The Georgian Nimrod

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Having weathered the escalating perils of the first eight circles, Dante stood on the verge of descending into the very center of Hell.1 There, along the rim of the icy pit leading to the imprisoned Satan, the author-turned-fictional-adventurer glimpsed several “towers,” the primordial giants of the Hebrew Bible and the titans of Classical literature. Among them was Nimrod, whom Genesis 10 famously depicts as “the first on Earth to become a mighty warrior. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord.…”2 The Inferno’s Nimrod, however, was a rather different figure: he was incapable of intelligible speech, and from his “savage mouth”—la fiera bocca—poured the incomprehensible syllables “Raphèl maì amèche zabì almi.” This Nimrod was nothing more than anima confusa. Dante’s guide Virgil explained:

Elli stessi s’accusa; questi è Nembrotto per lo cui mal coto pur un linguaggio nel mondo non s’usa. Lasciànlo stare e non parliamo a vòto; ché così è a lui ciascun linguaggio come ’l suo ad altrui, ch’a nullo è noto.

He is his own accuser. This is Nimrod, because of whose vile plan the whole world no longer speaks a single tongue. Let us leave him and waste not our speech, for every language is to him as his to others, and his is understood by none.3

Nimrod’s spectacular transformation from a “mighty hunter before the Lord” to a babbling and sinful primeval giant requires explanation.4 His imposing physical stature stands in marked contrast to his fleeting appearance in the Hebrew Bible. Including Genesis 10 Nimrod surfaces just three times

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1 Georgian transliterations observe a slightly modified version of the system used by the Library of Congress, USA, and adjusted to match more closely the Armenian Hübschmann-Meillet-Benveniste scheme. For Georgian transcription, see Rapp 2003, 45–6.
4 Here I have relied upon van der Horst 1990, 220–32.
in canonical texts: 1 Chronicles 1:10 identifies Nimrod as the son of Cush and “the first to be a mighty one on the Earth,” and Micah 5:6 alludes to “the land of Nimrod,” Mesopotamia, in connection with a prophecy about the defeat of the Assyrian Empire. As we should expect, Nimrod is entirely absent from the New Testament.

Nimrod is a figure of great antiquity. But how the ancient Hebrews imagined him is poorly understood. The picture sharpens in the late Hellenistic Age, when Jewish exegesis increasingly took up his memory. One of the earliest such exegetes was Philo of Alexandria who, in his pursuit to comprehend monotheism in a multi- and cross-cultural world, creatively combined Judaic, Greek, and Hellenistic thought. Philo substituted Genesis’s ambiguous depiction of Nimrod with one that was categorically negative. His Nimrod was an enemy of God and he proposed a false etymology for the giant’s name, deriving it from Hebrew marad, “rebellion” or “desertion.” Further, Philo explicitly associated Nimrod with the antediluvian giants of Genesis 6 and the fabled tower—the Tower of Babel—of Genesis 11. In the same century, the historian Josephus similarly depicted Nimrod in his Jewish Antiquities:

They were incited to this insolent contempt of God by Nebrodes, grandson of Ham the son of Noah, an audacious man of doughty vigour. He persuaded them to attribute their prosperity not to God but to their own valour, and little by little transformed the state of affairs into a tyranny, holding that the only way to detach men from the fear of God was by making them continuously dependent upon his own power. He threatened to have his revenge on God if He wished to inundate the earth again;

5 De gigantibus, cap. 15 (Philo 1981, 70–1).
6 van der Horst 1990, 221–2.