Some years ago I read a paper at an IOSOT congress on Genesis 10:8–12 (“Nimrod’s Cities”) in which I made four main points. Firstly, of all the ancient historical or mythological figures proposed as the source of the Nimrod tale, only the god Ninurta is appropriate. He, however, has undergone a process of polemical demythologization in Genesis 10 (I would now use a term such as reconceptualization). Secondly, the information concerning the cities he ruled and/or built reflects partially sound knowledge of Babylonian and Assyrian realities but also serious error or fantastic invention. The explanation of this paradox lies in accidents of transmission and consequent conjecture. When analysed the text is found originally to have told of only six cities in balancing sets of three, first for Babylonia, then for Assyria, and an attempt was made to demonstrate the process by which they became pairs of four. Thirdly, as had often been noticed, there must be a connection between the description of Nineveh as “the great city” in the Book of Jonah and the words “that is the great city” at the end of the passage under discussion, where Nineveh occurs. A new account of just what that connection is was proposed. Fourthly, the “name” Resen, or rather the Hebrew consonants רסן, are the mangled remains of the third Assyrian city, the great new capital of Sargon II, Dur-Sharrukin, Sargonsburg. This proposal has now been made again, independently.

The paper was not published at that time because I could not find solutions to problems which, unsolved, left the entire approach in an unsatisfactory condition. None of the explanations of the “Cushite problem” (what was Nimrod the son of an Ethiopian doing as an overlord in Mesopotamia?) seemed convincing. No remedy was forthcoming for the impossible entity Rehovot-ir, and attempts to separate out the elements of a clearly composite text in terms of J, P, R or the like would not hang together. However, recent publications have sometimes seemed to support the notions described and they, as well as further ponderings, seem to indicate ways of encountering the difficulties. Accordingly I attempt to re-engage the issue and am honoured to offer
the outcome to John Emerton, an eminent colleague and good friend who has not avoided coming to grips with thorny questions.

The complex of problems which our passage presents will be addressed by discussing the four main points adumbrated above, following up their implications and dealing with residual issues as appropriate.

The “Ninurta-Nimrod” equation has now been dealt with so exhaustively and with such clarity of argumentation by Karel Van der Toorn\(^1\) that it would be superfluous to add further discussion. There are, however, important implications for the dating of the original Hebrew Nimrod story before its insertion in the “Table of the Nations” framework in Genesis 10. Ninurta became a leading deity in Assyria, practically, if not “theologically”, on a par or almost on a par with Ashur himself, after the adoption of Kalhu/Kalah by Ashur-nasir-pal as his capital after 883 B.C. (Ninurta being the patron deity of Kalhu). This pre-eminence lasted until Sargon built his new capital Dur-Sharrukin, magnificent, but unfinished at Sargon’s death in 705. It would seem reasonable to surmise that “Ninurta-tales” could only arise in far-away Israel or Judah between these dates – or just possibly a little after 705 – when the fame of Ninurta continued to exist. During this period relations between Assyria and Israel seem to have been conditioned by the growing expansion of the Assyrian Empire and the increasing erosion of the northern state. Since Judah was also under threat and fast becoming Assyria’s vassal, one would not expect Hebrew folklore reflecting positive attitudes to Assyrian figures, whether deities or otherwise, to come into existence at such a time. Indeed, some researchers regard the Nimrod passage, together with the Tower of Babel story of Genesis 11, as a comment on Assyrian hubris. The Nimrod passage, however, seems to be free of emotional charge and to present foreign historical and cultural phenomena with dispassionate curiosity rather than with political rancour. Since we have no knowledge of “culture contact” beyond the jejune reports of political events on both sides, no more can be said on such matters, but the dating of the material which lies behind our passage would seem to be established. If there is polemic in the passage it is theological, though earlier than the introduction of the Nimrod theme to the Table of Nations. Verse 9

\(^1\) In K. van der Toorn and P. W. der Horst, “Nimrod before and after the Bible”, \textit{HTR} 83 (1990), pp. 1–29 (pp. 1–16, “Nimrod before the Bible”).