
Cyrus the Great

From International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

CYRUS sī'rəs [Heb *kōreš*; Old Pers *Kuruš*]. Properly Cyrus II, the Great, founder of the Persian empire. He reigned from 559 to 530 B.C., and his empire flourished until its conquest by Alexander the Great (331 B.C.).

I. Birth and Family

Cyrus was the son of Cambyses I, ruler of Anshan, a region in the uplands of eastern Elam and part of the lands of the Persian tribes. Cambyses had inherited his rule from his father Cyrus I, to whom the western parts of the Persian lands had been allotted by his father and predecessor Teispes, the eastern portion being granted to Ariaramnes, brother of Cyrus I. Cyrus II himself has left a text (the Cyrus Cylinder) affirming his genealogy: "I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, legitimate king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four rims (of the earth), son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anshan, of a family (which) always (exercised) kingship" (ANET p. 316).

Various stories concerning the birth and early history of this famous figure were of course in circulation in the ancient Near East, and some may contain genuine historical information. According to the best-known of them, as told by Herodotus (i.108–122), Cyrus was the offspring of the marriage of Cambyses, the Persian vassal of the Median king Astyages, and Mandane, daughter of Astyages. Astyages was warned in a dream that the child would grow up to slay him, and so gave orders that he should be put to death. The official entrusted with this task, Harpagus, instead gave the young Cyrus to a shepherd to bring up. Although Cyrus at the age of ten came to the attention of Astyages, once again his life was spared when the royal counselors persuaded the king to let the child live. Astyages' dream, however, came true, for when Cyrus became king of the Persians he revolted against Astyages, captured him in battle, and made himself master of the Median kingdom.

This legend has affinities with several other ancient tales concerning the founder of a dynasty, including those about Sargon of Akkad (24th cent B.C.) and later Iranian rulers like Ardashir, founder of the Sasanian dynasty (3rd to 7th cent A.D.). Herodotus' mention (i.122) that Cyrus' foster mother was named Spako, the Median word for dog, is further reminiscent of the tale of Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of Rome, who were supposedly suckled by a wolf or dog. The more military aspects of the legend, e.g., Cyrus' revolt against Astyages, are much more likely to be historical.

A different story was told by the historian Ctesias, a court physician to the later Persian king Artaxerxes II (404–358 B.C.). According to his account, Cyrus was the son of a Persian bandit and a shepherdess; he rose to a place of honor in the Median court and eventually led a successful revolt against Astyages. The story of Cyrus given by the Greek historian Xenophon in his *Education of Cyrus (Cyropaedia)* contains many factual details, but it is essentially a historical romance, portraying the ideal education of the ideal young prince. Within a century or two after his death Cyrus had become a legendary figure.

II. Early Conquests

By his conquest of the Median empire (550 B.C.) Cyrus had in the first place welded Medes and Persians into a unified nation. Because Cyrus remained respectful of Median culture, made Median Ecbatana one of his royal residences, and often appointed Medes to high positions in his provincial government, his kingdom became known as that of the "Medes and Persians" (cf., e.g., Dnl. 5:28; 6:8, 15; Est. 10:2). But secondly, his conquest over Media had given him rule over its former provinces of Assyria, Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia, and Cappadocia. To the west of the Median realm lay the powerful empire of the fabulously wealthy Croesus of Lydia. Croesus' attempts, after the downfall of the Median empire, to acquire some of the Median dependencies for himself were quickly frustrated by Cyrus. In 547 B.C. Cyrus launched an attack upon the Lydian empire,

forcing Croesus, who had crossed the river Halys, his traditional eastern boundary, back to his capital city Sardis. After a short siege, the acropolis of Sardis was taken, and Croesus, rather than suffer the usual indignities meted out to a conquered ruler, had himself burned upon a pyre. The Nabonidus Chronicle from Babylon reports laconically (though restoration of certain passages is somewhat doubtful): "In May [547 B.C.] he [Cyrus] marched to the land of Lydia. He killed its king. He took its booty. He placed in it his own garrison. Afterward his garrison and the king were in it" (ii.16–18). Although Herodotus reports that Cyrus treated Croesus in a friendly manner, this may reflect the legend of Cyrus' clemency toward his conquered enemies rather than the facts.

This expedition against Croesus had taken Cyrus far into Asia Minor and had brought him into contact with the Greek cities of the Ionian coast. This was the first of many disastrous conflicts between Persians and Greeks that were to play such a dominant role in Greek history especially for a century thereafter. One by one the Greek city-states, previously under nominal Lydian rule, were picked off by Cyrus and reorganized into Persian provinces. Greek tradition holds that the general who was responsible for the subjugation of the Greek states and who became satrap of the newly formed Persian province was the same Harpagus who had saved the young Cyrus' life by his disloyalty to Astyages.

Cyrus then turned his attention to the as yet unconquered Iranian tribes in the east. Parthia, in the hands of Hystaspes, grandson of Ariaramnes and thus cousin of Cyrus, soon became a Persian satrapy, Hystaspes exchanging his role as petty king for the no less exalted title of satrap of the Persian empire. Following the course of the Oxus river from high up on the Iranian plateau, Cyrus made himself master first of the land of Sogdia, introducing Persian systems of irrigation into that region, and then of Bactria. From there he pressed on finally into India, to the region known to the Iranians as Paruparaesanna, and to its inhabitants as Gandara, on the slopes of the Hindu Kush. Cyrus had, in no more than a decade, made himself ruler of a vast territory

extending from the Aegean Sea to India, and had simultaneously established the structures of provincial government that were to serve his empire so well for many generations.

III. Conquest of Babylon

Babylon, the next goal for Cyrus' ambitions, was ripe for change. Nabonidus, the last of the Neo-Babylonian kings, had absented himself from the capital for fourteen years to pursue his own antiquarian and religious hobbies at Teimā in northern Arabia. His continued failure to take part in the New Year festival at Babylon, the chief religious ceremony of the Babylonian cult, had alienated the powerful priesthood of the city-god Marduk, as had also his bestowal of favors upon the worship of Sin, the moon deity of Haran. The government of Babylon and of the empire was in the hands of his son Belshazzar, undoubtedly one of the less capable Neo-Babylonian rulers.

Nabonidus, sensing no doubt that Cyrus' success spelled severe danger for his own empire, returned to Babylon in the spring of 539 B.C. and began to bring into the city the statues of other Babylonian city-gods in order to afford greater protection to Babylon. Though New Year's day was celebrated in proper form on Apr. 4, 539 B.C., by late summer it was clear that nothing could hold back Cyrus. In early October Cyrus defeated a Babylonian force at Opis on the Tigris, and on Oct. 10 Sippar fell without a battle. Nabonidus hastily left Babylon, and on Oct. 12 Cyrus' troops under Gobryas (Ugbaru) governor of Gutium, a former general of Nebuchadrezzar who had defected to the Persians, entered the city. That night, according to [Dnl. 5:30](#), Belshazzar king of the Chaldeans (Neo-Babylonians) was slain. When Nabonidus returned to Babylon he was made prisoner. Cyrus himself entered the city on Oct. 29, and presented himself to the citizens as its liberator.

According to Herodotus, the Persians used the following stratagem to enter the city: "drawing off the river by a canal into the lake, which was till now a marsh, he [Cyrus] made the stream to sink till its former channel could be forded. When this happened, the Persians who were posted with this intent made their way into

Babylon by the channel of the Euphrates, which had now sunk to about the height of the middle of a man's thigh" (i.191). A similar story is told by Xenophon (*Cyropaedeia* vii.5.7–34), though no cuneiform evidence supports this course of events.

Although the chief evidence for Cyrus' reception comes from sources obviously very favorable to Cyrus, there is little reason to doubt that his presence was welcomed. According to the "Nabonidus Chronicle," "in the month of Arahshamnu, the 3rd day, Cyrus entered Babylon, green twigs were spread in front of him — the state of 'Peace' was imposed upon the city. Cyrus sent greetings to all Babylon" (ANET, p. 306). The Cyrus Cylinder, apparently composed by a Babylonian temple official, reports that "all the inhabitants of Babylon as well as of the entire country of Sumer and Akkad, princes and governors (included), bowed to him (Cyrus) and kissed his feet, jubilant that he (had received) the kingship, and with shining faces" (ANET, p. 316).

The whole outcome of the city's conquest was officially explained to its citizens as the doing of its city-god Marduk: "[Marduk] scanned and looked (through) all the countries, searching for a righteous ruler willing to lead him (in the annual procession). (Then) he pronounced the name of Cyrus, king of Anshan, declared him to be (come) the ruler of all the world ... Marduk, the great lord, a protector of his people/worshippers, beheld with pleasure his (i.e. Cyrus') good deeds and his upright mind (and therefore) ordered him to march against his city Babylon. He made him set out on the road to Babylon going at his side like a real friend ... Without any battle, he made him enter his town Babylon, sparing Babylon any calamity" (Cyrus Cylinder; ANET, p. 315).

The events of October 539 B.C. were of more than passing importance. They marked the transition in the Babylonian and Assyrian world from Semitic to Aryan rule, a state of affairs that was to continue for a thousand years, and they made of Cyrus a world emperor, since he now became heir to the Neo-Babylonian empire, great in its heyday under Nebuchadrezzar (605–562 B.C.), and even in its decay still

impressive. Cyrus was eager to make as little break in the continuity of Babylonian life as possible, so he proclaimed himself to the citizens according to ancient Semitic formularies and in the Akkadian language, to be "Cyrus, king of the world, legitimate king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four rims (of the earth) ... whose rule Bel and Nebo [the Babylonian deities] love, whom they want as king to please their hearts" (Cyrus Cylinder; ANET, p. 316).

IV. Policy toward the Jews

Part of Cyrus' conciliatory policy toward subject peoples was to resettle them in their homelands and to undertake the restoration of their places of worship. Cyrus' massive program of resettlement concerned more than the cities from which in recent months Nabonidus had brought the divine statues into Babylon; he wrote: " (As to the region) ... as far as Ashur and Susa, Agade, Eshnunna, the towns of Zamban, Me-Turnu, Der as well as the region of the Gutians, I returned to (these) sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which (used) to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned (to them) their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus has brought into Babylon to the anger of the lord of the gods, unharmed, in their (former) chapels, the places which make them happy" (Cyrus Cylinder; ANET, p. 316). The purpose behind these acts of repatriation was that a chorus of prayer from the various gods of the empire might ascend daily to Bel, i.e. Marduk, and Nebo, whom Cyrus recognized at Babylon as the highest gods: "May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me (to him)" (Cyrus Cylinder; ANET, p. 316).

The repatriation of the Jews, reversing the deportation policies of the Assyrians and Babylonians, was in accordance with Cyrus' general policy. According to the Chronicler,

generally recognized as author of the first chapters of Ezra, Cyrus' permission for the Jews' return was given in his "first year" (Ezr. 1:1), obviously not his first year as ruler (559–58 B.C.) nor yet his accession year (October 539–April 538 B.C.) in Babylon but his first full regnal year as king of Babylon commencing in April 538 B.C. Of course only after he had become king of Babylon did he come into contact with the Jews, so naturally they reckoned his reign from that time. The proclamation for the return was made both orally and in writing: he "made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom" (1:1) by dispatching a herald who after the public announcement of the royal edict would post a copy. Though Jewish exiles had settled mainly in Babylonia, the edict would apply equally to Jews elsewhere in his kingdom. This edict, preserved in Hebrew and no doubt drawn up in that language by some Jewish official in the Persian court, bears a strong Jewish coloring, especially in the phrases "Yahweh," "each survivor," "sojourns," "free-will offerings"; a shorter form of the edict, free of most of these distinctively Jewish phrases, is preserved in 2 Ch. 36:23.

The permission for the return reads as much like a royal command as the requirement to rebuild the temple. But although about fifty thousand Jews responded to the royal decree (cf. Ezr. 2:64f), many exiles remained in Babylonia (cf. Ezr. 7:6f). Therefore, this part of the edict must have been construed simply as permission; the command form is used because that is the only mode of speech suitable for an autocrat! Though the Jewish exiles had, unlike other deportees, no images to carry back with them, Cyrus said, "May their God be with them" as they return, a phrase that would not have been offensive to the Jews. In place of restored images, Cyrus offered as a contribution to the reestablishment of the Jerusalem temple the sacred temple vessels that had been dedicated as a war trophy in Esagila, Marduk's temple in Babylon, by Nebuchadrezzar after his capture of Jerusalem and plundering of the temple in 587 B.C. (2 K. 24:13; 25:13–16; Ezr. 1:7). These precious vessels of gold and silver, numbering between two thousand and five thousand (the text of Ezr. 1:9–11 is uncertain) were given into

the charge of Sheshbazzar by the temple treasurer Mithredath.

Two further features of the royal edict of Ezr. 1 call for special comment. First, Cyrus professes himself to have been given all the kingdoms of the earth by Yahweh, the God of heaven. This does not mean that he himself was a worshiper of Yahweh; he was probably a Zoroastrian and worshiper of Ahura-Mazda, but obviously a feature of his imperial policy was to acknowledge with gratitude his blessings from the other high gods of his realm. Thus at Babylon it is Marduk, the city-god, who chooses him and declares him to be world ruler, while at Ur, it is Sin, the moon-god worshiped there, who gives him victory.

Second, Ezr. 1:4 stipulates that non-Jewish subjects of the king were to help provide for the returning exiles money, food, and transport, together with offerings for the Jewish temple. This remarkable command reflects Cyrus' determination to restore regional cults, which of course required the presence of a body of worshipers in order to maintain them.

Another edict of Cyrus relating to the rebuilding of the temple is found in Ezr. 6:2–5. Because it does not mention the repatriation of the Jews but only the restoration of the temple, some have questioned the authenticity of the decree of Ezr. 1. But the two decrees have quite different functions: that of Ezr. 1 is a proclamation in Hebrew to the Jewish people, while that of Ezr. 6 is a document in Aramaic, the official language of the Persian empire, filed in the financial archives of the Persian administration at Ecbatana, one of the three imperial capitals. This records the stipulations made at the time of the grant from the royal treasury for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple. Thus the permitted dimensions of the temple are noted (the length is by some accident omitted), and the building materials (three courses of stone and one of timber alternating) are specified. This decree of Cyrus was confirmed and extended by Darius (522–486 B.C.) in the following verses (6:6–12).

V. Cyrus in Isaiah

Cyrus is alluded to or referred to a number of times in the prophecies of Isaiah 40–55. He is the one from the east whom Yahweh has “stirred up” (cf. Ezr. 1:1) and whom victory meets at every step (Isa. 41:2–4); he is likewise the one from the north and from the east who will trample on rulers as on mortar (41:25). Explicitly of Cyrus God says through the prophet: “He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfil all my purpose” (44:28); he is called Yahweh’s anointed one whose hand Yahweh has grasped and whom He will grant victories (45:1–4), the man of God’s counsel (46:11), the one whom Yahweh loves and who will perform Yahweh’s purpose against Babylon (48:14f).

In spite of the warmth with which the prophet refers to Cyrus and the dignity accorded the king by Yahweh, apparently the prophet does not expect Cyrus to be converted to the Jewish faith; he is a pagan summoned to do God’s bidding though he does not know Yahweh (45:4). The one place which, by prophesying that Cyrus will “call on my name” (41:25), suggests that he will become a worshiper of Yahweh is textually uncertain and may in any case be adequately fulfilled in Cyrus’ ascription of his victories to Yahweh (cf. Ezr. 1:2). Even though Cyrus is Yahweh’s shepherd, anointed one, the one whom He loves (i.e., has chosen), Cyrus is nothing more than an instrument of God’s plans. Although the service he will render will be an indispensable one, his significance in the prophecies should not be exaggerated, for God and the people of Israel, not Cyrus, stand at their center.

While Isa. 44:28 and 45:13 suggest that Cyrus was to be responsible not only for the rebuilding of the temple but also for the reconstruction of the city, actually his successors Darius (522–486 B.C.) and Artaxerxes I (465–423 B.C.) saw these tasks through to completion. Still, Cyrus’ policies toward his subjects in general and toward the Jews in particular provided the basis on which the later favorable decrees of Darius, ca 520 B.C. (Ezr. 6:6–12), and Artaxerxes I, in 445 B.C. (Neh. 2:1–8), could be issued. And in fact the rebuilding of the temple was begun in Cyrus’ reign (Ezr. 3:8–11), as was also possibly some

rebuilding of the city in order to house those working on the temple reconstruction.

Whether Cyrus was aware in any way of the prophecies of Isa. 40–55 remains uncertain. Josephus indeed says that Cyrus came to know of his destiny with respect to the Jewish people “by his reading the book which Isaiah left behind him of his prophecies; for this prophet said that God had spoken thus to him in a secret vision: —‘My will is, that Cyrus, whom I have appointed to be king over many and great nations, send back my people to their own land, and build my temple.’ Accordingly, when Cyrus read this, and admired the divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfil what was so written” (*Ant. xi.1.2*). It is not implausible that a highly placed Jewish official, such as the book of Daniel represents Daniel to have been, could have drawn the emperor’s attention to these prophecies, but without further supporting evidence this cannot be certain.

VI. Final Conquests and Death

At the end of his accession year (539–38 B.C.) Cyrus had left Babylon for his capital Ecbatana, leaving his son Cambyses, who was resident in Sippar, to represent him at the Babylonian New Year Festival. Of Cyrus’ activities during the final decade of his career little is documented. The sources become abundant again only concerning the occasion of his death, which occurred ca 530 B.C. when Cyrus was dealing with the nomadic Massagetae on his northeastern frontier. Possibly the protection of that frontier had been his major preoccupation during that decade. According to Herodotus (i.205–215), Cyrus was at first successful against the Massagetae, capturing one of the sons of their queen Tomyris. But after the son had committed suicide in captivity Cyrus was defeated and killed in a further battle with that tribe. He was succeeded on the Persian throne by Cambyses, whom he had appointed as his successor shortly before setting out on the expedition.

The tomb of Cyrus that stands at Pasargadae is plain but impressive. A simple gabled edifice built of limestone blocks cramped together with iron bands and resting on a stone platform

six courses high, it contains a windowless chamber 10.5 by 7.5 ft (3.2 by 2.3 m) in area and 8 ft (2.4 m) high. On it, according to Strabo (*Geog.* xv.3.7), was inscribed the following, in old Persian characters (Arrian *Anabasis* vi. 25): "O man, I am Cyrus, who gained the empire for the Persians, and was king of Asia. Do not begrudge me this memorial!" According to Plutarch (*Alex.* 69) the inscription read, "O man, whosoever you are, and whencesoever you come, for I know that you will come! I am Cyrus, who won for the Persians their empire. Do not begrudge me this little earth that covers my corpse!"

Cyrus had been not only one of the greatest conquerors of history, but by the tradition of his clemency to those he had defeated, and his policy of religious toleration, he had also left an example to mankind that, had it been followed, would have saved the world immeasurable suffering (Weissbach, col 1166).

See Map [XII](#).

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