

The Naked Bible Podcast 2.0

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“Interview with Dr. Ronn Johnson”

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With

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In this episode Mike chats with his friend and co-conspirator in divine council research, Dr. Ronn Johnson. Ronn and Mike met as undergraduates in Bible college in the early 1980s. Ronn has a PhD in Bible Exposition (Old and New Testament) from Dallas Theological Seminary. His dissertation focused on how the Deuteronomy 32 worldview of the gods of the nations influenced Paul's thinking about principalities and powers. Ronn is the author of the small group leader's guide for Mike's book *Supernatural*.

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 55, with Dr. Ronn Johnson. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, how are you doing?

MSH: Very good. Good to be back.

TS: Absolutely. Well, I'm excited. We have a special guest this week.

MSH: We do indeed, longtime friend Ronn Johnson. And sort of the rationale here, other than sort of giving the audience a little something new, would be to introduce Ronn to our podcast audience because Ronn is part of what I sort of imagine and it's more than imagination, it's real. The group of thinkers that I regularly bounce stuff off related to Divine Council material and Ronn is going to become part of the publishing effort with that. For those who follow the blog, Ron is the guy who will be the author of the small group manual for Supernatural. So I figured since Ronn is going to be exposed to my audience that way, we should do a podcast show and really sort of get into some details about who he is, and what our connection is, and what he's interested in so the people can sort of get a feel for what he's thinking about and his personality and what he contributes.

TS: Sounds good.

MSH: Alright, so let's just jump into that. Ronn, the audience is of course naturally going to want to know first how we met. In other words, what's the connection so I'll let you sort of explain that.

RJ: Yeah, thank you. It's good to be part of this. We go back to our college days. I think I was a sophomore. You came in as a freshman. I don't think we ever got to play baseball together but I know we talked a lot about it. Did we ever play a year together?

MSH: I think we did.

RJ: I believe one year, but otherwise, that just came back to mind. We would go on baseball trips, if you remember this; we talked theology the whole time. It was marvelous. But we got out of college, went off to seminary, I believe, around the same time. We had just a lot of interests. We used to talk theology for hours together. I remember it very well, just loved it. Let's see, when I became a Bible college teacher, there was an opening, I was actually the chairman of a small Bible college and I was told that there was an opening in our department, and Mike was the first person I could think of. So we were a two-man Bible college teaching team for a couple of years. We both went several directions after that but we've always maintained a good friendship. This is in the preface of supernatural, at least the study guide that I just finished. The day that things changed for me, and it's been about a dozen years ago, Mike was writing his dissertation and I was in the throes of trying to find dissertation topic. And when he described what he was writing about, number one, it made me want to rewrite what I was going to write about because I hated my topic so badly. And so I changed it to basically a Divine Council theme.

And so from that day, that was about 2003, so what has that been, a dozen years? And ever since then, we haven't lived near each other but we've kept in steady contact through the soul journey. So it's been an absolute journey for me and of course for you, too.

MSH: Yeah, I've known your wife, Susan, just as long and I don't know how she felt after that conversation when you wound up changing your topic.

RJ: Well, that's a story in and of itself. I was downstairs at three in the morning typing a dissertation proposal change, and she found me, and I looked up from the computer screen real sheepishly and she started to cry. She said, 'No, you're not going to do this.' And I said, 'Hon, you got let me do this.' And I was able to write the dissertation about 6-8 months because I was so excited about it. It really was Divine Council 101 without calling it that. I don't know if I even used the words Divine Council in the dissertation, but I probably referred to the term. But the dissertation through Dallas Seminary was basically who are Paul's principalities and powers and how would that work into an Old Testament connection? And that's where I got into it.

MSH: What did you find once you got into it? I'm sure listeners would want to know, was it difficult to find sources sort of in the evangelical orbit and how did your committee react or what was the response?

RJ: The response, I'll put it into the final days when I wrote, well, I finished it and then I was in my oral exam, and one of the principal questions you're always asked is, what have you added to the body of knowledge? And I had a prepared answer. I said nothing. I didn't add anything. I simply connected the gods of the Old Testament, which is not an evangelical discussion, they just don't talk about them, to the principalities and powers of Paul, which is an evangelical discussion. I simply combined two thoughts that really should've run parallel and never did. They never touched each other, even in the footnotes. You couldn't find an evangelical to really get into it. So they looked at me and smiled and passed the dissertation. So they weren't bothered by that answer, because it was true so they passed it just fine. And I don't know if they knew what I was writing about sometimes because I was, you know, the dominoes start to tip. Once you start from Genesis 2 and on, or 3 and on, and let these gods be real, things start to tip in a way that by the time you're done, you have a different Bible. And I don't know if my committee, I had a three-person committee, they might have been scratching in the bark of the tree so deeply that they didn't see the forest by the time it was over what I had said. But I'm not complaining, of course. I appreciated their help. But I still to this day, I met one of my advisors at a conference a couple years later and thanked them for it. And as we were talking, I could tell he had no idea what I wrote on. That's how I sensed it. But it's okay.

MSH: It sort of flew right by him or?

RJ: Well, yeah. You can say it in such a way that the audience doesn't really understand. Well this has happened to you, too, Michael, right, where you're talking to an audience, and I taught at a college for 20 some years, and after about 20 minutes, the hand will go up in back of the room and they'll say, 'Wait a sec. Are you saying that those are real?' And you say, 'Yes.' And you can sense this 'oh' kind of a moment, and they sense they're going to have to start over with the

whole discussion. So that's usually what I found in teaching and preaching this material, that it's a very basic idea but to get it through in a simple way without scaring someone or basically undoing everything they've thought, it's a very delicate situation.

MSH: Yeah, I can remember moments like those but then I also sort of remember moments I threw caution to the wind and they look at you like you have two heads. I don't know, I can't recall what I was thinking at any given moment as to why I did one over the other, but yeah, maybe I was just cranky or something or the Packers lost or whatever, who knows. I think that the listeners are going to be interested in some of your experiences if you can recall a few. Now you've already alluded to the fact that you taught over 20 years. You're teaching biblical studies and theology, so do you remember any sort of specific, either 'a-ha' moments or arguments or I can't wait to get out of this class; I'm going to report Dr. Johnson to the dean or something like that? Can you share a couple those if you can remember them?

RJ: I'm sure I was less careful earlier on. And I think this happens, like my wife would say often, and this is maybe a male thing, too, when your mind gets going on something, especially as a teacher, you tend to plow straight ahead and you can't think about anything else but that. And that happened in the early years, maybe early 2000s, finishing the dissertation and I saw everything from that angle, and it's hard not to when you're seeing specific illustrations. I think just that strange look on the eyes of students when they figure out what you're saying. Usually it's a misunderstanding. I would find, and that's my fault for not being clearer, even the word, you know what it was. Well, you've heard of rat my professor.com? I once looked on my own site, which I shouldn't have done. One of the students wrote, 'All he does is talk about Elohim.' And I thought, yeah. I think you're right. But what I said, and he only had me for one short class, I was trying to connect this idea throughout the Old Testament and once you get going down that path, I can see where the student feels a little overwhelmed by how that concept, if they are real, changes not only the First Commandment, but the entire storyline of knowledge tree, the fall of Israel, the coming of Jesus, the meeting of demons, the principalities and powers, the afterlife, there's so many dominoes that have tipped over, by the time you're done, the student thinks you've talked about one thing only. But really what you've done is just connect the dots all through the text.

MSH: Be candid here, what, I grant here the material's new. My experience online and sort of in live settings is there always seems to be two or three or four handful of people that just sort of get it. And I don't know why they necessarily get it? I guess my question is do you think it's a personality thing, an openness thing, or do you think people are actually prepared by what they hear in church? It's hard to assess because it's so random.

RJ: That's a great question. Why do some get it and some not? And I hate to ever, with an audience like this, to ever imply that getting it or not is an intellectual issue. I don't see that. And I also don't think it's just a, oh what's the term? You're just more intuitive than someone else. I think it starts with, boy, that's a good question. Why do some, you're going to have to let me think about that one for a little bit.

MSH: Okay, we can return to it or you can remember it and jump into it. This is in the same arena I asked that question to go into this question. You pastored a lot. You might want to tell the audience how many years you did that, what the contexts were, and then how did you or did you or did you not, I'm sure you pick your spots, get into some of this content with adults in a church context?

RJ: That's a big part of my life as well. My dad was a Baptist pastor so I grew up in the church. I loved him, loved the ministry as a kid. I was the only son that he had so I was very involved. I went off to Bible college and the whole thing. I wasn't intending to be a pastor, just didn't appeal to me, but I wanted to teach. I wanted to teach the Bible. Well I was in Bible college teaching, several years into it, and someone knocked on my door. They needed someone to fill in at a small Evangelical Free Church, about 50 people. That turned into seven years because, well, they just invited me back. I finally became the senior pastor. That church then moved. We decided to take those people and move over to another church that didn't have a pastor. That turned into another 7-8 years. So about 15 years of my life I was pastoring. Classically, or should I say, in the normal sense, it's much harder in church because you're dealing with an audience that only gets to hear you generally on a Sunday morning for half an hour, and that's typically not easy to use that time to explain something like this. Because as soon as you use a Hebrew term or something, part of the audience tunes you out or at least doesn't try to listen too carefully. We were greatly blessed by the people, and I think it was mutual. But I never pushed this issue too deeply. I would allude to it. There were times in the text when I couldn't deny it. But, again, how many people in the audience are carefully listening when you say things like that six line creed in 1 Timothy 3, and one of the lines is, seen of angels, Jesus was seen by angels, and Paul seems to use that as, well, it's one of six lines in the gospel as though this is a critical issue that Jesus was seen by angels. And I connected that in one of my sermons to the demon sermon, should we call them, the demon expressions of who Jesus was when he would appear. They would bow down, Mark 3, and they would say you are the son of God. Are you going to torment us, and I took that back to Jeremiah 10, where God has promised to punish the gods of the Old Testament. And I don't know if people caught it. I guess no one said anything. They shake your hand on the way out and say thank you pastor, but I didn't hear anyone comment on it. To me, it was, did you catch this? You want to stop and pause and say, are you seeing how this all plays together? And you don't have an opportunity that way as a pastor. So there's a lot of other things to do in the ministry, a lot of practical administrative issues. And so, it's good question but I never pushed too hard. And to this day, I wonder how many people, if I asked them, would know my view.

MSH: Well, that's understandable. I think you described pretty well. The time thing is really a big deal because if you only get essentially 30 minutes a week as opposed to 3 50 minute periods, like in a 3 hour class or...

RJ: And what are you expecting of the church? Do you really expect to get a sermon on connecting Jeremiah 10 to 1 Timothy 3? That's not on your list. You're thinking maybe of a list to buy at Target on the way home. I mean, these are good people. I'm not complaining about the quality of the person. It's just where our society is when it comes to what you expect on a Sunday morning.

MSH: I want to go back to the classroom, just to get some of the different contexts here for trying to communicate some of these things. We got the challenge of the classroom. We can't really assume, especially if you're not in a Bible college, but even if it is a Bible college, you can't really assume that your students are really that knowledgeable when it comes to even a broad, and not even a deep, a broad grasp of the books of the Bible and their content and whatnot. And then you get to the local church and you've got the time problem element. And you have different people from different traditions and different levels of interest automatically and whatnot. But compare that to conferences, scholars, because you and I have given papers at a number of conferences, typically the ETS meetings, and how do you think that's going? Can you describe some of the response there because, like you were talking about scholars when you were talking about your committee. And a lot of them sort of just didn't connect the dots. You would've had to do that for them, even though they were supposed to have read with understanding your dissertation. So let's just talk about the scholars for a little bit.

RJ: In my experience, and I'd love to hear yours as well, but I've not noticed personally much reaction in a scholarly conference to the papers. They're getting them so quick, they come in and out. They hear you. They hear the next person over. I delivered at the conference we're familiar with, I've probably given four papers on some relationship of gods and angels or monotheism, those kind of things. It's just not a hot button, yet, I don't think for people that's one of the issues that I really want to see you, Mike, do with your ministry and things like this, is how to get the non-theologian or really the theologian to grasp this concept and how to bring into the conversation and make it part of normal Bible conversation. I don't see it happening and I don't even know how really as much. That's just a good question. It does burden me but...

MSH: We're actually hoping that Unseen Realm does that because we, the conversations we have in the building about that book, and again, for those who might just be jumping in here recently in the podcast, Unseen Realm is the academic book that is due out imminently; lots of footnotes, basically trying to take scholarly information and make it decipherable either to the pastor, someone who has a decent amount of biblical knowledge under their belt to do exactly what Ron just described, put this on the table. So when we talk about it, we think there are going to be people in the academic community that read this and think this is just great, like wow, this is interesting. It's fascinating. I may not agree with everything but boy, I'm sure glad this book is here. And then there are going to be other people who hate it with equal passion because hey, I'm not finding this in the Westminster Confession or my tradition. Outside of Old Testament people, a lot of it frankly is going to be new. I just want to really want an anecdote. I won't use the fellow's name but I get an e-mail about a year ago from a well-known New Testament scholar. And his question in the e-mail was, hey, I'm writing a commentary on the book of Hebrews and I just happened to notice that the quotation from Deuteronomy 32 there in Hebrews chapter 1, if I go look for that it's not really the Masoretic text. It's in the Dead Sea Scrolls and it's some verse about the gods. Do think that has anything to do with the Divine Council stuff you do? And I'm like, I mean I answered him, yes, it does and here's why and so on so forth. But when I sent that e-mail off, I copied a few people in the building and more or less just followed it up by saying, this is what we're dealing with. This guy is an established New Testament scholar and this is news to him. And so unless you're sort of forced, again if you're in

a secular Semitics program to actually, you get hit in the face with this really upfront and you have think about it and deal with it, you're just not going to be familiar with it.

RJ: Right, and do you think that just being part of the denominational school or, again, credentials that scholar is expected to keep and to maintained and to push forward that there's going to be a, well, I'm saying this because I think it's true, so should ask this as a question, that when you are working through your own career or pushing through an idea or writing a book or something, unless a view meets a need for yourself in some way, you're going to let it run by the wayside or maybe not even consider it at all. And I wonder if the issue of gods has any practical value from a denominational stream. If you get into Calvinism, for instance, well, the CRC church or the Presbyterian or even the Lutheran to some degree, they job on that topic and they'll run with it because it does feed part of their tradition. Is there any tradition out there that is naturally fed by this view? I don't sense there is. And so my guess would be, even among your listeners, it's more of an independent discovery, shall we say, by those who are reading their Bible or want to know more about something and they're not either led or constricted, maybe is a better word, constricted by some kind of a theological pattern that they have to keep or they may lose their credentials, real or assumed. So I don't know. That's been part of my wonder, part of my suspicions that the reason someone may not be interested in this is because they don't see the value. They got too many other fish in the pan and those are maybe good things, but they don't see the connected value of this. I think that's where I would be.

MSH: Well, I think that's possible. It sort of, the other side of that coin is they don't see the value because they've never been shown it. And they've never sort of had anybody take them by the hand and say, well, here's the ripple effect it has in all sorts of places.

RJ: Do you think they'll have to start over so deeply?

MSH: I do and I think that's actually the greater problem. I think we live in a culture where a lot of Christians are willing, upfront they're not attached to a specific denomination, a certain number are, but a lot of your Evangelical free churches or community churches, or what not, and they tend to be very eclectic. So you've got a significant number of people already sort of detached from one single tradition or a church context that promotes one single tradition. And then the issue becomes like wow, this is just making me think about so many things I'm already tired. And I just don't know that I want to do that. But it's going to take, and I've hinted this on the blog a little bit, but I think for a book like *Supernatural* and *Unseen Realm*, both of them, I think its success will really depend on grassroots effort. Some friend of the church handing it to another friend or letting them borrow it and say, hey, just read the first two chapters here, in other words, stimulating an interest and having conversations about that and pulling people into the questions so that, going back to your student, the people that really get it are the ones that listen to the question and say, that's really a good question. So I think it's going to take conversations.

RJ: And it does but let me add one more part to that. Where do you stick this in, shall we call, the theological encyclopedia? Where does it start? Where does it end? How do you fit it in? And I'm sure you've struggled with this in writing the book. Is this a discussion to have at the

beginning of the book or do you explain how they fit into already existing stories in the Bible? Do you start in Genesis 1 or do you just move through Abraham's life and then drop in the idea or... That's where I've struggled, is how to drop, and where chronologically, where systematically, do you drop into this discussion and say backup. We go to start over because of what I'm going to be telling you in the next 10 minutes.

MSH: Yeah, I pretty much start, I mean, I'll leadoff Unseen Realm with the gods because that's the provocative issue. And then I go right from that to Genesis 1:26, the whole imaging idea, because there's a direct connection there with the plurals and then the Unseen Realm proceeds in many respects chronologically, using the order of the English Bible and Biblical history and whatnot. So I think part of the rationale for that was so that people could follow the narrative, if I can use that term there. So I thought that would be helpful. But along the way, I have summary sections that sort of summarize why you should care about these last three chapters or the last five chapters, that sort of thing. I think fundamentally it's really about understanding God's interest in humanity, who we are, who God wants us to be, what God wants to share with us, his life forever, that sort of thing. It takes familiar New Testament ideas that most Christians have heard and do cherish and just raises the simple observation, hey, these things have Old Testament roots and there are reasons why these terms are being used and why other terms are not being used, and then taking that into sort of our destiny, our status, and that sort of thing. I think those are connection points, other than sort of the curiosities, the weird passages in the Old Testament. We hit a lot of those, too. But I think to track on what in the world God's busy doing and why is he still interested is important.

RJ: Speaking of those strange passages, I think that's where people may tend to turn us, or turn me, I've heard that, where they'll look at my view on a certain minor passage, shall we call it, and say, well, that's just you. But my concern is that they're missing even Trinitarian issues, monotheism issues, or the problem of evil, or the fall of mankind. I mean angels, demons; it just becomes such a broad topic. That's what I meant by fitting it into the theological encyclopedia. How do I even broach the topic of deity of Christ without backing up and saying let's talk about what a deity is? And uh-oh, where do I start on that? So that's what I meant by trying to fit this in chronologically or even in a simple Bible study, going with six people around the room, how do you start the conversation, that's what I mean.

MSH: It's tough. Some of that I think of personally as book two, a follow-up volume to do it more systematically, but I chose the narrative here. But I try to hit on as much as I possibly can because there is really no area of doctrine that is not affected in some way by this and sort of pick those things off as you're going through the narrative. We'll find out if that works. My goal for the book is to find the four or five people in every church that just have this intuitive sense, or it might be something more overt, that there's got to be more to the Bible than this. There's got to be more to the Bible than what I've been taught, what I'm hearing now. I just have this sense that I'm missing something and I have these questions and never seem to really get good answers to them. So I think every church has a handful of those people. And I think for the book to reach those people, it's really going to have to depend on people on the ground who are interested already, introducing friends and perhaps enemies to what's happening.

TS: And if I may jump in here, what I've noticed is a younger generation seems to be more open-minded to it whether it be because we're raised on sci-fi or whatnot. But the older people that I talk about this content to, they believe in angels. They believe in the supernatural, but when you really get down to it and show them in the Old Testament, every single one of them say they're scared. It gets too real, and I think that the older generation is just plain scared of the content whereas the younger generation is more open-minded and not scared but more interested due to sci-fi in just our generation.

MSH: I think what will happen is providentially what's going to happen and God will see to it that people get the book. We're on the business end. We're committed to the long haul for the whole thing and those who wanted the book to happen in the first place understand that it's going to be controversial, but they're committed to the content. They know it matters. So we'll just see.

RJ: It also may take some major player in evangelicalism, let me say it that way. There's a well-known pastor, should I say the name of the one? John Piper, I've had him in my classroom at Northwestern, well, twice I should say. It wasn't too often. But one time, I overheard him say about me, oh that's the guy who does those weird papers at ETS. Well, what he meant was that the idea of the gods is weird and as long as a big name pastor says that, obviously people in the church will trail with that. Could it take some one of, I don't know how to say it, but a mega church level pastor who decides this is something my people need to know, that would be a fascinating idea.

MSH: That was part of the logic to having two books, because your mega-pastors are going to be the ones recommending the trade book, the little version that you wrote the study guide for, not necessarily the academic version obviously, but if it takes off at that level, then people will become aware that, hey, there's this other book over here that gives you all the documentation and whatnot. So I've really made an effort to, I like the way at your dissertation defense; what's your contribution, well, nothing really. The dirty little secret here for Unseen Realm is that I'm not saying anything new. Nothing that is in the book, it didn't originate with me. What I'm doing is I'm giving people the breadcrumb trail to every one of these ideas and my view my role as synthesizing the ideas and making them decipherable, making people aware that these ideas are out there and there's a pile of research in the academic community behind every one of them.

RJ: That's a very common statement I hear. Why haven't I heard this before? And I say, well, we haven't read their books.

MSH: Right, exactly right. And so if someone wants to say to me as the writer, well, I just don't buy this. I think this is just you. It's like, I'm going to force you, and I'm not going to argue with you in a forum or anything like that or my blog. I'm going to say that you need to go back and critique the bibliography that I provided you. And after you do that, then we can have the discussion. I'm perfectly fine with not getting into a discussion with them but giving them homework. Because if you want to win me, if you want me to say, oh, you're right, there's really nothing to this, this is what I need from you. I need educated critique here. I need to know why this is not the case because I ready. I'm basically ready for you. I've spent 12-15 years of

collecting bibliography. I know where the information is. I have access to it. I've put a lot of it in the book, the companion website. I am ready for your rebuttal. I am ready for your objection. Are you ready to do the work now or are you just going to spout off? I'm not going to try to say it that way, but that is part of the discussion. We're working on this this launch video and there are three scholars being interviewed for the launch video, Gary Breshears, Tremper Longman, and Darrell Bock are the ones who've agreed to do the launch video. And I was there when Gary was in and one of the questions I asked was, in your opinion, do you think Unseen Realm will be controversial? He just started to laugh the he's like, of course it's going to be controversial. One of his big sort of trajectories was it's going to force scholars, not just scholars but everybody else, but even scholars to ask themselves the question, well how much of this stuff about the supernatural world did the biblical writers believe do I believe? And that's an uncomfortable question but it's a necessary question. I've already had people at ETS come up to me and say, who are aware of the project and the book and whatnot, and they're saying this is actually going to be an issue of biblical authority someday, and probably not in the too distant future. They believe we're going to see the day when we're having sessions of ETS on, can we really believe what the biblical writers believed about this stuff over here. It's not science any more or anything like that. It's what they say about the supernatural. And what we're doing, what we're talking about here, is core to that. And so I do think, whether it's supernatural, at the grassroots, or whether it's people either loving or hating Unseen Realm, I think it will be a discussion starter. And who knows where it goes. What do you think, another question here, what sort of discussions do you think, since I brought that up, what other kinds of discussions do you think this will potentially cause or create?

RJ: I think, well, what it's done for me, is, and I did this completely before the new perspective. For those in the audience who know about or have heard about the new perspective on Paul that has hit the waves over the last 10 years or so, I came upon that view in this sense that it was just through the Old Testament watching people come to faith or trust or loyalty to Yahweh as opposed to the gods they used to follow. Think of Abraham himself, it says in Joshua 24 that his father used to worship other gods very clearly, so the story of faith, it's a good question and I'd like to answer it this way. The very story of faith, what it means to believe, when you look at it from the Old Testament, God's point of view, it's changing loyalties from one sphere to another. If I had said that to Abraham, he would look at me as though, well, what else would it have been? That's how to do this. So the idea of presenting the gospel, to me, is as basic as, do these God exists? Are you going to move your loyalty, faith, *amanah* in Hebrew, are you going to move your loyalty from one deity to another or not? That's the question coming out of the Old Testament. So I think to where this can go should come down to tracts. How it should come down, if you want to say it that way, how should you present the gospel to your neighbor who has no idea about the intricacies of Hebrew and Greek, but when it comes to the rubber meeting the road, how do I understand what God wants out of me today? It's that basic to me, and that's why, even as a pastor, I found that this material is helpful because it had very practical outworking. Like you're going through Acts, I'm thinking of the Jew Gentile relationship, and how that was basically, well, not basically. It was completely based on the idea polytheism and trust and idolatry and those questions of how to move my trust from a pagan deity to Jesus, a crucified Nazarene who resurrected from the dead. Those were real questions that have to do right back to the question of how my gods are there and are they real and what is a demon?

How does a demon affect me in my daily life if I sacrificed to them in the open marketplace? All the things in Acts to me are just pulling and tugging their way from the Old Testament stories of the gods.

MSH: Ditto. The whole believing loyalty thing, I agree with you, is fundamentally, it's not about moral performance. It's not about theological knowledge other than the extent of, okay, I have to make a choice now. Which God do I assign my believing loyalty to? And that becomes the issue. David can go off and commit adultery and do other horrible sins but he never wavered on where his believing loyalty was.

RJ: Think of Psalm 23:1, just that verse. 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.' There's a statement of loyalty. And we just studied 1 Samuel in a Bible study I do, and the people I think caught it, but, again, every week we seem to be rotating back to the question of he wasn't a very good person was he? That's not the point. The point that God is after is loyalty. And if you can be like a David and never waver or, the other side, like a Saul and waver all the time. By the way, Mike, I don't know if you ever studied this out but it's fascinating. Watch how Saul refers to Yahweh. He always calls him, your Yahweh. He never refers to him as my Yahweh. He'll say, the Lord your God when he talks to Samuel. He'll never say the Lord my God. Of course, David would have dry heaves if he were ever forced to say it that way. There is your loyalty coming out. And Solomon is both ways. He can't seem to decide which way to go. But it's just a study of Saul, David and Solomon through the lens of the gods. It's a fascinating study.

MSH: Have you really trekked through that? One of the things I wanted to ask you is what are you working on? What's sort of capturing your attention right now?

RJ: This is like you and I. We both like to run things until they're dry. For me right now, it's the Jew Gentile relationship and how that relates to Ephesians. Let me throw a theory at you here. 'For by grace are you saved through faith, not of yourselves.' Think of what the Ephesian audience, 90 some percent Gentile, would've thought by that phrase, for by favor you are saved, grace, favor, same word. And grace is all over the Old Testament, so for Paul to be introducing grace as though it some new thing for these people, I've taken the tact that what Paul is saying is, you Ephesians, remember how you came to the Abrahamic covenant. The Old Testament is, the Torah divides the world in two, the Jew and the non-Jew. So you as the non-Jew, you didn't have a way into the Abrahamic covenant except proselytism basically. And here comes Jesus. Romans 15 says that he died to sanctify the Gentile, the Gentile who could never come into the Temple. And now, to use the application, since the death of Jesus, the Gentile can come in fully Gentile, doesn't have to be Jewish. And for Paul to say, for by favor you Gentiles have now come into the family, those kind of twists and turns through Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, of course most of Paul's letters are written to Gentiles, and watching how he takes that family idea, the new people that God is creating.

MSH: You can see the Gentile sitting there who would've been familiar to some extent, maybe had a Jewish friend or something like that, even whether he's a God "fearer" or not. But you mean to suggest that the favor that Yahweh had placed on my buddy over here sitting next to me who's a Jew that now that's extended to me?

RJ: Acts 10-11, remember what Peter says? They got the Spirit just like we did. And I'm sure the eyes in the room opened up thinking, you got to be kidding. God is now turning to the Gentile with the same favor that he has to the Jew and that all comes out of the Old Testament, which how far back do you have to go to show the audience where we're going with this. But the idea that God chose Israel. God did not choose the other nations. He put other gods over them. That all starts back there and you move forward through and realize what Jesus came to do, to defeat those gods, to put them in their place and to put his feet up on them, 1 Corinthians 15, is really the story Deuteronomy 32 being played out page by page through Acts as Paul moves through the Gentile world, explaining Psalm 1:10, what it means to a Gentile audience, even while Caesar is still in Rome. There is a king on the throne. But Paul is trying to explain that that King actually is a footstool for a dead Nazarene who rose and is living resurrected. So all those pieces, that's what's fascinating about this, is that we're not doing anything new. We're not trying to create doctrine that's not there. But we're trying to put the pieces together and show how they all connect very well.

MSH: Right, and how someone of that time period in contemporaneous with the original biblical writers and their original audience, how they would've parsed all this, the lens in which which they would've seen and read the text or heard of the text presented to them. What they would have been thinking.

RJ: There's another study I've been working on, too, in my spare time and that's idolatry. And why does the Old Testament at times tease or make fun of, and I'm sure you have a good answer for this, but I've not thought through it enough to come up with my own, but at times, there's this rhetoric where they will tease the idolater and say that your God can't move. It can't hear. It can't talk. At other times, idolatry is the bane of mankind. It's this back-and-forth argument through the Old Testament. And yet at the same time, you come into the New Testament and, again, here's my evangelical background coming back to haunt me I think that would turn idolatry into cars and boats and trees and say don't love other things more than God. The last verse of 1 John, it just comes right out and says, 'brethren, keep yourselves from idols.' And I've never heard an evangelical take that to mean other gods exist. I always hear shape up, look at your wallet, and see how much money is in it. That's been a study I've been working on because, again, I see no end to it. It's just huge. It's the cause of the exile, so it's a part of the story that I've never spent time on because my forbearers never taught me that so.

MSH: Talk a little bit about that in the time we have left. Just the whole, I'm not going to ask you to predict anything as audacious as where do you think it most likely, for people who sort of either break free from a tradition or tradition might help them, but why do you think, because I get asked this all the time, why do you think that we just have not been taught this stuff, because like you said, the more time you spend in it, it's almost impossible to miss it. I'm at the point now I literally can't read anything in Scripture and not, my eye will fall on something that ties directly back into some of these major conceptual areas of the Old Testament. Do you think it's just a lack of Old Testament preaching? Do you think it is, what are the filters you see?

RJ: That's a good question. I'm like you. I can't read it without thinking of the dots connecting and I wonder what I used to think. That's what bothers me, 10, 15, 20 years ago. What did I used to think about this text? That's both a question of what needs to be done and how to change it. Mike I don't have a good answer. I think that's why we're here and appealing to those who are listening that there's a common sense side of this that is just waiting to be picked up and moved forward, and I'm glad to be part of it. I'm honestly not alone in it and that's maybe where I actually have to leave it but I don't have a good answer.

MSH: I'm sort of at the same place and I'm not saying this is a good thing, but I don't spend a whole lot of time now worrying about coming up with a silver bullet to rid people of the filters they have or anything like that. My goal is a lot simpler. And that is, I'm going to expose you to this and I hope that you latch onto one or two ideas and they never leave you. In other words, they so trouble your mind in a good way, gnaw at you, and you begin to see that these are really important questions. Once you turn, once you make that much of a turn, and there's something that you want to find an answer to, because 99% of people in church I'm convinced are quite capable of finding answers to these questions if you just alert them to the fact that there are questions here and then you produce things, which is the point of the websites and the books and all that. But there really are answers here that will affirm, ultimately affirm, your understanding of the Gospels and so on and so forth. But if you just know there's a question and you know, okay, well, I know the guy who raised this question for me and he recommended this or that, you remember a little bit of that. As soon as you sort of make that turn and you start getting a question answered, I think that's really all I can hope for, that there's a little spark of curiosity created. This is why I think this is going to have, the impact that the books and everything we're trying to do here, is going to be directly commensurate to people on the ground level getting involved, just introducing their friends to certain thoughts, presenting them with a good question. That's going to drive it. It's not to be the wonderful cover that we made for the book or my exhilarating prose. It's just not going to cut it.

RJ: Right. A good study Bible that is published by a press that is, shall we say, people trust because they know the name and it's sitting on the laps of a dozen people in a circle where they can look, because a lot of people read their study Bibles thinking, they don't separate the line halfway through the page between the footnotes and the text and they're looking down at the footnotes to see what this text means. That may be another step in this process, is to have people with Bibles that, again, we're not trying to, like you said, a silver bullet, but page after page of explanation of what this text means in relation to the other text and so forth. That may be another step in the process.

MSH: I'm glad you mentioned that because that is something I know in my mind gets a little neglected. We have a free study Bible for people who carry digital tools to church instead of a physical Bible, whether it be their phone or an IPAD or something like that or some other tablet. The Faithlife Study Bible, which people can download for free, it's got 2-3 million words in it. And I did the notes for Genesis through Joshua or Judges. And a lot of this by design, a lot of this Divine Council content is in there. But I often forget about that. It's like, oh, yeah, I spent a year and a half writing a half million words for this thing and it's like it never happened because

I sort of mentally track on the latest thing. So anything you wanted to chime in for? Are you going to deliver a paper soon? Are you doing articles, anything like that?

RJ: Well, we'll see if it's accepted. I put one in for ETS this year. I think I called it "Improving NT Wright's Grand Story." NT Wright, for those that read him, I find him delightful brilliant man. He's so broad yet so careful about the text. He's just delightfully bringing me back to the Bible every time I open his books. The one thing I've noticed, I hate to say I could improve on him, but he doesn't take the gods seriously in the sense of real beings. And that's what I'm going to do if it's accepted is a paper on that, showing how this argument that he has been bringing to the evangelicals and very strongly for the last 20 years how it could help. It could answer some questions that he leaves open-ended, but they don't need to be open-ended. They're answered right in the text.

MSH: Did I tell you about Dave Burnett's experience last year at SBL? Did I share that with you?

RJ: No. You may have. I forget.

MSH: Okay. Dave's another guy I want to interview on the podcast. But Dave did a paper in a Pauline section, Pauline study section, on Genesis 15:7, 'so shall thy seed be,' and the whole thing about the Abrahamic Covenant where your descendants are going to be like the stars in the sky and all this kind of stuff, and NT Wright was a responder in that section. And so Dave's paper went through all the Second Temple literature. I actually posted this with Dave's permission on my blog months ago so people could read the paper. But he basically goes through all the Second Temple literature showing how not only did people consider this a quantitative promise, your seed shall be like the stars numerically, but also they saw it as a qualitative promise. So it ties right into divine beings because divine beings are always talked about with the stars' luminous language. And he took that into Second Temple and New Testament discussions about glorification of the believers, all this Divine Council stuff, and in the Q&A afterwards, NT Wright had no idea what this stuff even was. He literally had no clue about Divine Council context or anything like this. And it really showed in the Q&A, and there were three or four people in the Q&A that stood up and, this is NT Wright and he's such a nice guy. You don't go after NT Wright because he's just a neat guy and everybody really appreciates what he does. But they did, I'll use the phrase, they spanked him a little bit basically saying, well, look at this and this and this and this, and I don't who the group was. One or two of them I could see in the discussion afterwards knew Dave and some of them didn't. But they were tracking on this the whole way and he was not. So there is this gap, as wonderful as Wright's stuff can be, there is this gap that would make his case, in certain places, really stronger and, like I said, answer questions.

RJ: Absolutely. It would not weaken his case at all. Numerous times in his books I just underline it and I scream my thoughts next to the paper, if you would just stop right here and add in the reality of the demon or the reality of a god, boy, you'd make the point.

MSH: Well, I hope that gets accepted and if it does, I'll let people know on the blog and hopefully we'll make your paper available. It would be interesting. I would plan to go to that unless they scheduled, I submitted something, too, something about Hebrew and Greek study. But who know. I'd forgotten all about it. Chances are they'll both be accepted and be scheduled right next to, right on top of one another. It always happens. But if it doesn't, I'd be interested in going to hear the discussion, the Q&A afterwards, especially for something like that. And if sparks fly, that would make a good thing to do an interview on.

RJ: Sure. I'll probably send it to Dr. Wright as well and just say thank you. My wife didn't want me to have the title I had, something about improving on his storyline but I just did that out of shock value.

MSH: Instead of the warm cookie model of election, it's how NT Wright can be improved. For those who, little inside baseball here, Ron and I, we'd go to conferences and we would always meet up at some point and say okay, what's the dumbest title, what's the dumbest one? What's one you just looked at me thought, what in the world is this one about? There's some real winners. There really are, and that was one of them, the warm cookie model of election. I don't know how that gets people in the room but.

RJ: One of them, let's see. Elohim had fallen and they can't get back up.

MSH: So you were guilty, too. Well anyway, I am glad you could, we could do this today. We'll have to do it at some future point again, like when you have something specific you've discovered might be a good time to do it, maybe if your paper gets accepted. Who knows but I want to start introducing people who are into this material to the podcast audience. And so that's the logic and I hope listeners got something out of the discussion. I would think they would have. But, again, the goal is just to have you meet Ron and know who he is and you will be hearing other things about him and from him in the future.

TS: Ron, I have a couple of questions for you. First, I just want to make a quick comment about why this knowledge hasn't been that prevalent. I think its 1 Corinthians 2:10, 'These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.' So I think God's revealing more knowledge here lately. Ron, could you tell me about the small-group manual for the Supernatural? Can you give me some details about that?

RJ: Mike was gracious to ask me to provide a study guide for small groups. And so what I did, the logic behind it is a shortened, almost point by point. I take two chapters. There are 16 chapters in the book, so I have 8 chapters, and each of those chapters has, it's not long, a 1000 words each chapter maybe, but I take seminal ideas that Mike has brought out and I add to it. I add other text to it that he didn't have time to go over or dominoes that, if this is true, what Mike said here, think about how this affects over here. So it is a companion volume but it's meant to add illustrative and applicational help. There are a few study questions at the end of each chapter as well for a small group. That's the logic of it.

