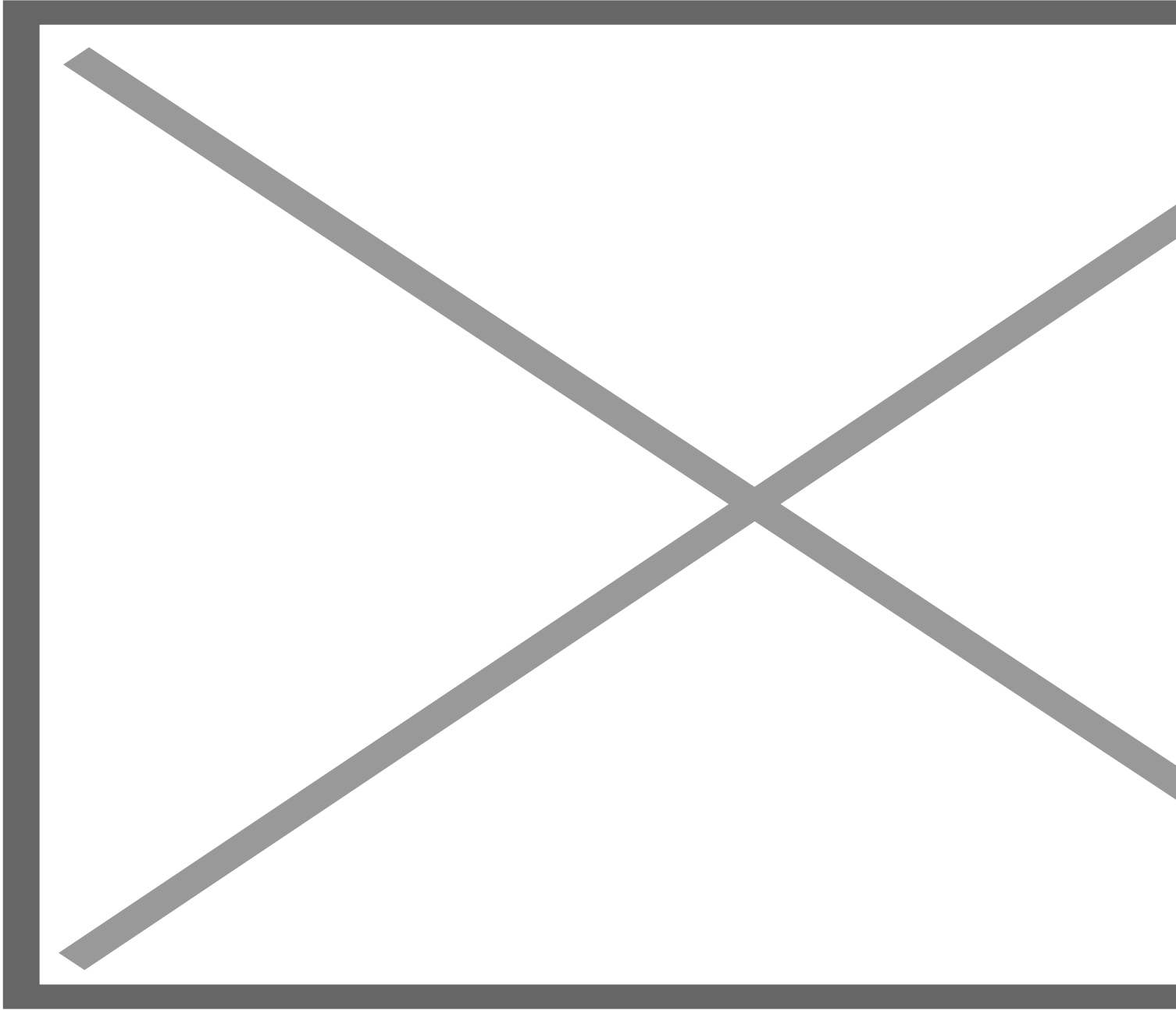


The bad king

Nimrod is the biblical archetype of the corrupt leader obsessed with his own power.

by [Mordechai Beck](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue

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Some bible stories aren't pretty. Some of the biblical kings are downright awful individuals and terrible leaders. In the original text and in the imaginative elaborations of the ancient Jewish sages, Nimrod is the archetype of the bad king, a way for Jews to understand their situation under the power of the Romans and, by extension, under any bad leader who follows. The sages see in Nimrod's deeds the necessity of a constant check against the arrogance of power.

Yet they also offer a warning to his followers: You follow a bad king at your peril. It is a salutary message in our own era as well. The seeds of Nimrod—for leaders and followers alike—are embedded in the very notion of human power.

Nimrod first appears in the story of Noah as a strong man, a descendent of Cush, Ham, and Noah, and “a mighty hunter before the Lord” whose kingdom includes Babel and other cities (Gen. 10:6–10). On the surface the text suggests that Nimrod is a legend during his own lifetime, an outstanding figure of his generation. But the sages weren't persuaded.

The medieval commentator known as Rashi (1040–1105) reflects these suspicions: “He caused the whole world to rebel against God—in the generation of the Dispersion. Moreover, he ‘hunted’ with his mouth in order to rebel against God. Thus the saying: ‘Every arrogant person who knows who his master is but intends to rebel against him is likened to Nimrod, ‘a hunter before God.’”

For Rashi, Nimrod is the model for a whole string of nasty people who follow, including Esau, Edom, Datan and Aviram, Ahaz, and Achashveros. In one source, Nimrod is even suggested to have fathered Pharaoh, the ultimate cipher for evil in the Hebrew Bible. How he achieves this eminence is explained by a later medieval commentator, Abarbanel (1437–1508), who was himself involved in the politics of his age as a leading courtier in the Spanish royal house. Of Nimrod, he notes:

When people saw his great feats in hunting and killing animals they feared him and venerated him and appointed him their king. But he abused this power. Whereas formerly there had been complete equality among people, Nimrod introduced a new system based on power. The idea of his “beginning to be a hero” means that he began to rule over others. To demonstrate his power he began to build turreted cities and strongholds as it is written—“the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Akkad and Kalna.” (Gen. 10:10)

Nimrod is a master of deception and cunning, a hunter in the broader sense of the word: someone who is always seeking his opponent's weak spots. He even pretends to be God-fearing in order to increase his popularity as “a mighty hunter before the Lord.” He is also seen by the sages as one who uproots the natural way of life, abandoning God along the way: “And they journeyed from Kedar” (Gen. 11:2), literally from their origins, pursuing trivia and vain things, manufactured objects to satisfy their superfluous appetites, and thus sought things other than God. According to Rabbi Zev Wolf Einhorn, Nimrod is the one who initiates rule by force, lauding it over the weak, killing them and stealing from them.

To this, Rabbi Akiva says, “They threw off the yoke of Heaven and appointed Nimrod over them—even though he was the servant son of a servant (the cursed Canaan) and ‘woe to the land that is ruled by a servant!’” Maybe Rabbi Akiva's comment is meant to suggest that Nimrod was caught in a dialectic of master-servant: one was either/or, and he could never see beyond this duality. Thus he was a servant to a limited perception of reality.

Later writers, too, drew the necessary conclusions from this first monarch, reflecting perhaps the world in which they themselves lived. Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), who was writing at a time when his German

homeland was struggling with unification and democracy, observes: “He was the first to make ‘heroism/brute strength’ into a full time occupation! Strength is good when used to enforce justice, but not laud it over the weak. He conducted his policies in secret.” Hirsch connects the Hebrew *tzud*, hunting, to *sod*, secret, and says that secret politics is bad politics. To the tradition that Nimrod’s “hunting” included capturing people, Hirsch adds that he then kept them under his yoke until he could use them for his own purposes. “This is the opposite of voluntary submission from below,” he concludes.

There are two other traditions that grew out of the Nimrod legend without any clear literary basis in the original. One is that Nimrod is the selfsame king of Shinar, who leads the people out of Kedem (literally, the pristine source) and settles in the valley of Shinar, where he orders the building of the city and tower of Babel. Nimrod has already been introduced as the builder of four cities, among them Babel “in the land of Shinhar” (Gen. 10:10), so there is some justification for this connection. Moreover, building cities had already received bad press—the first such builder is none other than Cain, the first murderer, who builds a city for his son—so this would fit the image the sages were constructing for Nimrod.

Rabbi Meir Hachohen Kagan (1838–1933) sees the Babel episode as underlining Nimrod’s bad tendencies as well as the divine response:

Nimrod becomes a byword for bare-faced arrogance. The story of Babel comes to tell us that in the end God’s will is done, that His enemies are destroyed and their arrogance uprooted . . . even though on the way it appears that the wicked have it their own way and succeed in all their undertakings.

The second extraliterary addition to Nimrod’s story is his connection to Abraham. Although this might seem far-fetched—Abraham arrives six generations later—the sages recognized that such archetypes as Nimrod exist in every age. They even gave him three names: his own, that of Cush (his father), and Amraphel, another king who flourishes in Abraham’s time. There are numerous versions of the confrontation between these two polar opposite personalities. Among the most elaborate is found in Bereshit Rabbah:

Terach [Abraham’s father] took Abram and delivered him to Nimrod who said to him: Abram come let us worship fire. Abram said to him: only if we worship water that will quench the fire. Said Nimrod: So let us worship water. Said Abram: If so, let us worship the clouds that carry the water; said Nimrod: let us worship clouds then. Said Abram: If that is so, let us worship the wind that disperses the clouds. Nimrod agreed—let us worship the wind. Said Abram, if so, let us worship man—for he is full of wind! Nimrod said to him—Are you speaking vain words [*dvarim beteylim*, literally, nonsense]? I only bow down to fire, so I am going to throw you into fire, and let the god whom you worship come and rescue you from it. Abram went down into the furnace and was saved.

The need to introduce Abraham into the narrative suggests the motivation of the sages, who were not merely introducing something fanciful to the script but pointing to the contrast of leadership models. Abraham is a leader, a king (Avimelech’s brother describes him thus), but his “kingdom” is founded on an elevated ideal, free of the force and unprovoked violence that characterizes Nimrod’s megalomania. If Nimrod is symbolized by a walled city, Abraham is characterized by an open tent. If Nimrod is characterized by arrogance and violence, Abraham is the paragon of altruism and selflessness. The Talmud makes a similar observation: “I gave greatness to Abraham and he said before Me: ‘I am dust and ashes’ . . . but idolaters do not react so. I gave greatness to Nimrod and what did he say—‘Come let us build a city . . . and make for ourselves a name.’”

Nimrod’s end, according to many tellings, is violent. First he is punished in a way that fits his rebellious and bullying nature. In confusing the tongues of his followers at Babel, God is doing no more than paying back

Nimrod in kind. Nimrod has achieved his enormous political power by abusing the power he was given by the people. The Targum Sheni speaks of him as one of ten kings who rule the entire world. When it comes to Babel, he entices, cajoles, and deceives people into following him, using his smooth tongue and twisted arguments. All he wants to do, he argues, is to respond to God's violent act of drowning the entire world in the flood. Yet in so arguing, he also tries to transform himself into a god, even fixing a location where people can come and bow down to him.

This megalomaniacal impulse is not confined to Nimrod. The builder of Babel leads his peers into an orgy of egoism. Everyone adopts Nimrod's selfishness as their own. They all join in this great undertaking in order to "make a name" for themselves.

The confusion of language should be a source of great shame for this once mighty king. The text doesn't say one way or the other, and given the nature of Nimrod's character, it is possible to conclude that it is not. Still, along with the dispersal of the people, there is presumably a contraction of the leader's power. In any case, another end is awaiting him, one that is also fraught with violence and which also contains a certain poetic justice.

According to the rabbis, one source of Nimrod's power is a mythical garment: the clothing that God once made for Adam and Eve. It was stolen from Shem by Ham, who then passed it down to Nimrod. When he wore it, all the animals and birds came and prostrated themselves before him, for they thought of him as a source of strength, and they appointed him king over them. Yet this same garment leads to Nimrod's end. When Esau and Jacob are being blessed by their father, we read of "the clothes of Esau the treasured older son" (Gen. 27:15). To what does this verse refer? According to the Bereshit Rabbah and Targum Yonatan, Esau covets the clothes that Nimrod wore, so he kills him (and his son, Henoch) and takes them. Those who live by the sword are destined to die by it.

Perhaps, in their wisdom, the sages realized just how constant is this pattern of leaders who gain power only to lose their purpose. Instead of serving their people, they serve themselves; instead of freeing their subjects, they enslave them. Instead of clarity and hope, they plunge the world into confusion and darkness.

The sages lay out the dangers that face all those who would be leaders or kings. Here, the obsession with power is paramount, as is Nimrod's shift from a leader of immense personal power to one who craftily inveigles the people to be like him: a winner, a man with a name, someone who is able to fulfill the dreams of all humankind to be independent and free of the usual constraints of family, community, and social norms.

Without limits, we can all become Nimrods.

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