

Nimrod The Mighty:

A Riddle, Wrapped in a Mystery, Inside an Enigma

By Andrew Packer

Translation of Genesis 10:8-12

8 Cush fathered Nimrod; he became a mighty one in the earth. 9 He was a mighty hunter before YHWH, therefore it is said, “Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before YHWH.” 10 The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. 11 From that land he went into Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and 12 Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city.

Introduction

Many Christians today may have only heard the name “Nimrod” when it is being used to mock someone for being silly or foolish. His name only appears four times in the whole Old Testament¹ and there is very little information given about him in those verses. His name first appears in Genesis 10, The Table of Nations, and there it says of Nimrod that he “became a mighty one in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before YHWH...” What does that phrase even mean though? There are a several questions that must be answered before this text can be fully understood: Why is the description so abruptly inserted into the Table of Nations? Is his name significant? Is the description of him a good description or a bad description? Is it even possible to determine? Does this matter for the Church today? This paper will seek to answer these questions and give a clearer picture of who Nimrod the son of Cush actually was.

The Enigma of Nimrod

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, Nimrod is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. This makes the study of Nimrod extremely interesting and yet at the same time extremely difficult. Before jumping into the Biblical text it is important to get some

¹ Gen. 10:8-9, I Chron. 1:10, and Micah 5:6.

understanding of where the focus of Nimrod studies has been in recent years. More recent studies seem to be overly obsessed with trying to figure who in history Nimrod is patterned after, actually was, or could have possibly been.² Biblical scholars seem just as obsessed with this historical “Nimrod”, often dealing very little with what the text actually says and instead spend their time speculating where the text came from and who it is describing.³ This paper, while not ignoring these studies, will instead seek to unravel this enigma based on the Biblical context without trying to tie Nimrod down to any specific extra-biblical historic character.

How Do These Verses Fit the Immediate and Broader Context?

This summary of Nimrod’s life takes place in Genesis 10, The Table of Nations. This is sandwiched in between the flood narrative and the Tower of Babel narrative. Nimrod is listed under the section listing the descendants of Ham. The first thing that sticks out about this summary of Nimrod is the change in wording. All of the previous sons are introduced with **וּבְנֵי** and then Nimrod is introduced by **יֶלֶד** in verse eight. In fact, Cush’s other sons have already been listed, but now a special point is made of singling Nimrod out and it is furthered highlighted by the abrupt change in wording. The verses on Nimrod are also the only verses in chapter 10 that tell the reader such specific information. The abrupt insertion, using this change in

² This discussion while somewhat interesting is outside of the scope of this paper whose focus is the Biblical text itself. For a summary of the various views see Hamilton, Victor P. *NICOT: The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990.), 337ff. For a more in depth discussion see Levin, Yigal. "NIMROD THE MIGHTY, KING OF KISH, KING OF SUMER AND AKKAD." *Vetus Testamentum* 52, no. 3 (July 2002): 350-366. And also, Toorn, K. van der, and P. W. van der Horst. "NIMROD BEFORE AND AFTER THE BIBLE." *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 1 (1990): 1-29.

³ See Hamilton, 337ff.; Skinner, John. *The International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*. Second. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963.), 207-212.; Speiser, E.A. *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*. (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964.), 67ff.

introduction and the specific details about him, clearly highlight the importance of this information about Nimrod.

This importance is further highlighted by the author tying Nimrod in with the Flood narrative and the Tower of Babel narrative. Moses does this with several key words. First, Nimrod is connected with the flood narrative with the use of the word נִבֵּר, which is used in Genesis 6:4 to describe the Nephilim. Second, the mention of בְּכֵל and שְׁנַעַר connect Nimrod with the Tower of Babel narrative (Gen. 11:2, 9). In fact the “beginning of his kingdom” was Babel. That these details are not insignificant can be seen from the fact that this is the only place where so much detail is given about any of the descendants and that this connects Nimrod to both the proceeding and following narrative. The further significance of these details will be seen shortly as the rest of this enigma is unraveled.

What's In a Name?

H.C. Leupold believed that how you defined Nimrod's name was the key to how one would interpret these verses.⁴ Leupold⁵, takes the name נִמְרוֹד to be from the Hebrew word מִרְד which means to “be bold and audacious in acts of rebellion or disobedience.”⁶ And he takes the name נִמְרוֹד to mean “let us rebel”. Many even think that his name may have been a nickname based on Nimrod's constant calls for rebellion. Hamilton says that most commentators are in agreement on the root of his name, but that there are more and more scholars looking to the possible Babylonian origin of his name.⁷ Leupold's rendering appears to be the best

⁴ Leupold, H.C. *Exposition of Genesis*. Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976.), 366.

⁵ Ibid. 367.

⁶ BDB 597.

⁷ Hamilton, 338. Luther, Adam Clarke, Keil and Delitzsch all clearly agreed with Leupold. Speiser and Skinner did not give a definition for his name. The Babylonian readings of the name seem to be connected with historical criticism – at least from this author's reading of the material.

understanding for several reasons: 1) There are no good grounds for taking the name as having Babylonian origin and not taking it as a Hebrew name. 2) The phrase “let us”, along with the mentioning of Shinar and Babel fits the broader context of the narrative that follows – the Tower of Babel. 3) The Hebrew rendering also fits best with the immediate context – including that he is a descendant of Ham.⁸ 4) The historical evidence – commentators, Targums, etc. – all weigh heavy in favor of rendering Nimrod’s name this way.⁹

Mighty Hunter of What/Whom?

The foundation has been laid to now look at what is perhaps the most difficult part to understand: גִּבּוֹר-צִיד לְפָנֵי יְהוָה. The word גִּבּוֹר by itself is neither positive nor negative but often means strong or mighty, but can also be used of tyrants.¹⁰ The closest use of this term though is in Gen. 6:4 where the use of the word is clearly in a negative context.¹¹ The next word in the phrase, צִיד, means a hunter.¹² The normal sense is a hunter of animals, but there are instances when the word is used with the hunting of men (I Sam. 24:12 (11); Jer. 16:16). The final part of the phrase לְפָנֵי יְהוָה most likely means in this passage “in the full (mental) view of” YHWH and appears to denote that what he was doing did not escape the watchful eye of YHWH.¹³ This idea is present in the broader context of 6:5, 13 and 11:5 – again tying Nimrod with the Flood narrative and the Tower of Babel narrative. All of these words taken together and in the immediate and broader context set forth Nimrod, not as a benign mighty hunter of animals,

⁸ See above.

⁹ I also believe the mention of Babel, Assyria, etc. further elucidates this point given what role they take throughout the rest of Scripture.

¹⁰ BDB 150, but cf. Ar. ḡabba’run one who magnifies himself, behaves proudly, a tyrant, who is bold, audacious.

¹¹ Cf. Ps. 52:1, 3; 120:4.

¹² BDB 844.

¹³ BDB 815. See Leupold 367. Keil and Delitzsch even take it in the stronger sense of “in opposition too” based on the LXX translation.

but as an evil and wicked tyrant who hunted men and led them in rebellion – most likely at the Tower of Babel. This is the understanding of such Old Testament scholars as Luther, Keil and Delitzsch, H.C. Leupold, Adam Clarke, etc. Even Speiser and Skinner lean in this direction, though admittedly they are not definitive nor clear on this issue. This is even the understanding of various Targums, such as The Jerusalem Targum, The Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel, The Syriac Targums.¹⁴ This appears to be the understanding of most commentators until perhaps the last 50 years or so.¹⁵ If the other assertions in this paper are correct, then there appears to be no reason to understand Nimrod as anything other than a wicked hunter of men and a rebellious tyrant who defied YHWH. Moses expounds on Nimrod in such a way that the reader is brought back to remember the rebelliousness of man before the flood and looks forward

Does it Matter?

If this paper is correct, then the question remains – so what? Obviously any honest Christian wants to understand what the text actually says, even on what appear to be more minor matters. But, does it matter if Nimrod is understood as evil or good? Does it really make a difference for the Church today if Nimrod is taken as a benign figure who happened to be so good at hunting that YHWH took note of Him? Luther answers this question with a clear and powerful assertion: “Moses presents a rather careful account of him so that he might be in full view in a conspicuous place, to inspire fear in the ungodly and to give comfort to the godly.”¹⁶ In other words, properly understanding this passage allows a pastor to rightly distinguish Law and Gospel in this passage and thus allows him to preach and teach the full force of this text in

¹⁴ Qtd. in Clarke 138.

¹⁵ Even see the The Lutheran Study Bibles vague assertions concerning Nimrod.

¹⁶ LW 2:196. Luther, as stated above, would consider the Tower of Babel as part of this account he is referring to.

the way that God intended it to be preached and taught – for the glory of God and the comfort of the sinner. This passage teaches that God does see the wickedness that is perpetrated by tyrants – nothing they do escapes His notice, even when His children may think that He has forgotten them.¹⁷ The proper understanding of this text also shows that not only does God see, but He also acts and judges the wickedness of man – even when they are at what they believe to be the height of their prowess.¹⁸ After the reader reads of Nimrod, and the Tower of Babel he is then taken to Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant where the glorious promise of the coming Messiah is once again given. Moses connects Nimrod with the Flood and the Tower of Babel so that the Church might better understand the pattern of sin, judgment, and grace that permeates the book of Genesis. Clearly there is more at stake than perhaps as casual reading of the text might at first suggest.

Conclusion

The enigma of Nimrod is not quite as perplexing as it first appears. A careful study of the text reveals a great deal about who Nimrod was, what he hunted, and how he lived. Though it may be interesting, there is no need to scour Babylonian history in search of “Nimrod”. Moses reveals Nimrod in a powerful, yet simple way so that the ungodly may fear and the godly may be comforted. Let the reader give careful attention to this marvelous text.

¹⁷ Cf. Psalm 73 .

¹⁸ Obviously this does not imply that God will always judge the wickedness of man in such a dramatic way in this life.

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