²

Adding the explicit component of an active supernatural worldview to Wright's thoughts on narrative and worldview would provide a more robust understanding of ancient Jewish and Christian understandings of reality and how that is reflected in the Bible. Relevance theory may aid exegetes in highlighting implicit references to divine-human interactions within the grand biblical narrative. When reading the New Testament, it would be beneficial to ask questions regarding whether there may be elements that make reference to the divine. While this may not be the case on every occasion, it is possible that there are instances when a supernatural reading of a text is warranted.²³ A sampling of such questions may include: Is there an explicit or implicit mention of a supernatural being in this passage? Is the mentioning of a physical element (a tree, mountain, political association, etc.) only referring to the natural plane, or is it also referring to the supernatural plane?²⁴ Is there an intertextual reference or echo to Old Testament passages that include supernatural themes?²⁵ Is there a rhetorical purpose in including any such supernatural themes that may serve polemical or pastoral purposes for the biblical writers and audiences? Is there a subversive element in a biblical passage that contradicts pagan views of the divine? Questions such as these may aid biblical interpreters to think beyond traditional exegetical questions and seek to ask explicitly what ancient people may have understood implicitly. The explicit mention of supernatural elements in biblical texts may help provide a "thick description" to the "texture" of a biblical passage that is more in line with how the ancient audience would have received it (Robbins 1996:130).

Conclusion

This essay has suggested that abandoning a modern post-Enlightenment materialistic worldview is beneficial for a biblical hermeneutic that is sensitive to ancient worldviews of the supernatural. Adopting such a biblical hermeneutic would be beneficial by expanding one's intellectual and cultural horizons, reflecting on one's own presuppositions, and seeking to understand the world in which God inspired the scriptures. By explicitly highlighting the ancient supernatural worldview, biblical interpreters may add this to their arsenal of hermeneutical and exegetical questions in order to produce more robust interpretations that do more justice to the ancient biblical authors and audiences, as well as prove beneficial for the Church today. Just as the Reformers sought to go back to the sources of scripture in their desire to best understand and express their faith, perhaps it would also

be beneficial for modern interpreters to understand the ancient worldview better and go back to the supernatural stories of God and the gods.

End Notes

¹ In agreement with Craig Keener, I am only using the term “supernatural” for lack of a better term that would describe the realm of the gods and spirits in antiquity. This is not to say that ancient people had hard and fast distinctions between what we as moderns would call the natural and the super-natural or that our terminology encompasses exactly what they believed. It is here used for convenience. See Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 6–9. I will also use some terms almost interchangeably, such as “mythological,” “supernatural,” “spiritual,” “cosmic” and the like. My purpose in this paper is not a taxonomy of supernatural beings, but rather a greater appreciation for ancient views on their existence and how that may impact our biblical hermeneutics.

² For an interpretation and analysis of Bultmann’s hermeneutic, see also Gert Malan, “Combining Ricoeur and Bultmann on Myth and Demythologising,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 72.3 (2016): 1–6.

³ This essay will lean more toward the supernatural in the New Testament and the Greco-Roman religious environment, but it will also draw upon Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern ideas. While it is important to be as synchronic as possible in approaches to the ancient world, there are also benefits to being diachronic and acknowledging that there are no hard dividing lines between certain religious or ethnic groups in antiquity between the ancient Near East or Greece and Rome as background for the Bible. For more on the interactions between ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman religious traditions, see Carolina López-Ruiz, *When the Gods Were Born: Greek Cosmogonies and the Near East* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁴ By “post-Enlightenment” I refer to the materialistic worldview that became more common in intellectual circles during the European Enlightenment of the 1700s and influenced western thought into this day. This term is used, for example, by Craig Keener (*Miracles*, 106, 203) and Paula Fredriksen (*Paul: The Pagan’s Apostle*, [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017], 58).

⁵ Rives helpfully summarizes ancient Greco-Roman approaches to the supernatural world. While a majority, perhaps all, accepted the existence of divine or supernatural entities in antiquity, there were certain groups that allegorized ancient myths or proposed variant interpretations based on their philosophical presuppositions. See James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, Blackwell Ancient Religions (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 15–42.

⁶ For other examples of how ancient Greek authors, such as Pindar, Euripides, and Plato, viewed myth, see Miller, "Myth as Revelation," 554.

⁷ See also Litwa, *How the Gospels Became History*, 15–16.

⁸ Cf. *Il.* 15.184–92.

⁹ See also Appendix A in Keener, *Miracles*, 769–87.

¹⁰ See also Michael Peppard, "Son of God in Gentile Contexts (That Is, Almost Everywhere)," in *Son of God: Divine Sonship in Jewish and Christian Antiquity*, ed. Garrick V. Allen et al. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2019), 138–48.

¹¹ For how relevance theory may apply to biblical studies, hermeneutics, and theology, see Gene L. Green, "Relevance Theory and Theological Interpretation: Thoughts on Metarepresentation," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4.1 (2010): 75–90. I want to thank Dr. Fredrick J. Long for bringing this methodology to my attention.

¹² Italics original.

¹³ Fredriksen helpfully comments on the difference between an idol and a spiritual entity: "An idol is a dumb image. A demon, however, is not an image of a supernatural power, but the power itself, a lower divinity. Any human can destroy an idol; no human can destroy a god. This Jewish translation [LXX] of Psalm 95 (96), then, at once elevated and demoted the Greek gods, granting that they were more than mere idols while placing them, *qua* daemones, in positions subordinate to the Jewish god on Hellenism's own cosmic map." See Fredriksen, *Paul*, 40.

¹⁴ Part of this idea was sparked by a comment in passing in the Naked Bible Podcast. See Michael S. Heiser, "Episode 55: Interview with Dr. Ronn Johnson," *The Naked Bible Podcast*, Podcast audio, June 27, 2015, <https://nakedbiblepodcast.com/podcast/naked-bible-55-dr-ronn-johnson/>

¹⁵ While this essay does not address these other relevant contexts, it is clear that it would be beneficial for us to reflect on how this supernatural worldview that I propose was so widespread in antiquity would affect our Christian traditions and our readings of Christian interpreters from many different periods and theological traditions.

¹⁶ On the relationship of the gods and the nations, see Daniel Isaac Block, *The Gods of the Nations: A Study in Near Eastern National Theology*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013); On the subversive nature of telling competing stories, see Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 40–41.

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¹⁷ See also A. Peter Hayman, "Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?," *JJS* 42.1 (1991): 1–15.

¹⁸ For a clear presentation of this cosmic narrative that is seen throughout Scripture, see Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering*

the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).

¹⁹ Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 9 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 244–48; C. L. Seow, *Daniel*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 106–13; For a more general take on the subversive nature of the proclamation “Jesus is Lord” and other anti-imperial material, see Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013). For specifics on how it applies to Revelation, see ch. 10.

²⁰ See also William J. Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1982), 2–4, 187–88.

²¹ Italics original.

²² This is not to say that every human occurrence or event should be viewed through a supernatural lens, as if any event we see on earth was caused by spiritual powers, good or evil. But it is to recognize that, according to how the majority of ancient and modern people view the world, spiritual and material interactions intersect in more ways than modern Western people would normally concede.

²³ Two such instances in the New Testament that have proven fruitful in my research are Rom 8:14–21 and Rev 5:9–10.

²⁴ For an OT example, see William R. Osborne, *Trees and Kings: A Comparative Analysis of Tree Imagery in Israel’s Prophetic Tradition and the Ancient Near East*, BBRSup 18 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017).

²⁵ In addition to relevance theory for a better appreciation of the shared cognitive environment of the biblical authors and audiences, Richard Hays’s criteria for hearing a biblical “echo” of a supernatural theme may prove to be helpful. See Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 29–32.



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