

Cyrus, Ben-Gurion and Ben-Zion

By Abolala Soudavar

A year ago, Dr. Jacob Wright, who is an associate professor of The Hebrew Bible at Emory University, wrote an essay in the Huffington Post ([3/6/2012](#)) in reaction to the [TED talk](#) on the Cyrus Cylinder, given by the British Museum's director Neil MacGregor. Alarmed by the popularity of the talk, Wright warned that the picture depicted by MacGregor had to be tempered by what "most historians who specialize in early Persian history" would tell you: that Cyrus and his successors were primarily motivated "to maintain control of their vast empire and to exploit the wealth of its subjects." I am not sure what yardstick Wright uses to determine that Cyrus *exploited* his subjects, and whether he would apply the same to assess the behavior of Western Powers in the 19th and 20th centuries, or the US when it intervenes in the four corners of the world to protect its national interest? But as the Cyrus Cylinder is about to embark on a five-city tour beginning in Washington DC, on the exact anniversary of Wright's article, it is perhaps appropriate to not let the positive symbolism of a precious object that is the legacy of human civilization as a whole, and not Iran in particular, be tarnished by anti-Iranian sentiments.

One must know that Cyrus has long been a role model for non-Iranians, rather than Iranians themselves. For, it is a fact that the memory of Cyrus was completely erased from Iranian chronicles, while Jews revered him all along as the Messiah or Anointed One, and Greeks, who otherwise treated Iranians as barbarians, bestowed the highest praise on him and considered him a role model. He also became a role model for some of the Founding Fathers such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, who cherished his memory through their own copies of *Cyropaedia* (a Greek account of Cyrus' life).

But Iranians themselves only began to appropriate Cyrus in the previous century, and under the influence of Western historiography. The most misguided appropriation of Cyrus happened during the festivities organized in 1971 by the Shah of Iran who decided to celebrate the "2500th Anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire" in the southern province of Fars. Its high point was when the Shah stood before Cyrus's tomb and asked him to "sleep tight" as he would oversee the empire that he had founded. To celebrate monarchy, he not only put Cyrus to sleep but the whole Iranian nation, only to be awakened by the nightmare of theocracy.

The 2500 years concept had always been puzzling to me—as to what constituted its starting year, and who conceived that idea—until a few years ago when the late Farrokh Ghaffari, who was in charge of those ceremonies, revealed to me that the original idea actually came from David Ben Gurion and André Malraux. After retiring from premiership, Ben-Gurion wanted to celebrate the birth of Israel through a meaningful event. The 2500th anniversary of the conquest of Babylon in 539 BC by Cyrus, and the liberation of the Jews who had been deported by Nebuchadnezzar, seemed admirably suited. As for Malraux who had a keen sense of history, the fall of Babylon

was a civilization landmark that merited celebration on an international scale. Iran was advised to be a participant and a host, but the Iranian Court hijacked the idea and created its own senseless 2500th year extravaganza, which didn't even fall on the right date. What was supposed to be the celebration of a noble event turned into a farce in Fars, that drew the ire of the Western press. Ben-Gurion did not participate in the 1971 festivities. He did, however, write an essay for a conference that was held in Shiraz in the same year. It was entitled *Cyrus, King of Persia* and was published in the first volume of *Acta Iranica*. In it, Ben Gurion states that “Cyrus was a great figure, one of the greatest in terms of general history” and that he deserved all the “eulogies” that the Old Testament bestowed on him. I wonder if Ben-Gurion’s praise must be tempered as well.

Trying to show the harshness of Persian rule in Judea, Wright further argues that “the Persian-appointed governor Nehemiah reports the complaints of people who lost their homes and children in order to pay imperial taxes.” Ironically, there are still many in that land who would like to complain *today* about the losses of their homes, as well as harsh treatment, but they don’t know who to.

As for Wright’s contention that Cyrus liberated the Jews to better exploit them, it is contradicted by the Bible itself. Ezra (6:3–5) produces the decree by which Cyrus ordered the Temple of Jerusalem to be rebuilt by monies paid *from his own treasury*, and it ascertains that all the gold and silver that the Babylonians had brought from the Temple were returned to the Jewish elders. It was a magnanimous act, unparalleled in history. For, where in history can one find a conqueror who enters a city, and who, instead of looting it, is willing to return the riches of a minority who happened to be there? If one must find fault with Cyrus, it is that he was too magnanimous, and that he trusted the Jewish elders with money and gold, without oversight. As a result, money and gold vanished and the Temple was not built. Three decades later, the Jews had to petition Cyrus’s cousin and third successor, Darius, to have the Temple rebuilt. But rather than entrusting it to the local people, this astute king decided to build it himself and levied new taxes to that effect (Ezra 5:15). Twice paid by the Persians, and once built, the Second Temple was finally destroyed by the Romans.

Wright is right to point out that the walls of Persepolis depict tribute bearers from the subjects of the empire, but he is wrong to assume that they were bringing it to Cyrus. Persepolis was built by Darius who organized Cyrus’s empire, the Achaemenid Empire, and instituted the tax levies. Closer to our times, American troops entered Iraq (Babylon) to punish Saddam for his invasion of Kuwait; and for the next 12 years they skimmed off Iraq’s oil revenues for war reparations. Whatever taxes Cyrus levied in Babylon must pale in comparison to what the US levied in Iraq.

The fact is that Jews who were liberated by Cyrus were free to go, but the vast majority of them preferred to stay. Not only did they stay, but many joined the Achaemenid administration as tax collectors. Ben-Zion Netanyahu (the father of Benjamin) who has written a book about the Spanish Inquisition, traces the origin of the hatred for the Jews to their activities in the Achaemenid empire (NYTimes 8/23/1995). Tax collectors have never been popular; neither then,

nor now. But taxes are necessary and one cannot leisurely allege “exploitation” without showing proof of egregious demand. As far as I am concerned, neither the Achaemenids excessively taxed their subjects nor were the Jews, who served them in this respect, tools of exploitation.

By all accounts, Cyrus was a magnanimous man and the archetype of a wise ruler. The policies that he introduced did indeed promote religious tolerance, and the right for communities to live according to their own laws and beliefs. What Cyrus promoted is a model to be emulated and not criticized. One must be grateful that Neil MacGregor delivered his TED talk, and is allowing the Cyrus Cylinder to tour the United States of America.

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