

## **NIMROD AND THE TOWER OF BABEL**

### THE FIRST WORLD EMPIRE

There is an interesting feature of Moses' treatments of the descendants of Ham. In the list of nations there is an interruption starting in verse 8 and continuing to verse 12. These verses do not deal with the general movements of peoples and nations, but with one particular descendant of Cush, named Nimrod, who is said to have been the founder of the first world empire. Here is the first place in the Bible where the word "kingdom" occurs. The word is used, not of God's kingdom (as it is later), but of this first rival kingdom, that of Nimrod. This was obviously of great importance to Moses, for a related interruption occurs in the first nine verses of chapter 11, in the story of the tower of Babel.

What is so significant about Nimrod? The fact that he established cities and built a kingdom is important, of course. But there is much more about this person.

Nimrod was the first person to become a "mighty" man. These verses call attention to this by using the adjective "mighty" three times in describing him: "Nimrod ... grew to be 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'" (vv. 8, 9). Why is this emphasized? Is it good or bad? After we get into the study you will be able to judge if it is "good or bad."

The empire of Babylon under Nimrod was an affront both to God and man, an affront to God in that it sought to do without God (Gen. 11:1-9) and an affront to man in that it sought to rule over other people tyrannously. Martin Luther was on the right track when he suggested that this is the way the word "hunter" should be interpreted. This is not talking about Nimrod's ability to hunt wild game. He was not a hunter of animals. He was a hunter of men – a warrior. It was through his ability to fight and kill and rule ruthlessly that his kingdom of Euphrates valley city states was consolidated.

One commentator renders this paragraph: "Cush begat Nimrod; he began to be a mighty despot in the land. He was an arrogant tyrant, defiant before the face of the Lord; wherefore it is said, Even as Nimrod, the mighty despot, haughty before the face of the Lord. And

the homeland of his empire was Babel, then Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. From this base he invaded the kingdom of Asshur, and built Nineveh, and Rehoboth-Ir, and Calah, and Resin between Nineveh and Calah. These make up one great City. (Barnhouse, *The Invisible War*)

Here we have a great city. But it is great, not as Jerusalem is great (as God's city), but great in its defiance of God. This is man's city, the secular city. It *is of man, by man, and for man's glory.*

### **The Tower of Babel**

The second interruption in the list of descendant goes along with the first. The first tells of Nimrod's exploits. The second does not mention Nimrod but speaks rather of an attempt to build the city of Babel (Babylon). A central feature of the city was a great tower. These are not separate accounts since Babylon was the initial city of Nimrod's city-building empire. In the first account we have an emphasis on Nimrod – what he was like, what he did, what his goals were. In the second we have the same theme but from the perspective of the people around Nimrod. In each case there is a desire to build a civilization without God.

The account of the building of Babylon begins by saying that the world had one common language (as would be expected due to the people's common descent from Noah). Part of the world's people moved eastward, some settled on the plain of Shinar or Babylonia. So far, so good. God had told the descendants of Noah to "increase in number and fill the earth" (Gen. 9:1), a reiteration of the command originally given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 1:28). To accomplish this implies a migration or scattering of people. The settlement of Shinar could have been a partial fulfillment of that command. Yet as we read we find that the goal of this particular settlement was not to fulfill God's command but to defy it.

From the beginning, Babylon's goal was to resist any further scattering of the peoples over the earth and instead to create a city where the achievements of a united and integrated people would be centralized.

There are some similarities of Nimrod to Cain. The first mention of a city prior to the flood was the one Cain built (Genesis 4:17). After the flood, the first mention of a city being built was by Nimrod (Genesis 10:10 and 11:4).

What we see appearing here is another contrast of God's way versus man's way.

You may recall (Gen 4:14) that one of Cain's fears when he was sent away was "and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth." He was fearful of being alone. This shows the hunger of humanity to huddle together for companionship. God's final intention is to build a city for man. Abraham looked for "a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

However, man was not yet ready for that. Now here they are, again ready to build a city to satisfy the desires of body and soul. There is nothing that does this better than for human beings to live together in cities. Cities are centers of commercial and business life where all the needs of the body can best be met. Also, cities are centers of pleasure and culture, where all the hungers of the soul can be satisfied: hunger for beauty, art, and music and all the ingredients of culture.

The tower, on the other hand, is designed to satisfy the spirit of man. Here we see, reflected in these two things (the City and the Tower), a fundamental understanding of the nature of man as body, soul, and spirit. All are to be satisfied in these two elementary needs, the city and the tower. A number of years ago, archaeologists discovered the remains of great towers these early Babylonians built. The great towers (called ziggurats), were built in a circular fashion with a staircase that terminates in a shrine at the top. Around the shire were written the signs of the zodiac. Obviously, the tower was a religious building, intending to expose man to the mystery of the heavens and things spiritual. That, perhaps, is what is meant here by the statement that they intended to build a tower with its top in the heavens. They were impressed by its greatness architecturally, that is, it was a colossal thing for the men of that day to build and they may have thus thought of it as reaching into heaven. But they also were thinking of it as a means of communication with the spiritual world. Another purpose was to hold people

together.

God said to GO and populate the earth. Nimrod and his people said COME. There was an invitation to "come" together to work on this great project. It is the first important "come" of the story. "They said to each other, 'Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They used brick instead of stone, and tar instead of mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth'" (Gen. 11:3,4).

Three things are involved in this invitation: 1) a vision for the city, 2) a desire for a name or reputation, and 3) a plan for a new religion.

The plan for a city does not need to be examined at length; we have already discussed it in our study of Nimrod. The important point is that it was not God's city, as Jerusalem was. It was man's city, the secular city. As such it was constructed by man for man's glory.

The last of these desires – to construct a place for man's glory – is involved in the word "name": Come, let us...make a *name* for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." It was the desire for reputation but, more than that, also a desire for independence from God. This reputation was to be earned by man apart from God. It was to be his (man's) alone.

We should not forget that one characteristic of the God of the Bible is that He names people. He gives them names symbolic of what He is going to do with them or make of them. God named Adam [mankind] (Gen. 5:2), Abraham [father of many] (Gen. 17:5), Israel [God prevails] (Gen. 32:28), even Jesus [Jehovah is salvation] (Matt. 1:21). In each case, the names point to what God has done or will yet do. However, the people of Babylon wanted none of this. They wanted to establish their own reputation and eliminate God entirely.

Thus far in our study of Babylon the one element that has been missing is religion. But that is where the famed tower of Babel comes in. Luther says that the words "reaches to the heavens" should not be applied to the height alone but rather should be seen as denoting "that this was to be a place of worship."

Second, it should be regarded as having a religious end because the Bible traces all false religions to Babylon and this is the only element in the description of early Babylon that can have this meaning. There is evidence that this was the case historically. The essential identity of the various gods and goddesses of Rome, Greece, India, Egypt, and other nations with the original pantheon of the Babylonians is well established. [In fact], Nimrod himself was apparently later deified as the chief god ('Merodach' or 'Marduk') of Babylon.

If you recognize the first consonant of Nimrod's name as a modifier (typical of African names) and take the others M, R, D you will have the basic root of the name of the god of Babylon.

In the Babylonian religion, Nimrod (or Marduk) held a unique place. Even more interesting is His wife who was named Semiramis. (In Cairo, Egypt, the Semiramis Hotel is named after this woman.) Marduk and Semiramis were the ancient god and goddess of Babylon. They had a son whom Semiramis claimed was virgin-born, and they founded the mother and child cult. It gets really strange when you realize that (in some of the traditions) this "son" was Nimrod whom she married. But remember that Nimrod (Marduk) is the chief god of Babylon, thus making Semiramis the "mother of god." This was the central character of the religion of ancient Babylon, the worship of a mother and child, supposedly virgin-born. You can see in this a clever attempt on the part of Satan to anticipate the genuine virgin birth and thus to cast disrepute upon the story when the Lord Jesus would later be born into history.

This ancient Babylonian cult of the mother and child spread to other parts of the earth. You will find it in the Egyptian religion as Isis and Osiris. In Greece it is Venus and Adonis, and in the Hindu religion it is Ushas and Vishnu. The same cult prevails in various other localities.

Statues and drawings of a goddess "mother and child" have been found throughout the ancient world. In addition to Babylon, there are at least three such combination in the Hindu religion, Egypt had it version of the mother-child cult, the practice was adopted by the Roman Catholics, and in Asia Minor there was

Diana of the Ephesians.

Most of the Greek and Roman goddesses were modification and adaptations of Semiramis. Reference to this goddess (not by name) appears in the Old Testament in Jeremiah where the Israelites are warned against offering sacrifices to "the Queen of Heaven." This Queen of Heaven is Semiramis, the wife of Nimrod, the original mother of the Mother and Child cult. The cult has also crept into Christianity and forms the basis for the Mariolatry that has been seen in the Roman Catholic Church, where the Mother and Child are viewed as joint redeemers. This idolatrous religion culminates at last in the Bible in the book of Revelation. There, a "great harlot" appears, whose name is "Mystery Babylon the Great," the originator of all the harlotries or false religions of earth. The essence of Babylonianism, as we understand from Scripture, is the attempt to gain earthly honor by means of religious authority. That is Babylonianism, and it has pervaded Christian churches, Hindu temples, Buddhist shrines, and Mohammedan mosques. Everywhere it is the element that marks falseness in religion – the attempt to gain earthly power and prestige by means of religious authority. That is what Nimrod began and what God will ultimately destroy, as we read in the book of Revelation.

This plan for a New Religion is also evident in the incorporation of astrology. The zodiac (dividing the sky into sections and giving meaning to each section on the basis of the stars found there) is said to have originated in Babylon by the Chaldeans. There is speculation among some writers that the system of false religion associated with the zodiac was a perversion of an earlier, true revelation in the heavens of God's plan of redemption. It has been suggested and there is considerable evidence that the formations of stars were originally named by God (or the pre-flood godly patriarchs) as a reminder of godly things, perhaps to the point of forecasting the coming of the great Deliverer who would crush the head of Satan.

The perversion of this would tells us that a person's destiny is said to be determined by whatever section or "sign" he is born under.

From Babylon, astrology passed to the empire of ancient Egypt where it mingled with

the native animal worship and multiple gods (polytheism) of the Nile. Its influence is seen in the pyramids which were constructed with certain mathematical relationships to the stars (the zodiac). The Sphinx has astrological significance. Some versions of it have the head of a woman, symbolizing Virgo, the virgin, and the body of a lion, symbolizing Leo. Virgo is the first sign of the zodiac, Leo the last. So the Sphinx (which incidentally means "joining" in Greek) is the meeting point of the first and last of the zodiac, indicating that the Egyptian priests believed the starting point of the earth in relation to the zodiac lay in Egypt, on the banks of the Nile.

By the time the Jews left Egypt for Canaan, astrology had infected the population there. Hence, some of the strictest warnings in the Bible against astrology date from this period (Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18). Still later, astrology entered the religious life of Rome.

The interesting thing about these biblical denunciations of astrology is that astrology is identified with demonism or Satanism in the sense that Satan and his hosts were actually being worshiped in the guise of the signs or planets. This is the reason for the Bible's denunciation of these practices.

God's answer to this false system is found some 1500 years later on the Isle of Patmos. You remember the Egyptian said the Sphinx represented the Beginning and the End of the zodiac. So Who is the First and the Last? John heard the Lion of the tribe of Judah who was born of a virgin say in a voice that sounded as many waters (the Nile?), "I AM the First and the Last."

God intervened in what was developing on the plain of Shinar. Genesis 11:5-9 describes how He intervened. God performed a miracle in the minds and vocal cords of the builders. He confused their language so that now, instead of speaking together and working together, their words brought confusion and an inevitable (because it was divinely appointed) scattering of these people over the earth.

God's Council versus man's council: There are several interesting features of this part of the story. The first is a second use of the word "come." Earlier the builders had used this word for the calling of their council: "*Come*, let's

make bricks.... *Come*, let us build ourselves a city" (vv. 3, 4). But now God uses the same word (come) as He assembles His heavenly council and moves to confuse their language: "*Come*, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" It is a way of saying that God always has the last word.

The second interesting feature of this part of the story is that God *came* down to see the tower the men of Babylon were building. This is an anthropomorphism, that is, God being described as if He were a man. (We are not to think that God actually had to get off the throne of the universe and come down to earth to determine what the builders were doing. All things are known to God always.) It is used with effect.

Here were men attempting to build a great tower. The top was to reach to the heavens. It was to be so great that it and the religion and defiance of God it represented would make a reputation for these citizens of Shinar. There it stood, lofty in its unequaled grandeur. But when God wants to look at it He comes down.

He has to stoop low to see this puny extravagance.

The Babylonians wanted a city. Their city could not stand. But God provides His people with a city with foundations that will endure forever. God has His own plans for a city that is connected to the heavens. That city is called the New Jerusalem. In this city we will have a "coming together" at God's invitation. In this city God will eliminate the confusion in the languages. We see an earnest of this promised inheritance in the birth of the church and the "language phenomenon" that happened on the Day of Pentecost.

Nimrod's people wanted a name. But to those who stand with God and who overcome, God promises: "To him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 3:12,13).