

"I AM

# CYRUS

**KING OF THE UNIVERSE, THE GREAT KING,**

the powerful king, grandson of Cyrus, the great king ... When I went as harbinger of peace into Babylon I founded my sovereign residence within the palace amid celebration and rejoicing. Marduk, the great lord, bestowed on me as my destiny the great magnanimity of one who loves Babylon, and I every day sought him out in awe ...

**My vast troops were marching peaceably in Babylon,** and the whole of Sumer and Akkad had nothing to fear... I sought the safety of the city of Babylon and all its sanctuaries. As for the population of Babylon ...

**I soothed their weariness; I freed them from their bonds** ... Marduk, the great lord, rejoiced at my good deeds, and he pronounced a sweet blessing over me ... From Shuanna I sent back to their places to the city of Ashur and Susa, Akkad, the land of Eshnunna, the city of Zamban, the city of Meturnu, Der, as far as the border of the land of Gutu, whose shrines had earlier become dilapidated, the gods who lived therein, and made permanent sanctuaries for them ... **I collected together all of their people and returned them to their settlements** ...

May all the gods that I returned to their sanctuaries ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds, and say to Marduk, my lord, this: Cyrus, the king who fears you, and Cambyses his son, may they be the provisioners of our shrines until distant days, and the population of Babylon call blessings on my kingship.

**I have enabled all the lands to live in peace."**

problem of hubris, overstepping boundaries and laying claim to the territory of others. (Eventually, however, the Greek world would produce its own invincible conqueror – one who supposedly developed his plans for world domination at the feet of a notable Athenian philosopher.)

Meanwhile, in the small and relatively insignificant town of Jerusalem, authors were creating, under the auspices of the Persian Empire, what became biblical texts. These texts present a generally favorable image of the Persian kings. It was, after all, during their rule that the Temple in Jerusalem and the city itself were rebuilt, much of the Hebrew Bible was written and many of the most enduring institutions and practices of Jewish life emerged. But the biblical authors also reveal the dark underbelly of the Persian Empire. In several places we hear of the hardships endured by the community. For example, the Persian-appointed governor Nehemiah reports the complaints of people who lost their homes and children in order to pay

imperial taxes. In a lengthy collective prayer, the community declares that they are slaves in their own land due to the oppressive tribute they owe the imperial government. And in response to the imperialist vision that Persia inherited from Assyria, the biblical authors articulate norms prohibiting Israel from expanding beyond its borders. The vision of national coexistence they set forth stands over against a Middle East controlled by a single power.

The values of tolerance that the Cyrus Cylinder has come to represent today must be held high. Yet in doing so, we must also heed the voices of those who opposed Persia's imperial reach. Otherwise, we lose sight of the danger posed by any power that would organize the world primarily for the purpose of greater control, exploitation and expansion.

***This article appeared as a blog on the Huffington Post June 3, 2012. It is reproduced with permission from the author.***



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**"But come to those who by their own ability and not through fortune have risen to be princes. I say that Moses, *Cyrus*, Romulus, Theseus and such like are the most excellent examples"**

**Niccollo Michiavelli - Italian Historian - The Prince (ca 1513)**

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 in reaction to the TED talk, given by Neil MacGregor, the British Museum's director, on the Cyrus Cylinder. 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 has embarked on a five-city tour beginning in Washington DC, 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 and Zoroastrian chronicles, while Jews revered him 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 will listen.

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.

When Cyrus conquered Babylon, Judea was not part of his empire, nor did he ever send any troops there; in all probability Judea submitted on its own volition some five years later. It thus seems rather farfetched to think that Cyrus freed the Jews to go home, in the hope that they would someday submit to him to be "exploited." 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 as tax collectors during the Achaemenid empire. 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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## CYRUS, KING OF PERSIA

**David Ben-Gurion**

**T**he Bible as we have it today ends with these two very significant verses:

“Now in the first year of Cyrus, King of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken in the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and put it also in writing, saying :“*Thus saith Cyrus King of Persia. All the kingdom of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him and let him go up*”

**(II Chronicles, XXXVI, 22, 23)**

A special privilege this, to be accorded to a ruler who was not a Jew-to close the Book of Books, and to close it with a word that in our day as well has a fateful meaning for the whole people of Israel, but for our State and for Jewry in the Diaspora, the Hebrew word that says---“let him go up”

And no other foreign ruler was given such praise, and that by one of the grandest of the prophets of Israel, as Cyrus had, from the lips of Isaiah whom Biblical criticism names the “:Second Isaiah “

“*That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem . Thou shall be built: and to the temple. Thy foundation shall be laid. “Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have bolden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates: an the gates shall not be shut. I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron; And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places...”*

**(Isaiah, XLIV, 28 XLV,1-3)**

Beyond question, Cyrus was deserving of these eulogies, and not only because of his proclamation, and of his permitting the Babylonian exiles to return to their country and rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus was a great figure, one of the greatest, from the point of view of great history also. He was one of the most outstanding military commanders in an age when there were but a few such among the mighty conquerors. .

**Paper presented at 1971 Conference, Shiraz, Iran :  
Proceedings in Acta Iranica, Vol 1, 1974 pps 127-133**