

In Search of Nimrod: Nimrod and Esau as Parallel Figures

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Introduction

This study seeks to arrive at an understanding of the enigmatic character Nimrod, the mythical Assyrian conqueror and builder who plays a prominent role in the Genesis accounts of the development of evil after the flood. The methodology for arriving at such an understanding lies in an analysis of the parallel relationship between Nimrod and Esau, and by association, Assyria and Edom, the nation-states that they represent. The research presented here leads to an understanding of Esau/Edom as the literary successor of Nimrod and the Assyrian monarchy that he founded.

Nimrod

Most academic discussions concerning Nimrod focus on the improbable task of identifying him with an extra-biblical, known historical figure.¹ S.

¹ Cf. for example, Y. Levin, "Nimrod the Mighty, King of Kish, King of Sumer and Akkad," *VT* 52.3 (2002): 350–64; Cf. also Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary, (ed. N. Sarna; Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 73, who attempts to identify Nimrod with Naram-Sin; some have argued that Nimrod has his roots in a Mesopotamian deity. This was first suggested by J. Grivel, "Nemrod et les écritures cunéiformes," *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 3 (1874), p. 136–144, and revived by E. Lipinski, "Nimrod et Assur," *Revue Biblique* 73.1 (1966), p. 77–93, who related Nimrod to Marduk in the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma elis*, "when on high." Van der Toorn and P. W. van der Horst, *Harvard Theological Review* 83.1 (1990), p. 1–29, argue against the identification of Nimrod with Marduk and propose an association with the Mesopotamian god Ninurta.

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Abramsky argues persuasively that the biblical reference to Nimrod reflects many periods in Mesopotamian history, beginning with the Sumerian period (Erech) and extending through the Neo-Assyrian Empire (Nineveh, Calah). According to this view, Nimrod need not be positively identified as any particular king but rather as the personification of early Mesopotamian monarchy.²

The Bible's perspective on the moral character of Nimrod (be he an individual king or a conglomeration of monarchs) is not readily inferred from the text:

Cush was the father of Nimrod, who became a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; that is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord." The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Uruk, Akkad and Kalneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah—which is the great city. (Gen. 10:8–12)

The term 'לפני ה' 'before God,' repeated twice in this short narrative, appears 'on the face of things' to convey a positive connotation.³ The Rabbis, however, interpreted Nimrod as one who 'led the entire world in a rebellion against God'.⁴ They derive the name Nimrod from the root מרד rebellion, and the term 'לפני ה' as *against* God, rather than *before* him. Textual basis for the negative interpretation of the term 'לפני ה' offered by the Rabbis may be found in the verse contraindicating idol worship: 'You shall have no other gods before me, עַל־פְּנֵי' (Ex.20:3).

A positive orientation to Nimrod was adopted by some interpreters of the text, such as Ephrem the Syrian, who read the term 'לפני ה' as an indicator that Nimrod acted 'according to the will of the Lord'.⁵ K. A. Mathews, however, argues persuasively in favor of a negative undertone to the text based on thematic and lexical similarities to Shinar and the Tower of Babel narrative which follows our text, with its building of cities,

² S. Abramsky, *Beit Mikra*, 25 (1980): 321–40.

³ H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon, 1997), p. 90-91 proposes that God's name was added to the text in replacement of a Babylonian god. Cf. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, II: From Noah to Abraham; Genesis 6:9-11:32* (trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), p. 201, who argues that God's name is certainly part of the original text, as he believes these verses to have originated in an Israelite epic poem.

⁴ Cf. Erub. 53a; Pesah. 94b; Hag. 13a.

⁵ Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis* 8.2, cf. 8.4.2.

reference to Shinar, and the prominent place of the word **החל**.⁶ M. Hom counters that the similarities to the Tower of Babel narrative draw attention to Nimrod's strength and abilities.⁷ This is unconvincing, as the overwhelming theological trend in Genesis 1-11 is to highlight and document the evolution of sin, not physical strength.⁸

A Mighty Hunter

The significance of the phrase popularized in Nimrod's day, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter (**גִּבּוֹר צַיִד**) before the Lord (**לפני ה')**" (Gen.10:9), is not immediately apparent. The term **גִּבּוֹר צַיִד**, a 'mighty hunter,' is a strikingly unusual word pair found nowhere else in the Bible, in contradistinction to the more ubiquitous term, **גִּבּוֹר חַיִל**, or valiant fighter. The rare appellation 'mighty hunter' brings to mind the ancient Assyrian monarchic tradition of lion hunting, depicted in 7th cent. BCE reliefs of the Assyrian lion hunt.⁹ These stelas showcasing King Ashurbanipal on a lion hunt reflect a long and rich history of royal Assyrian lion hunting. Westermann notes that the Assyrian king's prowess at hunting was not considered to be a sport in the conventional sense. "The hunting of wild animals threatening the community was one of the functions of the king from the early days of the sacral kingship."¹⁰ The centrality of the lion hunt in the ancient Assyrian monarchic tradition is preserved in the Gilgamesh epic, in which Gilgamesh participates in a lion hunt.¹¹ Akkadian cylinder seals from the late 3rd and 2nd millennia depicting kings battling lions reinforce the centrality of this monarchic tradition.¹² The hoary antiquity of the Assyrian royal lion-hunting tradition is preserved in the Uruk 'Lion Hunt Stela'

⁶ K. A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (NAC; Nashville: B&H Pub. 1996), 450.

⁷ Mary Katherine Y. H. Hom, "A Mighty Hunter before YHWH: Genesis 10:9 and the Moral-Theological Evaluation of Nimrod," *VT* 60 (2010): 63–68.

⁸ Cf. Matthews, *Gen. 1-11*, p. 60. Matthews says that "What we find in ch. 1-11 is the divine initiation of blessing, which is compromised by human sin followed by gracious preservation of the promise."

⁹ Cf. http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/galleries/middleeast/room_10_assyria_lion_hunts.aspx.

¹⁰ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 516.

¹¹ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Assyrian International News Agency Books Online www.aina.org, p. 10.

¹² Dominique Collon, "Nimrod, the Mighty Hunter, and his Descendants Contest Scenes on Cylinder Seals," pages 28–32 in *Seals and Sealing in the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. Goodnick Westenholz; Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem Publications 1, 1995).

fragment circa 3,000 BCE, which depicts two separate scenes featuring a priest-king engaged in lion hunting.¹³

Benzel explains the significance of the Assyrian royal lion-hunting tradition. “Lion hunts were specifically restricted to royalty, and kings for millennia even described themselves as lions, having taken on the mantle of the animal’s power by defeating it in combat.”¹⁴ Nahum’s description of the palace at Nineveh, the Assyrian capitol, as a lion’s den, reinforces the close association between the Assyrian monarchy and lions.

‘Where now is the lions’ den, the place where they fed their young, where the lion and lioness went, and the cubs, with nothing to fear? The lion killed enough for his cubs and strangled the prey for his mate, filling his lairs with the kill and his dens with the prey. “I am against you,” declares the Lord Almighty. “I will burn up your chariots in smoke, and the sword will devour your young lions. I will leave you no prey on the earth. The voices of your messengers will no longer be heard.’ (Nah. 2:12–14)

Hosea also describes the Assyria monarchy in leonine terms.

“When Ephraim saw his sickness and Judah his sores, then Ephraim turned to Assyria, and sent to the great king for help. But he is not able to cure you, not able to heal your sores. For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, like a great lion to Judah. I will tear them to pieces and go away; I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them. Then I will return to my lair until they have borne their guilt and seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me.” (Hos. 5:13–15)

To return to our original question regarding the significance of the phrase “Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter (גִּבּוֹר צַיִד) before the Lord” (Gen.10:9), we may infer that Nimrod’s role as a ‘mighty hunter’ conferred upon him the mantle of the hunted animal’s power (in his case, the lion),

13. Cf. The Baghdad Museum Project, <http://www.baghdadmuseum.org/Photos.htm>. This stela is thought to be one of the earliest examples of pictorial narration in art. Cf. Kim Benzel, *Art of the Ancient Near East: A Resource for Educators* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010), 32. The priest-king depicted in the stela is regarded as a canonical figure for later art, although nothing is known about him as an individual. Cf. Henri Frankfort, “The Last Predynastic Period in Babylonia,” *Cambridge Ancient History*, (Vol.1:2; eds. I. E. S. Edwards, C. J. Gadd, N. G. L. Hammond; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), 80–86.

¹⁴ Ibid; this observation is interesting in light of the Bible’s own tradition of Samson and David defeating lions with their bare hands prior to their rise to power. Cf. Jud.14:5, 1Sam. 17:36; it is noteworthy that the tribes Dan and Judah were closely associated with the lion image. Cf. Gen. 49:9; Deut. 33:22.

by his having defeated it in combat. The significance of the animal likeness conferred upon Nimrod, and in particular, his leonine likeness, will be revisited further down in the discussion on Esau.

Before the Lord

We will now investigate the significance of the term 'לפני ה', 'before God,' within the phrase "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter (גִּבּוֹר צַיִד) before the Lord, (לפני ה')." The Genesis Nimrod text and its unusual 'mighty hunter' terminology, together with its emphasis on the vast extent of Nimrod's reign, places a stress on the theme of Nimrod's royal dominion, רֵאשִׁית מַמְלַכְתּוֹ. This is reinforced by the seemingly innocuous phrase הוּא הִיָּה literally interpreted, 'he was.' (Gen.10:9) The only other usage of this descriptive phraseology in the Pentateuch is found earlier, in connection with the sons of Lamech, who were also noted within the context of a genealogy for their role as being 'firsts' in their respective fields.¹⁵ The implication is that Nimrod is not only attributed with having been a prolific builder and an inexorable conqueror; as Nachmanides points out, he was mankind's very first monarch.¹⁶ The significance of Nimrod and his dominion was far more than his having merely been the first king. He was the originator of the very notion of monarchy and a global empire. This explicates the passage: 'He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; that is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord."' (Gen.10:9) Nimrod, the individual king, or the conglomeration of monarchs, established a mighty reign that was revered by all, and whose dominion seemed to encompass most if not all of the known world. It probably appeared to ancient man as though Nimrod ruled all of mankind. This is what is meant by the use of the term 'לפני ה' before God. We find the phrase 'לפני ה' in places where the entire world is the referent, for the entire earth *is* essentially *before God*, which may be observed in the Psalms:¹⁷

'Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, (לִפְנֵי ה') for he comes, he comes to judge the earth, (הַיּוֹרֵד). He will judge the world, (תִּבְרָל) in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.' (Ps. 96:13)

The connotation of the phrase 'לפני ה' as implying the entire world, in the context of our text, also works well together with the parallel Tower

¹⁵ Gen. 4:20-21.

¹⁶ Nachmanides, Gen. 10:9.

¹⁷ Ps. 98:9 is nearly identical with Ps. 96:13.

of Babel text, which Mathews noted as having lexical similarities to the Nimrod text through the shared motifs of Shinar, the building of cities and introduction with the word הֶחֱלָ.¹⁸ In this text as well, the entire known world is described as consisting of one place, one people, and one language:

‘Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.’ (Gen.11:1-2).

Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord

The significance of the enigmatic saying popularized in Nimrod’s day, “Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter (גִּבּוֹר צַיִד) before the Lord (לפני ה’),” may now be properly understood. Nimrod was a brutally aggressive monarch whose dominion and dread extended throughout all of the inhabited earth. The themes fundamental to the Nimrod/Assyria text will now be shown to also play a central role in the Genesis text recounting the birth of Esau and the emergence of Edom/Seir.

The Emergence of Esau

Our discussion on Esau, the individual and the microcosm of Edom, will begin with a close reading and analysis of the language used by the Genesis narrative leading up to and immediately following his birth. This text treats Esau and Jacob as eponymous figures, allegorical symbols of the national identities that they come to represent. To begin with, they are both referred to as nations while still in utero. Esau is described as being hairy at birth and ruddy in complexion, an allusion to the land of Seir and to the nation of Edom. The first step in analyzing this text will be to establish and evaluate its semantic field. An examination of Gen.25:22–27 yields the following twelve prominent lead words: בֶּן / *ben* (son), גּוֹי / *goy* (nation), הִפָּרַד / *hippared* (to be separated), עָבַד / *eved* (serve), יָלַד / *yeled* (birth/child), רִאשׁ / *rosh* (head/first), שֵׁם / *shem* (name), אָח / *ah* (brother), גָּדַל / *gadal* (growth/big), צַיִד / *tzayid* (hunt), אִישׁ / *ish* (man), אֹהֶל / *ohel* (tent).

The emergence of fraternal nations preceded by an ominous oracle predicting their eternal struggle is also the focus of the genealogical narrative describing events in the days of Noah. Both of these Genesis genealogies relate to the birth of brothers, their struggles, and subsequent division into nations, highlighting one child for being a ‘first’ who displayed superior hunting prowess, and another, who dwelled in tents. In addition

¹⁸ Cf. nt.7.

to their thematic similarities, these texts' semantic fields are strikingly parallel:

'He (Noah) said, "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves (עֶבֶד / 'eved 'avadim) will he be to his brothers (לְאָחָיו / le-ehav)." He also said, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave (עֶבֶד / 'eved) of Shem. May God extend Japheth's territory; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem (בְּאֶהֱלֵי־שֵׁם / be-ohalei Shem) and may Canaan be the slave (עֶבֶד / 'eved) of Japheth." After the flood Noah lived 350 years. Noah lived a total of 950 years, and then he died. This is the account (תּוֹלְדוֹת / *toldot*) of Shem (שֵׁם / Shem) Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons (בְּנֵי־נוֹחַ / *bnei Noah*) who themselves had sons (בָּנִים / *banim*) (וַיִּוָּלְדוּ / *va-yivaldu*) after the flood ... From these the maritime peoples (הַגּוֹיִם / *ha-goyim*) spread out (וַיִּפְרְדוּ / *nifredu*) into their territories by their clans within their nations (בְּגוֹיֵיהֶם / *be-goyeibem*), each (אִישׁ / *ish*) with its own language ... Cush was the father of (יָלַד / *yalad*) Nimrod, who became a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty hunter (גִּבּוֹר־צַיִד / *gibor tẓayid*) before the Lord; that is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter (גִּבּוֹר־צַיִד / *gibor tẓayid*) before the Lord." The first centers (רֵאשִׁית / *reishit*) of his kingdom were Babylon, Uruk, Akkad and Kalneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah—which is the great city (הַגְּדוֹלָה / *ha-gedolah*).'¹⁹ (Gen.9:25 – 10:14)

While it may be argued that when the individual terms that are shared between these two texts are each examined separately, they are not found to be distinctive, the 'lexical cohesion' of these two texts, or the unique way in which these particular words recur as a tight set in both places, supports the supposition of a deliberate link.¹⁹ It is critical to note that these are the only two biblical texts that trace lineage while making use of the word הִפְרָד (to be separated), and that detour from their respective genealogies to take special note of both hunting and tent-dwelling vocations, and that are preceded by an ominous oracle foreboding an ongoing future sibling rivalry.²⁰ The similar lexical patterns and thematic points of contact that emerge from these two genealogies serve as a preliminary indicator that further exploration of the relationship between these two

¹⁹ Adele Berlin explores 'lexical cohesion'; the way in which words are connected in a sequence, and the role that this plays in interpretation. Cf. Adele Berlin, "Lexical Cohesion and Biblical Interpretation," *Hebrew Studies* 30 (1989), p. 29-40.

²⁰ Gen. 9:25 and 25:23.

texts is warranted. If additional significant points of contact emerge between the two texts, then we may assume the two texts to be intentionally parallel.

Edom/Seir

The events leading up to and recounted at the time of Esau's birth in Gen.25 describe Esau in terms that highlight his role as the progenitor of a nation. His birth is preceded by an oracle that relates to both fetuses not as two individuals, but as future nations: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated" (Gen.25:23). We are told that Esau had a ruddy complexion, "אֶדְמוֹנִי", and that he was born with an excessive amount of body hair, like a fur garment, "כְּצֹמֵר קְצָרָה". These descriptions foreshadow Esau's future appellations Edom (red) and Seir (hairy), and relate more to Esau's role as their founding patriarch. Interestingly, while the national sobriquets Seir and Edom are acquired only later on in Genesis 36, the meaning of the given name 'Esau' is never formally explained in the text recounting his birth. Many of the Rabbinic exegetes relate the name Esau, עֵשָׂו, to the root עָשָׂה, the verb for doing, meaning that at birth Esau was fully 'done' or developed, complete with a mantle of thick body hair.²¹ Nahum Sarna notes that some scholars relate the name Esau to the Arabic, *gh-s-w*, meaning to cover or develop. Both options relate to Esau's unusual full physical maturation at birth. Complete physical maturation in newborns coupled with full body hair are attributes normally associated with animals, not with humans.²² The motif of Esau's hair is once again used to portray him as being animal like when Rebecca dresses Jacob in actual animal skins when trying to pass him off as Esau. Esau's wild character is subtly reinforced by his description as an "אִישׁ שָׂדֵה", ostensibly, a man of the field (Gen.25:27). Whereas the term "חַיַּית הַשָּׂדֵה", wild animal, appears over thirty times throughout the Bible, there is no other occurrence of the term "אִישׁ שָׂדֵה". The uncommon coupling of these two words implies the meaning 'wild man.' Further subtle indications of the animal-like identification of Esau's character may be observed in his speech, when Esau refers to the fateful pottage as "הַחֶמְדָּה הַהַיְוֶהֱ אֲדָמָה", 'this deep red' pottage (Gen.25:30). The word אֲדָמָה actually mean red; it is more accurately the color of blood.²³ Esau's identification by the text as a 'man of the field/wild man' and a hunter colors his strong

²¹ Rashi and Rashbam, Gen. 25:25.

²² Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*, 180.

²³ HALOT, 'אֲדָמָה,' CD ROM ed. p.15; Cf. Is.63:1–6, esp. 2.

attraction to things blood red, אָלֶם-אָלֶם, as suggesting bloodthirsty, animal-like tendencies.²⁴

Later in Gen. 36 we read about Esau's lineage, regarding which the text repeatedly informs us (four times), that Esau is Edom.²⁵ These references serve to draw the reader back to the crucial moment of the sale of the birthright for 'red-red' pottage. This text lists the chieftains who ruled in Edom, and the 'kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the children of Israel' (Gen. 36:31). In other words, according to Genesis, Esau's kings came first, preceding Israel's established monarchy by centuries.²⁶

Our textual encounters with Esau, from the prophecy preceding his birth, to the sale of the birthright, and later to the text listing his progeny, convey the sense of Esau's having been a 'first.' This is expressed in the sense of his having been the actual firstborn, of his being the progenitor of the future nation-state Edom/Seir, and his being the first to establish a monarchy, before Israel. Esau is also described in distinctly animal-like terms. These thematic elements are highly reminiscent of Nimrod, whose primary characteristics highlighted by the text are his role in being a 'first,' through the establishment of a monarchy, and his being a 'mighty hunter,' which was noted above for the quality of taking on the mantle of the animal's power by defeating it in combat. Interestingly, Nineveh, the flagship city of the Assyrian empire that was established by Nimrod, also displayed the color red on its banners:

'The shields of the soldiers are red; the warriors are clad in scarlet.
The metal on the chariots flashes (red-hot) on the day they are made ready; the spears of juniper are brandished' (Nah. 2:4).

Lions

The Rabbis, who recognized the implied relationship that the text draws between Esau and Nimrod, drew attention to it by weaving a homily recounting how Rebecca dressed Jacob in Esau's special garments that he

²⁴ Esau's declaration "Behold, I am going to die, what good is the birthright for me?" Gen. 25:32 offers another glimpse into Esau's belligerent tendencies. The expression הוֹלֵךְ לַמּוֹת, like the expression נִפְשׁוּ לַמּוֹת or 'quick to risk their lives in battle,' Jud.5:18, conveys battle readiness. Esau had no use for a future inheritance when he was perfectly capable of military conquest.

²⁵ Gen. 36:1, 8, 19, 43.

²⁶ This article focuses on the biblical approach to the emergence of Esau/Edom. Historiographic and archeological inquiries related to the development of the Edomite nation-state remain outside of the realm of this study.

had inherited from Nimrod.²⁷ *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* draws the connection as well, connecting both Esau and Nimrod with Adam, who was given the mission of ruling the animals and conquering the world.²⁸ Aside from drawing a parallel between Nimrod and Esau, this Midrash hints that the domination of the world established by Nimrod, and eventually succeeded by Edom, need not have a priori been destructive. Adam's charge of conquering the earth could just as easily have been expressed through mankind's harnessing of the earth's potential for the benefit of mankind.

Another significant motif developed in relation to Nimrod and ancient Assyria, and recurring within the Esau/Edom narratives, is the affinity with lions. Srinivasan delves into the shared roots of the Egyptian and the Hori/Seir (later known as Edom) cultures, specifically in relationship to the sphinx.²⁹ He explains that the Egyptian Sphinx, a cosmic lion, was associated with the god Herakhty, which derived from the ancient Indo-Aryan man-lion god known as both *Hari* and *Seir*:

Hebrew Hori was also the name of the same man-lion god, Nar-simha or the Sphinx, symbolic of Herakhty. In the Indian contexts, some of the names of god Hari are synonyms of a lion, as well as of god Hari, who is also a man-lion, that is, the lion god Sphinx. Seir, 'hair' too once was the name of the same lion god.³⁰

In addition to the leonine underpinnings of Hori/Seir, archeological finds link later Edomite kings with the sphinx. A seventh century BCE royal seal impression from Umm el-Biyara, an Edomite mountain settlement overlooking Petra, features a winged throne sphinx upon which the king is seated, which reads, "Belonging to *Qaus Gabar*, King of Edom."³¹ The profile of another sphinx was found in Horvat Qitmit, an Edomite site in the Negev desert.³² The sphinx is known to be associated with Leo, the astro-lion of the zodiac.³³ The *Pesikta Zutarta* also correlates the zodiac

²⁷ Cf. Gen. Rabbah 63.

²⁸ *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, Gen. 24.

²⁹ Liny Srinivasan, *Desi Words Speak of the Past: Indo-Aryans in the Ancient Near East* (Bloomington: Author House, 2011), 193-194.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 194.

³¹ Philip J. King, *Jeremiah: An Archeological Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 48; Edward Lipinski, "Ammonite and Edomite Personal Names in the Light of Assyro-Babylonian Sources," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 67.2 (2014), 36-45, esp. 42.

³² Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (London: A&C Black, 2003), 320.

³³ Thomas Brophy, *The Origin Map: Discovery of a Prehistoric, Megalithic, Astro-physical Map and Sculpture of the Universe* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2002), 89.

Leo, the cosmic lion, with the kingdom of Edom.³⁴ Ibn Ezra in his astrological work does the same.³⁵

Esau's fur Mantle

The text describing Esau's birth provides another subtle clue pointing to a link between Esau and Nimrod. Gen.25:25 recounts that at the time of his birth, Esau was cloaked in what looked like an 'אֲדָרֶת שֵׁעָר', a fur mantle. The singular use of the unusual word אֲדָרֶת, especially to describe the appearance of a newborn baby, is striking.³⁶ The אֲדָרֶת is a robe customarily associated with leadership and traditionally worn by prophets and kings.³⁷ In Jo. 3:6 we read that the king of Nineveh, a city founded by Nimrod, wore an אֲדָרֶת. Assyria was well known in the ancient world for its thriving textile industry.³⁸ Ezekiel clearly references the fine textiles that were worn by and that identified Assyrian officers:

'Oholah engaged in prostitution while she was still mine; and she lusted after her lovers, the Assyrians—warriors clothed in blue, governors and commanders, all of them handsome young men, and mounted horsemen...Her sister Oholibah saw this, yet in her lust and prostitution she was more depraved than her sister. She too lusted after the Assyrians—governors and commanders, warriors in full dress, mounted horsemen, all handsome young men. I saw that she too defiled herself; both of them went the same way. But she carried her prostitution still further. She saw men portrayed on a wall, figures of Chaldeans portrayed in red, with belts around their waists and flowing turbans on their heads; all of them looked like Babylonian chariot officers, natives of Chaldea.' (Ezek. 23:5–15)

It would appear that garments produced in Shinar were renowned for their fine workmanship, and were widely perceived as symbols of status

³⁴ *Pesikta Zutarta (Lekah Tov)* Gen. Ch.1, 14.

³⁵ Shlomo Sela on Ibn Ezra, *The Book of Reasons. A Parallel Hebrew-English Critical Edition of the Two Versions of the Text* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 161; Maharsha makes a similar observation in his *Hiddushei Aggadot* on BT Yoma 69b and BT Bava Batra 73a.

³⁶ The word אֲדָרֶת appears nowhere else in the Pentateuch.

³⁷ *HALOT*, 'אֲדָרֶת,' p. 17.

³⁸ Cf. K. R. Veenhof, *Aspects of Old Assyrian Trade and Its Terminology* (Leiden: Brill, 1972); cf. also Luca Peronel, "Spinning and Weaving at Tell Mardikh-Ebla (Syria): Some Observations on Spindle-Whorls and Loom Weights from the Bronze and Iron Ages," in *Ancient Textiles: Production, Crafts and Society* (ed. Marie-Louise, Nosch, C. Gillis; Oxford: Oxnow Books, 2007).

and prestige. Further evidence supporting this hypothesis may be found in Josh.7:21, where Achan covets an Assyrian mantle, an אֲדָרֶת שֹׁנַעַר.

Richard Nelson argues that “it would be peculiar to construct ‘robe of Shinar’ to signify place of origin; it is better to interpret this as a ‘robe made of Shinar fabric.’³⁹ Stec agrees that the phrase is peculiar, as he assumes that the country of origin is not usually described by a construct phrase.⁴⁰ Stec proposes eliminating the ‘nun,’ which he assumes to have accidentally made its way into the text, thus rendering the term אֲדָרֶת שֹׁעַר, as in Gen. 25:25. None of the classic biblical translations render the Joshua text as referring to a hairy mantle, nor are there any variant texts to support Stec’s hypothesis.⁴¹ Furthermore, the very premise for suggesting an alteration of the text in this case is fundamentally flawed. The Bible contains numerous examples of the country of origin being used in a construct phrase, such as Egyptian chariots רֶכֶב מִצְרַיִם (Ex.14:7) and boats constructed in Tarshish אֲנִיּוֹת תְּרִשִׁישׁ (Isa.23:14).

It is more likely that when the text spoke of Esau at birth as though clothed in an אֲדָרֶת שֹׁעַר it intended that the reader would automatically draw the association to אֲדָרֶת שֹׁנַעַר, which is essentially what Stec did, although in the reverse. He *removed* a letter from the Joshua text, instead of *adding* it to the Genesis text. Wordplay suggestive of alternative lexical associations, or paronomasia, is a powerful literary tool, and may be found throughout the Bible. A clear example of this phenomenon may be observed in Amos 8:12, where Amos sees קִיץ summer fruit in a prophetic vision and understands that the intended message is that the קֵץ end, is near. S. Segert explains how paronomasia functions in the Bible:

‘Listeners had to find for themselves the appropriate connections from the synonyms and from similar words or roots and then to enjoy them. Even the concealing of such connections can be considered a specific stylistic intention.’⁴²

The Genesis wordplay suggestive of אֲדָרֶת שֹׁנַעַר the traditional mantle of Assyrian kings may be understood to be another subtle literary point of association between Esau the founder of Edom and Nimrod, the legendary builder of the great cities of Shinar.

³⁹ Richard Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 98.

⁴⁰ D. Stec, “The Mantle Hidden by Achan,” *VT* 41 (1991): 356–9.

⁴¹ John Lloyd, *The Book of Joshua: A Critical and Expository Commentary on the Hebrew Text* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1886), 96.

⁴² S. Segert, “Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative in Judges,” *VT* 34 (1984): 454–61.

Edom and Nimrod through the Eyes of the Chronicler

Assis argues that the rationale behind the later prophets' hostile attitude towards Edom throughout the Bible stems from Israel's feelings of despair at the time of the destruction, which derived from the attitude that God had abandoned his people following the fall of Jerusalem.⁴³ Assis calls further attention to 1Chron.1:43–51, where the Gen. 36 Edomite-king list is revisited, but with the curious addition of the repeating word *תמת* in reference to the deaths of the Edomite kings. This, Assis explains, is for the express purpose of defining Israel's identity in contradistinction to the existential challenge posed by Edom.⁴⁴ Assis argues that the reason for the inclusion of the Edomite-king list is to stress the inferiority of Edom's monarchy in relation to Israel.⁴⁵ Riley comments that the most striking feature of the list of kings of Edom in the opening chapter of 1Chron. is the 'complete lack of dynasty,' which is made explicit through the naming of the different fathers of each king, thus highlighting the absence of a successor.⁴⁶ Nachmanides makes a similar observation, earlier on in Genesis, where he notes the glaring absence of any Edomite royal familial dynasty.⁴⁷

The detailed Edomite-king list in 1 Chron. 1, followed by the descendants of Israel by tribes, is designed to signal the decline of the Edomite dynasty. According to Assis, the impression that the chronicler wanted to convey was the simultaneous rise of one against the decline of the other. Assis sees this as indicative of the attitude towards Edom as inferior, specifically in post-exilic biblical literature.⁴⁸

Another glaring textual anomaly in 1 Chron. 1, which is directly relevant to our discussion on Edom, is the reappearance of the brief Nimrod text from Gen.10, in 1Chron.1:10. The appearance of this narrative verse in the midst of the profoundly laconic Chronicle genealogy, which reduces the description of the descendants of Adam in Gen.10 to three verses in

⁴³ Elie Assis, "Why Edom? On the Hostility towards Jacob's Brother in Prophetic Sources," *VT* 56.1 (2006): 1–20, esp.19.

⁴⁴ Idem, "From Adam to Esau and Israel: An Anti-Edomite Ideology in 1Chronicles 1," *VT* 56.3 (2006): 287–302, esp. 298.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 302; Cf. R. G. Coggins, *The First and Second Books of Chronicles* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), 16. Coggins thinks that 1Chron.1 is not anti-Edomite; Simon De Vries also fails to mention any anti-Edomite sentiment in the chapter in idem, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 34.

⁴⁶ William Riley, *King and Cultus in Chronicles: Worship and the Reinterpretation of History* (JSOT supp. Edinburgh: A&C Black, 1993), 51.

⁴⁷ Nachmanides, Gen. 14:1 and 36:31.

⁴⁸ Assis, "Why Edom?" 299-300.

1Chron.1:1–3, and the descendants of Noah in Gen.11:10–32 to three verses, vv.24–27, is striking. It is fascinating that the same chronicler who opted to eliminate all extraneous verbiage, including all verbs and relative pronouns, chose to include the short Nimrod account: ‘Cush was the father of Nimrod, who became a mighty warrior on earth.’ (1Chron.1:10) This verse stands out not only for its not relating strictly to the genealogical record like the surrounding verses; it is particularly striking for its inclusion of a verb, נָלַד begot, which the surrounding genealogy lacks. In addition, it contains a pronoun, and a short descriptive statement. Even Noah and Abraham did not merit such verbose treatment by the chronicler! The undue emphasis that the chronicler places on both Nimrod and Esau in 1 Chron. 1 confirms our suspicion of an ideological relationship between the two.

Nimrod/Assyria and Esau/Edom, a Homogenous Pair

Assyria and Edom are portrayed in the Bible from the moment that they walk onto the biblical stage as an existentially homogenous pair. Nimrod and the Assyrian Empire that he establishes, foreshadow the subsequent emergence of Esau and Edom, who exhibit many of the same core characteristics as their ideological predecessors. Assyria consumed smaller tribes and ethnic groups in their advance toward imperial domination: ‘Now the whole world had one language and a common speech’ (Gen.11:1). This offers a perspective on why God reacted to the building of the tower of Babel by imposing ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Like Assyria, Edom assumed the identities of the aboriginal peoples who had formerly inhabited the land east of the Jordan. Seir the Horite in Gen.36:20 became subsumed in Esau’s genealogy together with the other indigenous inhabitants of Edom. Nachmanides and later commentators make the point that the kings of Edom have no familial continuity and are all of seemingly foreign origins.⁴⁹ Though they were separated genealogically and territorially, the Assyrian imperialistic culture of domination and subjugation found its existential continuation in Edom, who, like their Assyrian predecessors, embraced a geopolitical policy of consuming and assimilating rival cultures.

The abundant lexical and thematic links between Nimrod and Esau point to this duo as sharing a common trajectory. Although they are both

⁴⁹ Nachmanides, Gen. 14:1; cf. Thompson, who points out that the Edomite-king list in Gen.36 appears to be unrelated to the Seir list, the Esau genealogy, and the Israelites. Linda Thompson, *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel: The Literary Formation of Genesis and Exodus* (Edinburgh: A&C Black, 1987), 115.

introduced as individuals, they are meant to be understood as the personification of the monarchies and nations that they proceed to found. Their shared characteristics were shown to include animal-like tendencies and a hunger for territorial and cultural domination. Nimrod was the first to establish an empire rooted in tyranny, and Esau was his ideological progeny. Jacob's contests with his brother, from their *in utero* struggles to the sale of the birthright and the fraudulent acquisition of the patriarchal blessing, must be viewed within the literary framework of the struggle against evil, a defining theme in the book of Genesis. The motif of the struggle against evil that began in the Garden of Eden and was continued in the Flood tales and the emergence of Nimrod is developed further in the Esau narratives.

Conclusion

An analysis of the lexical field and thematic similarities between the two texts recounting the emergence of Nimrod and the microcosmic story of Esau's birth and early years, points to a conceptual relationship between Nimrod/Assyria and Esau/Edom. Nimrod is credited with establishing the first monarchy and empire, and Esau became the founding patriarch of a nation ruled by an imperial monarchy. Further indications of Assyrian-Edomite affinities are gleaned from 1 Chron. 1, where the two are again juxtaposed by the text. Although they were separated genealogically and territorially, the Assyrian imperialistic culture established by Nimrod found its natural continuation in Esau's Edom, who, like their Assyrian ideological predecessors, embraced a geopolitical policy of consuming and assimilating rival cultures. Nimrod plays a critical role in the Genesis accounts of the development of evil after the flood. Like Nimrod and his personification of early Mesopotamian monarchy, Esau and Edom are an inseparable pair. The same individual who laid the foundation for the development of the future Edomite Empire is consistently portrayed eponymously. Esau emerges from this study as Nimrod's literary successor and ideological scion, a figure who sustained and advanced the thread of the development of evil from the days of Nimrod, in the opening chapters of Genesis. 