

# Theology Abstracts 2012

## Hesiod's Succession Narrative Adversarial Relationship to Genesis 1-11

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The Near Eastern background for Greek mythology has become a fashionable topic these days with works by Charles Penglase (*Greek Myths and Mesopotamia*) and Matthew West (*The East Face of Helicon*) who both demonstrate persuasively the relationship between Greek myths with various Near Eastern myth complexes. There has been little done, however, to relate Greek myth to the Old Testament narratives and in particular *Genesis* 1-11. The scholar Jan Bremmer has published a volume with a number of articles attempting to fill the gap to a small extent. But the work remains focused on the general Near Eastern backdrop and assumes that much of the influence from the Near East came at a much later date. Therefore the influence is more superficial or attributable to the general world-view evidenced in both Greek and Near Eastern religion and myths, a milieu which did influence Hebrew thought. In other words, there is no deep or fundamental relationship between the *Genesis* account of primal times and other ancient accounts including the Greek, Hittite and Babylonian accounts beyond cross-pollination from the Near East to Greece.

This paper will seek to establish deep thematic relationships between the Old Testament narrative of the primal world in *Genesis* 1-11 and Hesiod's succession narrative in the *Theogony*. Hesiod's succession narrative is the story of the evolution of the divine order from the original gods Ouranos (Heaven) and Gaia (Earth) through various divine upheavals to the final supremacy of Zeus a storm god. The paper will suggest not a direct relation between Old Testament narrative and Hesiod's succession narrative where one borrows directly from the other, but rather an adversarial relationship. Specifically, Hesiod and other Near Eastern succession narratives trace back to an original narrative or narratives constructed at the time of Nimrod or shortly thereafter. This narrative sought to justify the new divine polytheistic order established by Nimrod as he led mankind in rebellion against Yahweh. This original mythical narrative recast the rebellion of mankind along with their demonic conspirators/inducers as a justifiable rebellion against an original tyrannical deity. This initial rebellion resulted in the handing down of the world's authority through successive divine generations until coming to rest in the possession of a storm god. Interestingly, the storm god identity of the final figure, so important to these early succession narratives, fits well with the background of Noah's flood.

Supporters of this new divine order may have argued that the recent world-destroying flood was a sign of an upheaval or war among the gods with the victor, as evidenced by the great flood, a storm god like Zeus. Hesiod's succession in the *Theogony* due to the quality of writing and its full-preservation represents an important insight into the original myths of polytheism advanced against the divine story as recorded in *Genesis* 1-11 with a rebel mankind and demons justified in dominion.

## The Nimrod-Like Figures of Ninurta and Hercules

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Jewish tradition records that Nimrod introduced idolatry to mankind and incited rebellion against Yahweh. Yet K. van der Toorn and P. W. van der Horst suggest Jewish writers invented Nimrod and may have based him on Sumerian gods. Indeed, traces of Nimrod are present in ancient Sumerian and even Greek mythology. This paper contends that Nimrod shares parallels with the hunter, god-heroes Hercules and Ninurta. But contrary to van der Toorn and van der Horst's arguments, Nimrod is the origin for cults of Hercules and Ninurta. Identifying Nimrod as the source for these cults ultimately strengthen *Genesis*' credibility as a historical document and reveals that early man's religious attitudes originated in an intentional rebellion against Yahweh.

The methodology in this paper examines the literary traditions surrounding Hercules, Ninurta, and Nimrod. Sources for Hercules include the Greek tales about the Cycle of Twelve Labors and the Gigantomachy. The literature examined on Ninurta included Sumerian *Myth of Anzu*, *Ninurta's Exploits*, *Ninurta's Return to Nippur*, *Ninurta and the Turtle*, and assorted hymns. Jewish sources include the account in *Genesis*, the *Talmud*, the *Haggada*, and the *Book of Jasher*. These traditions reveal parallels between Hercules, Ninurta, and Nimrod: they are renowned hunters, establish cities, found cults, and quash revolts. The key link between these three heroic figures, however, is Ninurta and Hercules' role as the champions of the new order of gods against rebellions by the older, monstrous gods. Likewise, Nimrod attempted to replace Yahweh and stood as a champion for the new order of gods. Though Ninurta's cult probably originated before even conservative estimates place the writing of *Genesis*, Nimrod is likely the origin for Ninurta and Hercules. The argument that Jewish writers based Nimrod on Ninurta ignores the Jewish culture's isolated nature. The Jews were unlikely to allow foreign religious influences to shape their religious or historic traditions. Jewish records place Nimrod at a historic moment that allows him

to be the founder of deviant religions and the inspiration for later hero-god cults. These factors indicate that Nimrod is the origin for Hercules and Ninurta.

Finally, this paper examines the reasons behind and the consequences derived from denying Nimrod's historicity. The contemporary scholarship relegates Nimrod to a mythical status. This allows scholars to attribute the development of religion to social causes and to strip away the spiritual motivations for religion. Recent scholarship contends the invention of ancient religions is not the product of a conscious uprising against Yahweh but the consequence of social, economic, and political needs. Linking Heracles and Ninurta to Nimrod may shed light on how ancient man viewed religion and vindicate the Genesis account of the revolt at Babel: man did not invent gods for social needs but as an overt act of rebellion against Yahweh.

Van der Toorn, K. and van der Horst, P. W. 1990. Nimrod Before and After the Bible. *Harvard Theological Review* 83:1-29.