

**“NIMROD, A MIGHTY HUNTER BEFORE THE LORD!”
ASSYRIAN ROYAL IDEOLOGY
AS PERCEIVED IN THE HEBREW BIBLE**

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ABSTRACT

Neo-Assyrian kings proclaimed themselves as “strong king”, “king of all the four quarters”, “unrivalled king”, “beloved of the gods” (e.g. Ninurta), etc. In this Memorial Lecture the question of how the Assyrian royal ideology has been perceived in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, will be examined. The passages selected for the topic are: Gen 10:8-12 (Nimrod), Gen 11:1-9 (city and tower of Babel), Isa 10:5-15 (king of Assyria), as well as Gen 2:4b-3:25 (story of paradise). It is argued that these texts represent an impressive response to the neo-Assyrian royal ideology and its resulting imperialistic policy. It is also argued that the passages of Gen 10 and 11 allude to the building of Dur-Sharrukin, at the end of the eighth century B.C. As to Gen 2-3 the conclusion is drawn that the Assyrian ideology served as a model for the “original sin” in the story of paradise.

INTRODUCTION

It is a real pleasure and great honour for me to deliver at the 24th annual conference of SASNES¹ the Adrianus van Selms Memorial Lecture. Van Selms was a great scholar who devoted part of his work to studies pertaining to the cultural context of the Old Testament. A prime example is his dissertation, entitled *De Babylonische termini voor zonde en hun beteekenis voor onze kennis van het Babylonische zondebesef* (promotie in Utrecht, 13 juni 1933). In line with his interests I would like to deal with a topic relating both to Mesopotamia and the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. It concerns a particular aspect of the Assyrian royal ideology which has left its traces in the Old Testament.

In order to make clear what I have in mind I start by quoting a passage from the royal inscriptions of Ashurnasirpal II, one of the most important kings of the Neo-Assyrian period:

(I), Ashur-nasir-apli, strong king, king of the universe, unrivalled king,
king of all four quarters, sun(god) of all people, chosen of the gods

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Enlil and Ninurta, beloved of the gods An and Dagan, destructive weapon of the great gods, the pious, beloved of your (Ninurta's) heart, prince, favourite of the god Enlil, whose priesthood is pleasing to your great divinity and whose reign you established, valiant man who acts with the support of Ashur his lord and has no rival among the princes of the four quarters, marvellous shepherd, fearless in battle, mighty flood tide which has no opponent, the king who subdues those insubordinate to him, who rules all peoples, strong male, who treads upon the necks of his foes, trampler of all enemies, the one who breaks up the forces of the rebellious, he who acts with the support of the great gods his lords and has conquered all lands, gained dominion over the highlands in their entirety and received tribute, capturer of hostages, he who is victorious over all lands ...²

Ashurnasirpal II, who reigned in the ninth century B.C. (883-859), was a great strategist and can be regarded the founder of the neo-Assyrian empire (9th-7th century). He is also known as the one who built a new capital city – Kalchu (Kalach).

If one thinks of royal ideology of Mesopotamia the following characteristics easily come to mind – the divine status of the king;³ the king being, as far as Assyria is concerned, the high priest, or viceregent, of the god Ashur; the king as warrior and shepherd; and the king as the one who has a great wisdom concerning law and justice, and hence the one who is expected to demonstrate justice in his land.

However, when reading the inscriptions of the kings of the Neo-Assyrian era, like the one quoted above, it strikes one that the king is presented first of all as strong king, as king of all quarters of the world. His role as warrior and conquerer dominates the scene. This does not pertain, as one would expect, to his role as defender of his people, as a true shepherd of his flock. On the contrary, the inscriptions testify to an ideology which we would call “imperialistic”.

² Grayson (1976:119f.).

³ Cf. the following statement: “sanctity of the royal person is often, esp. in Assyrian texts, said to be revealed by a supernatural and awe-inspiring radiance or aura which [...] is characteristic of deities and of all things divine” (Oppenheim 1964:98).

In this lecture I want to focus on this feature which seems to be typical of the royal ideology of Neo-Assyrian kings. I will do so by raising the question of how it has been perceived and evaluated in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. In order to examine this question I will deal with the following passages: Gen 10:8-12, Gen 11:1-9, and Isa 10:5-15. In addition, I will also discuss Gen 2:4b-3:24 because, as will be argued, the motif of the so-called “original sin” in the story of paradise can be explained against the background of the royal ideology of Assyria.

NIMROD, A MIGHTY HUNTER

Genesis 10 contains a passage which is about a hero-king named Nimrod (vv. 8-12). It reads thus:

Cush became the father of Nimrod: he was the first on earth to be a mighty man. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; therefore it is said, ‘Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the Lord’. The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Kalneh, in the land of Shinar. From that land he went out to Assyria, and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah, that is the great city.

The figure of Nimrod plays a prominent role in the passage. As to the name itself, an identification with Ninurta is the most reasonable one.⁴ Nimrod is not presented here as a god, but as a king and as a mighty hunter. The motif of a king as a hunter is a well-known topic in royal inscriptions of Assyria, not of Babylonia. Hence, Nimrod, “the mighty hunter”, is an Assyrian king.⁵ The topic of hunting is attested in inscriptions from Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076) onwards, and is related to the figure of Ninurta. So, e.g.,

By the command of the god Ninurta, who loves me, I killed on foot 120 lions with my wildly vigorous assault. [...] I have brought down

⁴ Cf. Lambert (1979:272); van der Toorn and van der Horst (1990:12-15); Uehlinger (1995:1181); Annus (2002:107).

⁵ Cf. Oppenheim (1964:46).

every kind of wild beast and winged bird of the heavens whenever I have shot an arrow.⁶

Scholars have tried to identify Nimrod with a single monarch of Mesopotamian history, but this does not seem to be a relevant question because in the passage as a whole his name can not refer to only one king. The passage refers first of all to the land of Shinar (v. 10), and then to Assyria (vv. 11-12), representing two periods in the long history of Mesopotamia. Hence, Nimrod obviously functions as a symbolic name representing a kind of kingship which is considered typical of Mesopotamia.⁷

The second part of the passage, vv. 10-12, is dominated by the listing of several cities, four in the land of Shinar, and four in Assyria, respectively. The beginning of the kingdom of Nimrod is described in terms of four cities in the land of Shinar: Babel, Erech, Akkad, and Kalneh. These are ancient cities in the south of Mesopotamia, i.e. in Babylonia. It is still not quite clear how to interpret the name Kalneh. It is a well-known option to read this word as *kullanah*, “all of them”,⁸ but this does not recommend itself since it is more plausible to take the word as the name of a city. One might think of Kullaba, a city in Babylonia.⁹

The next part, vv. 11-12, is about Assyria. It is said that “he”, Nimrod, who is the subject of the verb,¹⁰ “went out – from the land of Shinar – to Assyria”. There he built cities, four in number, Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen. The motif of city building is a most fitting characterization of Mesopotamian culture, especially of the kings of Assyria. Interestingly, the last city named, Resen, is the only one with information about its location, and furthermore is designated “the great city”.¹¹

⁶ Grayson (1976:16) (Tiglath-Pileser I). On Ninurta and the motif of “royal hunt”, see Annus (2002:102-108); Dick (2006:244-256).

⁷ This explains why he is presented as “the first on earth to be a mighty man” in v. 8b, being at the same time the one who went out to Assyria (v. 11).

⁸ See for example Witte (1998:110).

⁹ This suggestion was already made by Jensen in 1895; see Skinner (1930:210). For Kullaba, see Fuchs (1994:351) (“Ur, Uruk, Eridu, Larsa, Kullaba etc.”; see also p. 362).

¹⁰ Cf. Witte (1998:110, note 121); Knohl (2010:45). For “Ashur” in the sense of “to Assyria”, see also Hos 7:11.

¹¹ It has been suggested to regard the phrase “the great city” as apposition to Nineveh or Calah; see Lambert (1979:272); Sasson (1983:94); Hurowitz (2010:521), and Knohl

The cities of Nineveh and Calah/Kalach are well-known, the latter being built as the royal capital by Assurnasirpal II,¹² but the other two, Rehoboth-Ir and Resen, represent enigmatic names. What about these two cities? It strikes one that both names are in Hebrew: Rehoboth-Ir means “squares of city”, whereas Resen corresponds to a Hebrew word for “bridle”.

It has been suggested that Rehoboth-Ir be regarded as being in apposition to Nineveh: Nineveh, the broadest city.¹³ However, since the Hebrew text is marked by the usage of the object marker in all four cases (four times תא), the idea of an apposition, or a similar construction, is not very likely. Rehoboth-Ir as designation – City with squares – points to an important city.¹⁴ Which city might be meant? As we know from Assyrian sources, there was one city in Assyria – the city of Ashur itself – which often is not referred to by its name, but by a designation, namely, “the City”, or “the Inner City”.¹⁵ An interesting case is to be found in one of the oracles of encouragement to Esarhaddon where the following listing of cities is given: “the Inner City, Nineveh, Calah and Arbela”. Just as in Gen 10:12 an appellative (“the Inner City”) is employed here together with real names of other cities in Assyria. In the light of these data it seems plausible that Rehoboth-Ir actually refers to the city of Ashur.

As to Resen attempts have been made to interpret the name in the light of Akkadian words, such as *risnu*, “irrigation”,¹⁶ or more in particular, as based on Resh-eni (“Fountain-head”), the name of a settlement not far from Nineveh.¹⁷ From a phonetical point of view, the latter proposal is attractive, but since this

(2010:49), but syntactically speaking this is not very plausible.

¹² Cf. above. For the inscriptions concerning the building of the new capital, see Grayson (1976:136f. [about the temple of Ninurta], 147, 154-156, 166f., 172-176 [the “Banquet Stele”]).

¹³ See e.g. Sasson (1983:95); van der Toorn and van der Horst (1990:5). For a slightly different reading, see Lipinski (1966:85) (“avec des places urbaines”).

¹⁴ The notion of squares is always related to great cities, not only in Palestine (e.g., Jerusalem, see Lam 2:12, but also in Mesopotamia).

¹⁵ For “the City”, see e.g. Garelli (1965:151, 155, 158); and for “the Inner City”, see e.g. the Indices in SAA (State Archives of Assyria) I, IX, X. The latter designation of Ashur is attested as early as the inscriptions of Adad-narari I (circa 1300 B.C.). Initially, it referred to the old city of Ashur, but later on it was used for the city as a whole.

¹⁶ So Lipinski (1966:85-86).

¹⁷ For this suggestion, see e.g. Lambert (1979:272); Hurowitz (2008:518-519).

reference does not fit the location and, more importantly, nor the idea of Resen as a “great city”, it does not recommend itself. I agree with those scholars who have suggested that Resen is to be taken as a reference to Dur-Sharrukin.¹⁸ The question however is how to explain the relationship between both names. Is Resen a corruption of Desen (cf. LXX) which might be related to Dur-Sharrukin (van der Toorn and van der Horst)? Or is it due to textual corruption (Levin; Fenton)? Or has the author of our text substituted the name of the neighboring village (Resh-eni) for that of the Assyrian capital (Hurowitz; Knohl)? The idea of a textual corruption is based on the assumption that the name in Hebrew should have been DR SRGN. The difficulty is that we have no evidence about the way the new city was named by people of another language at that time. However a piece of evidence from a much later time indicates that the place was named after the second part of the Assyrian name only. According to Rawlinson (19th century), the Syrians called the site of Khorsabad *Sar’oun* (Albenda 1986:35). So one could imagine that Resen is related in one way to another to the second part of the name (Sharrukin/Sargon). However, this does not explain the word Resen because if related to Sargon/Saroun, one would have expected something like Saron.¹⁹ Be this as it may, instead of considering Resen a corruption, I would propose the following explanation.

As noted above, “Resen” corresponds to a Hebrew word for “bridle”. This notion reminds one of the Assyrian custom of humiliating defeated enemies (rulers) by putting bridles or nose-ropes on them. Notably, a reference to this practice including the use of Hebrew *resen* is found in Isa 30:28 (“a bridle ... on the jaws of the peoples”). A well-known depiction of this practice is provided by a series of stelae executed by the order of Esarhaddon after his successful campaign against Memphis in Egypt (671 B.C.). The Assyrian king is presented here as someone who is holding an Egyptian king (presumably Tirhaka) and a Phoenician king with a nose-rope. It has an inscription that reads inter alia, “(Esarhaddon) the king of kings of Egypt, Patros and Kush (...) who holds kings

¹⁸ Van der Toorn and van der Horst (1990:6); Levin (2002:365); Hurowitz (2008:511-524); Fenton (2010:28).

¹⁹ Compare LXX Isa 20:1 where the name of Sargon has been transcribed as Sarna, or Arna.

with a bridle”.²⁰

More interesting, however, is the fact that a reference to this practice is found in Assyrian sources which are related to a particular city, namely, inscriptions of Sargon II which all are from Dur-Sharrukin. The relevant expression reads thus, “I put bridles on the rulers (or, usurpers) of the four regions of the world”.²¹ This phrase which is not attested in royal inscriptions of other Assyrian kings clearly conveys the notion of world dominion.

In the light of these data it seems likely that Resen actually stands for the new city that was built by Sargon II, viz. Dur-Sharrukin. If related to the second part of the official name of the city, the symbolical name probably resulted from a word-play. Anyhow, the name in Hebrew fits the idea that Dur-Sharrukin was the city which symbolized Sargon’s world power as is clear from the inscriptions from that city, such as the so-called Cylinder Inscription which was composed in commemoration of the founding of the new capital. Furthermore, the location as given in Gen 10:12 matches, roughly speaking, the place of Dur-Sharrukin, halfway between Nineveh and Calah.²² Importantly, it also explains why Resen is called “the great city”. As is clear from Assyrian sources as well as from excavations, the new capital was a very impressive city indeed.²³

The notion of world dominion may also account for the number of *four* cities, both in Babylonia, and in Assyria, in Gen 10:10-12, because ‘four’ is the number employed in the phrase “the four regions (of the world)”. This expression often occurs in Assyrian royal inscriptions, in the context of the claim of universal power of a given king. If so, this passage not only describes in a nutshell two periods in the political history of Mesopotamia, but also points to two phases of world power, the first one going back to early times (one might think here of

²⁰ See Borger (1956:96-97). For a parallel in the Old Testament, see 2 Kings 19:28 (par Isa 37:27); cf. Uehlinger (1997:306), and van der Kooij (2000:115-116).

²¹ See Fuchs (1994:33, 46, 56, 86, 193) (translations on pp. 290, 297, 301, 313, 343 respectively).

²² According to Gen 10:12 Resen was located “between” Nineveh and Calah. However, “between” is not necessarily meant in a precise way. Compare the phrase “between the eyes” which actually means “on the front of the head”. Alternatively, and even more likely, the notion of “between” is based on the fact that roads linking the three cities “enabled a traveler to move from Nineveh to Calah, not directly, but indirectly by way of Dur-Sharrukin” (Hurowitz 2010:523).

²³ See Unger (1938:249-252); Albenda (1986).

Sargon of Akkad),²⁴ and the second one being the period of New Assyrian imperialism, culminating in the reign of Sargon II, the builder of Dur-Sharrukin.

All in all, the passage about Nimrod turns out to reflect specific features of the Assyrian royal ideology – the king as mighty hunter, the king as builder of cities, and the notion of world dominion. Nimrod is also said to be a mighty hunter “before the Lord”. This posits, as has been pointed out by Hom, “a relation between Nimrod and YHWH that expresses the superlative with regard to the strength of Nimrod’s abilities” (Hom 2010:63). It thus underlines the great power of Nimrod as Mesopotamian king.

THE CITY AND TOWER OF BABEL

The story about the building of the city of Babel, and its tower, is a nice piece of literature. It has two parts, vv. 1-4, about man, and vv. 5-9, about God’s reaction to the action of mankind. Mankind built a strong city, with a high tower, in order not to be dispersed (vv. 1-4), but eventually God did disperse humankind all over the earth. The structure of vv. 8-9 – this passage begins and ends with the issue of dispersion – strongly suggests that the matter of dispersion is very important. Apparently, the story seems to be meant to explain why humankind is living spread out all over the earth.

As to the building project, vv. 6-9 are revealing because the city-project of mankind is presented in these verses as due to unlimited power, the crucial statement being “nothing that they plan to do will be impossible for them” (v. 6).²⁵ They are able to do this since they are “one people” with “one and the same language” (v. 6). Mankind is depicted in Gen 11 as being highly interested in a position of supreme power by building a strong city to live in. They therefore are concerned not to live spread over the earth (cf. v. 4b) because this would not serve their purpose.²⁶

²⁴ Compare Levin (2002:359-364). I do not think however that Nimrod is modeled after Sargon of Akkad, as Levin argues (cf. Knohl 2010:49), but rather after Sargon II.

²⁵ For a similar statement in reference to God, see Job 42:2!

²⁶ It has been argued that v. 4b, if read in the context of Gen 1-11 as a whole, is to be understood as a transgression of the commandment that man should fill the earth; see Houtman (1977:106), and Harland (1998:527-532). This may be so, but the story if

This leads to the intriguing question whether the “dispersion” should be taken as a form of punishment, as scholars have argued, or not. Does the verb פָּרַץ convey a negative connotation as in texts such as Deut 4:27; 28:64; 30:3? I do not think so. The situation in Gen 11 is different from that in the texts just mentioned. In the latter, a particular people, the people of Israel, is dispersed as a result of violent actions of powerful enemies, whereas in Gen 11 the dispersion is the result of the confusion of a common language, that is to say, mankind is no longer one people with one language, but has become many peoples, each with its own language. The confusion of language is a subtle, but effective means of reaching a particular goal, namely, that mankind will live spread out all over the world.

It therefore is not so obvious to regard the element of dispersion as a punishment. But what about the building project? If this is to be considered as sin, then the dispersion carries the notion of punishment. Most scholars hold the view that the city project should be seen as sin as hubris.²⁷ It is true that the building of the city and the high tower symbolizes a most powerful position of man, but the judgment of God, in v. 6, seems not to reflect the idea of bad behaviour in the sense of transgressing a given order. Rather, as is clear from vv. 6-7, as they are one people with one language, they are fully capable to create a position of supreme power.

In my view, the story in Gen 11 is not about sin and punishment.²⁸ The measure taken by God is part of the *destinies* determined in primeval times which, in line with Mesopotamian mode of thought, are meant as explanations of the world order as it is.²⁹ In Gen 11 the explanation is given of why the divine decision was taken that man should speak different languages and, as a result,

considered part of a pre-priestly stratum creates a different picture because the decision that mankind should live spread over the earth is taken by God in response to the building of Babel (and implemented through the confusion of the one language), and not at an earlier moment.

²⁷ For a survey of the literature involved, see Uehlinger (1990:254-290). See also Harland (1998:521-527) (for the Jahwistic version “the sin of the people involved hubris” [526]), and LaCocque (2009:40).

²⁸ Cf. Uehlinger (1990:575); van Wolde (1994:100-104); Hiebert (2007:30). For a different view, see Strong (2008).

²⁹ See Saggs (1978:74-76).

should live spread out over the whole earth. In this way, God set limits to the power of man. Seen this way the verb פָּרַץ does not convey a negative connotation; on the contrary, its usage is in keeping with Gen 9:19 (related verb [פָּרַץ]) and 10:18.

Since the story of Gen 11 draws one's attention to Mesopotamia, a reading of this story in the light of Mesopotamian literature and culture recommends itself.³⁰ As I have argued elsewhere, I share Uehlinger's view that the combination of several motifs in Gen 11:1-9 makes good sense indeed, if understood as reflecting the building of Dur-Sharrukin by Sargon II in the final decade of the eighth century B.C.³¹ This applies to the building of a strong³² city with a high tower, to making a name for oneself, and to the element of stopping the building of the city. The building of Dur-Sharrukin, the new capital, was not finished because of the ominous death of Sargon II in the year 705 B.C. The making oneself a name – a well-known topos in royal inscriptions of Assyria – conveys the notion of power and fame, but it might well be that its relationship with the building of the city mirrors the fact that the city of Dur-Sharrukin was named after its builder, King Sharrukin (Sargon). More interestingly, the elements, in the Genesis story, of humankind as one people with one speech in relation to a new city, resemble a particular topic that is characteristic of inscriptions from Dur-Sharrukin. The text reads thus,

Peoples of the four regions of the world, of foreign tongue and divergent speech, dwellers of mountain and lowland, [...] I took as spoil at the word of Ashur, my lord, by the might of my scepter. I caused them to have 'one mouth' and settled them therein (i.e., the new capital).³³

According to this passage peoples of different languages living all over the earth are brought together into one place, the new city of Dur-Sharrukin. Furthermore,

³⁰ Usually, the story is read from a more general perspective; see e.g. Hiebert (2007) ("cultural origins"), Strong (2008), and LaCocque (2009).

³¹ Van der Kooij (2008). Unlike Uehlinger I regard the story as it stands a literary unity; see van der Kooij (2008:1-7); for the same view, see Baden (2009).

³² For the notion of strong, cf. the use of *baked* bricks in v. 3 instead of dried ones.

³³ Fuchs (1994:43, 47f. (shorter version), 72, 79f.) (translation on pp. 296, 298, 306, 311, respectively). See also Uehlinger (1990:470-471).

all peoples should speak with one voice which means that they accept one authority, namely, that of the king of Assyria who claimed to be the king of the world.

The inscriptions from the new city clearly indicate that the building of Dur-Sharrukin symbolized the supreme power in the sense of world dominion of Sargon II. This too sheds light on the fact that in the Genesis story the building of a city with a tower is considered an illustration of supreme power.

However, the question arises of how to account for the differences, that is to say, for the fact that our story is about “one speech” not only in the sense of unanimity, but also of one language, as well as for the fact that it is a story about Babel. The answer is that the Genesis story is a narrative which is set in primeval times. Babel is one of the oldest cities of Mesopotamia (cf. Gen 10:10) and as such fits very well a story about the early history of mankind. The choice of this city has also the advantage of being appropriate for the word-play between Babel and the verb *balal*, “to confuse”. Furthermore, the motif of explaining the change from one language into many languages is also a topic which suits a story set in primeval times. In addition, this also sheds light on the fact that it is about mankind, and not about a king.

I therefore would suggest that Gen 11:1-9 is a story about the early days of humankind which has been composed in such a way that at the same time it mirrors major events and ideological claims known from the last decade of the eighth century B.C. It may be compared to a coin having two sides, resulting from a technique which is widespread in world literature, viz. of setting a story in the past, and yet speaking about the present. It is based on the idea of a certain analogy between events in the past and in the present. Interestingly, this phenomenon has parallels in the time of Sargon II: at his court texts were composed about the early history of Sargon of Akkad which are clearly alluding to the time of Sargon II.³⁴ The story about the city of Babel in Gen 11 seems to belong to such a category of literature. Babel is Babel, but can then be seen in analogy with a city like Dur-Sharrukin; mankind as being one people with one language making the attempt to realize a position of supreme power by building

³⁴ See Grayson (1974-77:56-64); Lewis (1980:101-107; Uehlinger (1990:496-503); Horowitz (1993:151-156).

the city of Babel can be viewed then in analogy with Sargon II's striving for world domination which culminated in the building of Dur-Sharrukin and in causing all peoples to have "one mouth".

There is, however, one element which still needs our attention, the motif of dispersion. As we have seen, this motif is crucial because it marks the end of the striving for supreme power. Read against the background of Assyrian politics it mirrors, in a contrasting way, a crucial element of these politics, viz. bringing peoples together into one area, and more in particular into one city according to the inscriptions from Dur-Sharrukin, by means of mass deportations.³⁵ Seen from the perspective of our story, Sargon II made an attempt to realize a situation where people and power were concentrated into one place as it was in the beginning. But seen from the same perspective Sargon II was violating the international order as set by God according to Gen 11, namely, that all peoples should live spread out all over the earth.

READING GEN 10:8-12 AND GEN 11:1-9 TOGETHER

The two passages discussed above, sharing important elements - the land of Shinar, the city of Babel, and the motif of city building -, turn out to allude to Assyrian imperialism. Both stories allude to the city of Dur-Sharrukin, in Gen 10 by the city called Resen, and in Gen 11 by way of analogy (Babel // Dur-Sharrukin). It is interesting to note in this regard that Babel is characterized by the expression "city and tower" (עיר ומגדל) in Gen 11, whereas, in Gen 10, Resen is designated by a phrase which too consists of the word "city" as well as of a form of the root גדל - the "great city".³⁶ Importantly, both stories seem to mirror a specific feature of the imperialistic ideology as expressed in texts from Dur-Sharrukin: the name "Resen" in Gen 10 as reflecting the expression about the bridles on the rulers of the world, and the picture of mankind living in one city and speaking the same language in Gen 11 as analogous to the policy of bringing peoples from all over the world to the new capital and of causing them to have one mouth. Furthermore, it may well be that Gen 10:10-12 confirms the analogy

³⁵ On this subject see e.g. Oded (1979).

³⁶ In Assyrian sources the phrase "the great city" can convey the notion of royal capital.

between Babel and Dur-Sharrukin because the former is the first city mentioned in this passage, whereas the latter is presented as the last one:

v. 10: **Babel**, Erech, Accad, and Kalneh

vv. 11-12: Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and **Resen**.

There is, however, a difference between both passages because from a chronological point of view the Gen 11 story goes further back in time than the passage about Nimrod. The story of the building of the city of Babel actually forms a backdrop to the passage in Gen 10. Nimrod, the hero-king, is not the builder of Babel, but represents an heir to humankind in Gen 11 as far as the pursuit for supreme power is concerned.

According to Gen 11 mankind was able to build up a strong position since they were one people because they spoke one and the same language. However, afterwards, as soon as there were different languages and, as a result of that, different peoples living spread out all over the earth, things had become different. In this situation, world dominion could only be realized by force, by subjugating nations with different tongues, by not respecting their borders, and by mass deportations. Seen from this perspective, the name of Nimrod makes perfect sense as conveying the notion of rebellion (cf. Hebrew מרד), in this way characterizing the policy of Mesopotamian kings. The underlying idea seems to be that in striving for supreme power Assyrian kings did not respect the order of things as decided and set by God in primeval times.³⁷ Finally, both passages display an interest in a word-play on names: explicitly so in Gen 11 as far as the name of Babel is concerned, and presumably so in Gen 10 regarding the choice of Nimrod and of Resen.

THE KING OF ASSYRIA

I now turn to another passage about Assyria which also is very interesting as far as our topic is concerned – Isa 10:5-15. Within Isa 1-12 the passage of ch. 10:5-15 represents a remarkable prophecy. Unlike brief references to Assyria in 7:17;

³⁷ Hence, on the level of the pre-priestly narrative, “real” history starts with Gen 10, whereas Gen 11:1-9 is still part of the “primeval” history. For this distinction, see also LaCocque (2009:40).

8:4, 7; 10:24; and 11:11, 16 the passage about Assyria in ch. 10 is fairly extensive which testifies to a strong interest in the subject matter. In addition, our text is the only one where Assyria is addressed. This is done in the form of a *hoy*-oracle (woe-oracle) which differs from this type of prophecy elsewhere in ch. 1-12 since this one is the only one which is presented as divine speech, and not as a prophetic word. The oracle as a whole is marked by vivid and contrastive language, and on the level of its contents it conveys a notion of self-confidence and strength towards a most powerful entity – Assyria, or more in particular the king of Assyria.

The question of the theme of the oracle against Assyria is directly related to the issue of the literary unity. The overall message of the text is clear – it expresses a fierce, passionate and devastating critique of the Assyrian imperialistic policy.³⁸ However, from a literary critical point of view the verses 5-15 do not form a unity. Scholars have argued, and rightly so in my view, that, for reasons of style and contents, vv. 10-12 should be assigned to a later hand, or hands.³⁹ The same may be true of v. 15b (Wildberger 1972:393). Hence I will focus on the remaining verses, vv. 5-9 and vv. 13-15a respectively. Verse 5 reads,

Woe, Assyria, the rod of my anger,
and the staff – that is in their hand – of my fury

The phrase “that is in their hand” (הוּא בַיָּדָם) is commonly considered a gloss.⁴⁰ Be this as it may, this phrase underlines the responsibility of Assur: he not only is the rod of anger, but the rod, or staff is in his (“their”, i.e., the respective kings) hand, that is to say, he is fully responsible for the way he uses it.⁴¹ Different from the Assyrian sources where the king is presented as “an imperial implement in the hands of the *Assyrian gods*”, he is seen here as “an implement of judgment in the hands of *Yhwh*” (Chan 2009:725).

The verse consists of two elements because on the one hand the use of *hoy* implies doom or disaster for Assyria, whereas on the other hand the expression

³⁸ For literature, see Chan (2009).

³⁹ See e.g. Wildberger (1972:392); Dietrich (1976:116-117); Mittmann (1989); De Jong (2007:127); De Jong (2010:96).

⁴⁰ For a discussion, see Chan (2009:720-721) (note).

⁴¹ Cf. Mittmann (1989:115).

“the rod of my anger” points to a particular role for Assyria to play. Both elements are explained in the next two verses, vv. 6-7:

Against a godless nation I did send him and against the people of my
wrath I commanded him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread
them down like the mire of the streets,
but he did not so intend, and his mind did not so think, but it was in his
mind to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few

The first part (v. 6) tells us what the king of Assyria should have done, whereas v. 7 makes clear what he actually did. Assyria should have limited his military action against one particular people, “a godless nation”, but thought otherwise. Instead of a punitive action directed to *one* nation, the Assyrian king decided to destroy *many* nations. Beside this one both verses display another contrast as well: the verbs “to spoil” and “to plunder” used in v. 6 are not the same as the verbs employed in v. 7, “to destroy” and “to cut off”.

As has been pointed out by scholars on the basis of Isa 9:16, “the godless nation” (גוי הַנֶּפֶשׁ) is best understood as referring to Ephraim/the northern kingdom.⁴² This is also in line with the fact that Samaria is mentioned as the last city in v. 9. The term הַנֶּפֶשׁ is typical of wisdom literature and therefore fits in with the oracle as a whole of which, as Whedbee noticed some time ago, the “wisdom rootage is evident in the form and method of argument”.⁴³ The word expresses disloyalty to God by acting in a foolish way (cf. 9:16), i.e., not according to the order of justice. An action by an enemy who spoils and plunders and tramples down is apparently seen as an adequate way of punishment (compare 10:2!).

Both verbs, “to spoil” and “to plunder”, have a parallel in Isa 8:1-4 where they are used in connexion with the capture of the cities Damascus and Samaria. The use of the verbs “to destroy” (הַשְׁמִיד) and “to cut off” (הַכְרִית), however, seems to imply a more disastrous fate for the cities and nations involved. Both verbs evoke the notion of the annihilation of a nation as a result of the deportation policy and of the removing of its boundaries (cf. v. 13 below). The same wording in texts such as Deut 28:63 and Prov 2:22 supports the idea of

⁴² Cf. e.g. Procksch (1930:164); Wildberger (1972:395); De Jong (2010:96).

⁴³ Whedbee (1971:73).

deportation.

Verse 8 reads, “For he says, ‘Are not all my princes (״ר״) kings?’” From a Judean perspective, “princes” closely belong to the king as his advisors and ministers. Thus, if these princes are kings, then the king of Assyria himself is the “king of kings”, in this way proclaiming a most powerful position. One might think here of vassal kings,⁴⁴ although it is also possible, as proposed by Lemaire and Durand,⁴⁵ to consider the royal ministers to be the Assyrian officials who were appointed rulers of provinces. Anyhow, the claim made in v. 8 is fully in line with statements to be found in Assyrian inscriptions: for instance, Ashurnasirpal II, the one who is called “valiant man who [...] has no rival among the princes of the four quarters”, is also designated as “lord of lords” and “king of kings” (Grayson 1976:120).

The powerful position of the Assyrian king is then illustrated by the boasting statement in the next verse, v. 9:

Is not Calno like Carchemish?
Is not Hamath like Arpad?
Is not Samaria like Damascus?

Six cities are mentioned here, six capital cities to be more precise. This passage reflects military events in the period, roughly speaking, of 745-715 B.C.E.⁴⁶ The order of the cities is clearly geographical. What is said in vv. 6-9 is that, instead of the “plundering” of Samaria only, Assyria took the opportunity to “destroy” other cities and nations as well.

The issue at stake here is the imperialistic policy of Assyria which is described in more detail in v. 13:

By the strength of my hand I have done it,
and by my wisdom, for I have understanding;
I have removed the boundaries of peoples,
and have plundered their treasures;
as a mighty one I brought down the inhabitants (of the cities)

⁴⁴ Wildberger (1972:397).

⁴⁵ Lemaire et Durand (1984:44).

⁴⁶ For details, see e.g. Wildberger (1972:397-398); Lawson Younger (2002:291-292). For Calneh, see Tadmor (1994:58-59).

This verse is marked by the notions of power and wisdom to which the king of Assyria attributes his military successes. The emphasis on wisdom corresponds to v. 7 (“he did not so intend, and his mind did not so think, but it was in his mind ...”). The reference to the removal of boundaries touched upon a sensitive matter. According to the ideas of the time the abolition of territorial boundaries was really a great sin since it violated a divine, sacred order, in this case the distribution of the lands from of old (cf. Deut 32:8). Although Assyrian royal inscriptions do not speak literally of the removal or change of boundaries, they actually refer to these political measures by talking about the ‘annexation’ of conquered areas to the land of Assyria.⁴⁷ On the other hand, a close parallel is to be found in an oracle for Esarhaddon: “I (i.e., Ishtar of Arbela) will abolish the frontiers of all the lands and give them to you” (Parpola 1997:16).

The final clause of the verse creates some difficulties – how to interpret *ואוריד* and how to understand *יושבים*? To begin with the latter, the participle of *ישב* is contextually best understood in the sense of inhabitants of the captured cities (v. 9), and not of persons sitting on thrones. This is also the way the text has been interpreted in ancient versions (LXX, Targ). Regarding the former problem, one could think here of the way the Hiphil of *ירד* is used in 2 Sam 22:48 where it carries the notion of the submission of nations (see also Ps 56:8). However, if the inhabitants of captured cities are the object, then it stands more to reason to think of people “brought down” from these cities as prisoners and deportees. There is a nice parallel of this usage of *ירד* in a inscription from Karatepe, dating to 720 BC (KAI 26 A [I] 20).

Verse 14 gives expression to the way the king of Assyria terrified the peoples of the earth:

My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples,
and as men gather eggs that have been forsaken
so I have gathered all the earth;
there was none that moved a wing
or opened the mouth, or chirped.

This verse makes clear in a most vivid way Assyria acted as a superpower.

⁴⁷ For this motif, see Tadmor (1994:43-44, 99, 161). See also Machinist (1983:725).

Everyone was struck with terror. The oracle ends with V. 15a which reads,

Shall the axe vaunt itself over him who hews with it,
or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it?

This verse summarizes the argument of the whole oracle and contains the rationale for the doom of Assyria. In line with vv. 6-7 it portrays “the sharp clash between Yahweh’s counsel and Assyria’s intention”.⁴⁸ This part of the divine speech is formulated as a rhetorical question of which the answer is quite clear – Assyria must not vaunt himself over him who hews it, that is to say, over God himself.

In Isa 10, the Assyrian king is strongly criticized because of his decision to conquer the countries of many nations, instead of punishing one people only, the people of northern Israel. The king of Assyria is depicted as someone who aimed at world domination. He wants to be the king of kings, the ruler of the four quarters of the earth. From the point of view of Isaiah, in doing so the Assyrian king claims a position that belongs to God, the Lord of Hosts, who in Isa 6 is proclaimed the king of the whole earth.

Assyrian sources, on the other hand, attest a theological view according to which it were the great gods who named the king to plunder the possessions of the lands (cf. Grayson 1976:85). The king is said to conquer the lands with the support of the great gods (Grayson 1976:120); they granted to the king’s dominion their fierce weapons. Ninurta is of particular importance, and this applies even more so, it seems, to the god Ashur, “the king of the gods”, “the lord of the lands” (Mayer 1984:79; see also Grayson 1976:121: “Ashur ... made my sovereignty supreme over the kings of the four quarters”). This is not to deny however that the inscriptions also stress, very much so, the power of the king himself.

According to Isa 10, the pursuit to supreme power on earth is due to the strength and the wisdom of the Assyrian king (10:13), with an emphasis on the latter element (cf. v. 7). This point of view seems to reflect the way the royal ideology of Assyria has been perceived by the prophet – supreme power on earth resulting from great wisdom. This feature leads to the next part of this lecture.

⁴⁸ Whedbee (1971:71).

THE STORY OF PARADISE

The story of paradise (Gen 2:4b-3:24) is a narrative about God who planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and who put man in this garden. As I have argued elsewhere, the expression “the garden in Eden” (Gen 2:8) represents a combination of two different elements known from Mesopotamia: (a) a royal park, on the one hand, and (b) a location outside the terrestrial disc, on the other.⁴⁹ Among the many and wonderful trees in the park two are mentioned in particular: “the tree of life” and “the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (2:9b). The latter one, the tree of knowledge, has a crucial role to play in the story: It is the tree of which it is said that man should not eat of it; otherwise he would be sentenced to death (death penalty).⁵⁰ However, at the end of the story the *two* trees do show up again, in Gen 3:22-23:

Then the Lord God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever’. Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

I will not deal with the issue of the one-tree hypothesis as far as an earlier version of our story is concerned. As has been argued by a growing number of scholars the story as it stands, including the two trees, makes perfect sense,⁵¹ although one may differ about the question of which sense or meaning is implied.

The two trees each symbolize a particular motif. The tree of life is the tree by which one can reach life for ever (3:22), that is to say, eternal life in the sense of immortality. The motif of immortality is part of the story.⁵² Interestingly, this motif fits Eden as a location in the east because, seen from the perspective of Mesopotamian traditions, it refers to a place far off where Utnapishtim and his

⁴⁹ Van der Kooij (2010:7-14).

⁵⁰ On Gen 2:17 as referring to death penalty, see Schmid (2008:63); van der Kooij (2010:4-7).

⁵¹ See van der Kooij (2010:4 note) (lit.). As to the issue of the two trees, see also Mettinger (2007:5-10); Krispenz (2004:301-318); Kübel (2007) (passim).

⁵² Cf. Barr (1993:4). The view that the tree of life symbolizes rejuvenation (see Stordalen 2000:292; Kübel 2007:112-114) is not plausible since it is hardly in line with Gen 3:22.

wife lived an eternal life (van der Kooij 2010:11-12).

The tree of knowledge of good and evil, on the other hand, has raised a lot of discussion as to the kind of knowledge implied. Which knowledge is meant here? The main interpretations are: (1) the acquisition of human qualities; (2) sexual consciousness; (3) ethical knowledge; (4) universal knowledge.⁵³ The last one seems to be widely accepted, nowadays. I agree with Mettinger that this interpretation is the most plausible one. Good and evil, or even better, good and *bad*, are best understood as referring to a totality. Hence, the phrase is about encompassing knowledge and wisdom.

This interpretation fits in with our story because in 3:5 and in 3:22 this knowledge is presented as divine wisdom. According to the serpent, who is depicted as a animal possessing great wisdom, if man eats of the tree of knowledge he will be “like the gods”. At the end of the story God says, “Behold, man has become like one of us knowing good and evil” (3:22). So the serpent got it right.⁵⁴

There is reason to believe that the knowledge and wisdom in the paradise narrative has to do with kingship. In his dissertation, Vriezen drew the attention to 2 Sam 14:17, 20 where David as king is depicted as having wisdom like the angel of the Lord.⁵⁵

In v. 17 the woman of Tekoa says, “for my lord the king is like the angel of the Lord to discern good and evil”. And in v. 20 she put it this way, “But my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth”.

The wisdom of David as king which has to do with good and evil and which is characterized as knowing all things is said to be a wisdom like that of the angel of the Lord. This concept is very similar to the motif of divine wisdom in our story. The link between the kingship and divine wisdom is also attested in Mesopotamian sources. The myth of Adapa is important in this regard. One of the first lines of this text often cited in relation to the Genesis story, reads thus:

⁵³ See Mettinger (2007:62-63) (lit.). He does not refer to magical knowledge as an explanation of the phrase; for (criticism of) this interpretation, see Skinner (1956:96).

⁵⁴ On this issue, see Moberly (1988:1-27).

⁵⁵ Vriezen (1937:145-146). See also Pfeiffer (2001:10).

To him he (Ea) had given wisdom,
eternal life he had not given him.

This passage is very interesting as it contains two motifs which are also found in our story – wisdom (cf. the tree of knowledge), and eternal life (cf. the tree of life).⁵⁶ The (divine) wisdom of Adapa was proverbial as is clear from Mesopotamian sources.⁵⁷ Kings of Mesopotamia were eager to compare themselves with Adapa, the wise. So, for instance, Sargon II:

The king endowed with clear understanding, sharp of eye, in all matters the equal of the Master (Adapa), who waxed great in wisdom and insight and grew old in understanding.⁵⁸

All this is not meant to deny that man in Gen 2-3 is man in general. The words spoken by God to the woman and to the man in Gen 3:15-19 are about daily life. At the same time, however, the aspect of divine knowledge evokes the idea of the great wisdom of kings, a wisdom like that of Adapa (so in Mesopotamian sources). The underlying interest of the story obviously concerns the wisdom and power of kingship.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil plays a crucial role in the story of Paradise. It was forbidden to eat of this tree, under penalty of death (2:16-17). According to Mettinger, the story is about a divine test of obedience to the commandment; its theme be the issue of disobedience and its consequences, which “should be seen as being inspired by Deuteronomistic theology” (Mettinger 2007:64).⁵⁹ I agree with his idea of viewing the story of the garden as a test, but, as I have argued elsewhere, his interpretation that “obedience to the commandment leads to life (i.e. eternal life), disobedience to death” (Mettinger 2007:64), is not convincing.⁶⁰ Instead, I would suggest that our story is better understood as a test like the one found in 2 Chron 32:31. There we read, about king Hezekiah:

⁵⁶ Cf. Mettinger (2007:108).

⁵⁷ See Picchioni (1981:82-101).

⁵⁸ Luckenbill (1927:62-63); see also Fuchs (1994:292).

⁵⁹ For the idea of a “test”, see also Stordalen (2000:248). For the assumption that Deuteronomistic thinking is implied here, see also Arneth (2007:147).

⁶⁰ See van der Kooij (2010:5-7).

And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart.

In the light of this kind of test, it seems to me that the ‘garden episode’ within the story of Paradise⁶¹ was created in order to provide a particular insight in human nature, namely, to know what is in the heart of man. This also sheds light on the fact that the test of Gen 2-3 is arranged, and fully so, by God.

Finally, it is important to note that, in contrast to 2 Sam 14 and to the Mesopotamian sources (Adapa), the wisdom motif – the knowledge of good and evil – is presented in Gen 2-3 as something negative. Otherwise, it would not have been forbidden to eat of the tree of knowledge. One is led to ask why.

This question leads us to a reading of the story of paradise together with the other passages discussed above – Gen 10, 11 and Isa 10. As has been observed by scholars there is a specific link between Gen 2-3 and Gen 11 – in the former God declares that “man has become like one of us” (3:22), whereas in the latter God states that “nothing of what they (mankind) plan to do will be impossible for them” (11:6). The second story seems to illustrate that the divine wisdom which man acquired in the first one, led to the pursuit of supreme power. Although, as argued above, the story of Babel mirrors, by way of analogy, the Assyrian pursuit to imperialism, it is the passage of Gen 10:8-12 that provides a clear reference to Assyrian kingship. The figure of Nimrod is the mighty hunter representing Assyrian kings who strived after world dominion. Both passages share the motif of city building which, as is clear from Gen 11:6, is seen as resulting from wisdom and planning abilities. This is the more interesting as in Assyrian sources the motif of royal wisdom is often related to the building of cities.⁶²

⁶¹ On the garden episode (Gen 2:8-3:22) as an intermezzo in the story as a whole, see van der Kooij (2010:14-16).

⁶² So for instance in the case of Sargon II, according to the Cylinder Inscription: “in my all-embracing wisdom, which at the bidding of the god Ea [...] was made rich in understanding and filled with craftiness, and by the fertile planning of my brain, [...] planned day and night to settle that town (i.e., the place called Magganubba where Dur-Sharruken was to be built), to raise aloft a noble shrine, [...] and palaces for my royal abode” (Luckenbill 1927:63). For another example, see Grayson (1976:173).

The link between wisdom and supreme power is also present in Isa 10:5-9.13-15a. This prophecy in which the imperialistic policy of the king of Assyria is strongly criticised, also helps us understand why the divine wisdom in Gen 2-3 is viewed in a negative way and even considered dangerous. True, in Isa 10 the wisdom motif is related to the politics of mass deportations, the plundering of the nations, and the removal of boundaries, whereas in Gen 10 (cf. Gen 11) the focus is on city building. However, as we have seen, the building of a city such as Resen (Dur-Sharrukin) actually is symbolizing the world dominion resulting from the policy just mentioned.⁶³

In sum, a reading of Gen 2-3 in the light of Gen 10, 11 as well of Isa 10 provides a key to the question regarding the negative view of (divine) wisdom in the story of paradise: it is related to the critical stance towards neo-Assyrian imperialism as reflected in the other passages.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The city of Dur-Sharrukin was inaugurated in the year 706 B.C. Only one year later – 705 B.C. – Sargon II died an unexpected death in battle, in Anatolia. “His death rocked the ancient world”.⁶⁴ In line with the thinking of the time, Sargon’s death and the fact that he “was not buried in his house” were regarded as a sign of divine wrath for grave offences committed by the king. Thus according to the Assyrian text called “The Sin of Sargon”.⁶⁵ The result was the abandonment of the still unfinished city of Dur-Sharrukin.

It was this major event that, in my view, formed the background of the stories in Gen 2-3, 10 and 11. One can easily imagine that the scribal elite (at the royal court) in Jerusalem believed that Sargon II, the Nimrod of their time, had been punished by God for not having respected the order set in primeval times. The allusion to Dur-Sharrukin in Gen 10 and 11 strongly suggests that they were

⁶³ The serpent in Gen 3, possessing the greatest wisdom, too evokes the idea of kingship. This is in line with Isa 14:29 where the serpent imagery is used as symbolizing Assyrian kings.

⁶⁴ Lawson Younger (2002:319).

⁶⁵ For this text, see Livingstone (1989:77-79. For the phrase “was not buried in his house”, see p. 77 l. 20’).

composed in reaction to what happened in 705 B.C.

The prophecy of Isa 10:5-9.13-15a goes back roughly speaking to the same period of time. It may well be that, as has been proposed by scholars, it was triggered by events of the year 720 B.C.⁶⁶ However, it is also possible that it presupposes the events of 705 because the self-confident tone of the oracle in condemning the imperialistic behaviour of Assyria (cf. v. 15a!) makes perfect sense if the ominous death of Sargon II had taken place. Be this as it may, both the prophecy of Isaiah and the stories in Genesis dealt with above represent an impressive response to the neo-Assyrian royal ideology and its resulting imperialistic policy. It was this ideology that served as a model for the so-called “original sin” in the story of paradise.

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⁶⁶ For a recent discussion, see de Jong (2010:98-102).

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