



Michael S. Heiser, Gandalf, and the Neanderthal

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“What would you do if your daughter wanted to date a Neanderthal,” I once asked Michael S. Heiser, the great biblical scholar. I meant a literal Neanderthal. This was a thought experiment, in which the thick-browed cave man was not fully human, and not in the image of God.

Admittedly, this is a weird question. The easiest response would be to sniff, reject the premise, and move on.

But Heiser was up for the question. He was, after all, the scholar of the weird. Thinking of Genesis 6:1-4 and Psalm 82, Heiser often said “if it is weird, it is important.” So, how would he respond to this weird question?

Heiser was an academic through and through. He could have given a hyper-academic or legalistic answer. But no, he didn’t. He responded, “well, I would talk to my daughter about the difficulties she might face, and I’d support her in the decision she might make,” even if it was to be with this Neanderthal.

My summary does not capture the fullness of his answer. It was as if a switch flipped. In that moment, he was thinking about his daughters, and he responded as a good father. Our esoteric academic conversation became almost uncomfortably personal.

A few weeks later, Heiser was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. All our plans for the coming year were thrown out. One year ago, February 20, 2023, Heiser left this world and entered the unseen realm.

Soon after, all three of Heiser’s daughters, his son, his wife Dreena, along with other family and friends gathered in the rural town of Lebanon, Pennsylvania. We met in his childhood church, the church where Heiser had met and married his wife. A few hundred people were present, but thousands watched online. Together, we remembered him.

Heiser was a biblical scholar who mattered.

In his books and the “Naked Bible” podcast, he explained the most complex and contested of questions in biblical interpretation. In doing so, he attracted a surprisingly large and enduring audience, of pastors, professors, and ordinary lay people, both in the United States and across the world.

Simply, as the scholar Carmen Imes puts it, Heiser “singlehandedly changed what it was possible for a biblical scholar to accomplish.” Before Heiser, who could have known that academic and detailed

exposition of weirdest parts of the Bible would gather a world-wide audience of so many?

Heiser once explained to me that he aspired to the example of Gandalf, of the Lord of the Rings. Here was a hero with unique skills and insight who intentionally made friends with and appearances in many otherwise disparate communities.

He was educated at secular institutions, the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the University of Pennsylvania. But he taught for many years at the fundamentalist bastion of Liberty University. Heiser would attend the Evangelical Theological Society meetings, but he would also speak at UFO conventions, and even show up at conferences for black pastors. The content was almost always academic, almost esoteric, but the connections Heiser made were often deeply personal.

A scholar of scholars, many of the best of us consulted him on difficult questions. Heiser did not hold an academic position in his later years, but his work was academic indeed, full of detailed footnotes and complex and nuanced ideas. Even his most academic of books were read by tens of thousands.

The Church struggles with several difficult questions. Heiser saw a need for informed and grounded scholars to empathetically engage these questions. With real humility, he knew that this need was far greater than he alone could meet. So, he searched for others like him, for scholars with years of substantial education, and intent on serving the Church.

Gandalf might have been Heiser’s model, but more Christian academics should aspire to Heiser’s example. He worked for the love it, not career advancement, and out of a deep sense of service to the Church. Out of this vocation of service, Heiser gave of himself so generously to strangers on the internet.

Much should be said about the distinct emphasis of Heiser’s teaching. Rather than sanitizing Scripture to western, modernist sensibilities, Heiser propounded some of the weirdest passages of Scripture. He constantly made use of Ancient Near-Eastern literature, the Church fathers, and the complex debates and uncertainties of leading biblical scholarship.

Warning he would not “protect” us from our bibles, Heiser advanced a reading of scripture that emphasized the supernatural, the “Divine Council Worldview.”

Miracles, angels, and demons certainly are weird to the modern mind. Liberal theologians glossed over these ideas as mythological window

dressings for theological truths. Heiser ferociously resisted this sort of “demythologization,” giving us permission to actually believe what the Bible taught, weird parts and all.

Though weird in the West, Heiser’s embrace of the supernatural was certainly central to his appeal in the global Church. His books were translated into tens of languages. His particular defense and explanation of the supernatural left a mark.

Heiser was also courageous, willing to advance controversial ideas he believed would serve the Church. It certainly took courage to discussed with me, on his podcast, how evolution can be consistent with his reading of Genesis. Then, at an academic conference, he went on to present a detailed defense of God having created people

outside the Garden, alongside Adam and Eve. In doing so, Heiser legitimized constructive dialogue with science, still holding fast to the supernatural, even in the troubled waters of the origins debate.

One year ago, Michael “Gandalf” Heiser died at peace, confident that his own role in this grand project was completed. When he had found scholars like him, he platformed and introduced them to his large audience. He partnered and collaborated with us. Now, many of these friends of his are continuing and expanding his work in various ways.

Still, many of us still feel his absence. I certainly do, and will for some time to come. Heiser’s scholarship left a mark. But he was more than merely a scholar. He was a good man who served the Church. May many more good scholars rise to follow his example.

References

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