

# Cyrus the Shepherd

*Ali R<sup>1</sup>*

Cyrus,<sup>2</sup> known in Persia as Kouresh, is the most popular king of Iran. He was a messenger of peace and freedom, and he still has a great place in the hearts of Iranians.

We will tell his story in the context of the Israelites who were enslaved in Babylon. They were there after God had removed his protection because of their disobedience, idolatry, and mistreatment of one another. But God was not done with them as a people. To set them free, God was going to raise up a liberator. More than a hundred years before his birth, Isaiah prophesied about him by name, describing him as “shepherd”:

*He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid.” (Isaiah 44:28)*

And also as “anointed one”:

*This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut. (Isaiah 45:1)*

These are powerful prophecies. But God fulfilled his promise, and Cyrus lived up to his purpose. In doing so, Cyrus foreshadowed the even greater king, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here’s the story in more detail...

## The captivity of the Jewish people

After the death of Israel’s great king David, his son Solomon came to the throne and built the temple of Jehovah God in Jerusalem. The temple was completed in about 957BC. And it was glorious! But, after Solomon died, his son Rehoboam became king. He decided to be harsh with

---

<sup>1</sup> Full name withheld over concerns of persecution

<sup>2</sup> Cyrus the Great (580-529 BC)

the people and raised taxes severely. The people revolted, and the unity of Israel was destroyed. Israel split into two parts: the northern kingdom (still called Israel) and the southern kingdom (now called Judah). These lived as neighbors in uneasy tension for about 200 years until God's patience with their mistreatment of each other was exhausted

The judgements of God came in the form of invading armies. The northern kingdom of Israel suffered several Assyrian invasions between 732-700BC until it was completely destroyed. Then the southern Kingdom of Judah faced multiple invasions through 701-686BC. However, at a critical moment God decided to intervene, and Judah withstood this devastating onslaught. The King of Assyria returned home defeated.

In 612 BC, the Assyrian Empire faced its own destruction. It was overrun by the growing power of the Babylonians who became the dominant empire of the region of Mesopotamia.<sup>3</sup> The Babylonians also had a lust for invasion, and in 605BC, Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah. He captured King Jehoiakim of Judah, humiliating him and making him his servant. More invasions followed, and during Nebuchadnezzar's third and final invasion of Judah, he besieged and destroyed Jerusalem, destroying the beautiful temple Solomon had built. Many of their valuables were looted from the temple treasury and taken in triumph to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar also captured and enslaved all the people of Judah and forced them into exile in Babylon.

Daniel was one of the prophets at that time. He himself endured slavery and forced migration to Babylon, but while he was there he had a prophetic dream,

*In the vision I was beside the Ulai Canal. I looked up, and there before me was a ram with two horns, standing beside the canal, and the horns were long. One of the horns was longer than the other but grew up later. I watched the ram as it charged toward the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against it, and none could rescue from its power. It did as it pleased and became great. (Dan 8:2-4)*

The two-horned ram, Daniel was told, represents the kingdom of Media and Persia. Cyrus was to be that great king of Persia. In Daniel's dream, he is like a two-horned ram. His appearance was promised to people who were captive and thirsting for freedom, and his two

---

<sup>3</sup> Approximately the location of modern-day Iraq

horns are a sign of the power he wields. Isaiah had previously used similar imagery, but in his case he saw the power as a bird of prey.

*From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose.  
What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that I will do.  
(Isaiah 46:11)*

One of the principles underscored in these accounts is that God is the one who calls the liberator – Cyrus – and places the intentions in his heart. After a later vision Daniel goes on to give an even more explicit insight of God doing this through the work of his angels,

*Then [the angel Gabriel] continued, “Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. (Dan 10:12-13)*

He may not have known it, but some of Cyrus’ most trusted advisors may have been angels!

## Kouresh, the founder of human rights

Cyrus work of liberation is honored still today. According to the Nabonidus Chronicle, it was October 29, 539BC when Cyrus the Great defeated the city-state of Babylon and freed about 50,000 captive Jews. Consequently, October 29 is still referred to as “the Day of Cyrus” by modern-day Persians, even though it is not recorded in the official calendar. In fact, Iranian people have been forbidden by the current regime of the Islamic Republic from commemorating Cyrus the Great. Nonetheless, because this day is rooted in the minds and memories of many Iranian people, they still gather in Pasargad (the capital city of Cyrus the Great’s Kingdom) on the occasion of the commemoration anniversary.

And it’s not just Iranians. On this day, people come from all over the world to the tomb of Cyrus to preserve Iranian culture and civilization. They gather to honor the memory and name of Cyrus who created wonders in the history of the world.

After the conquest of Babylon, Cyrus ordered that a charter was to be written on a cylindrical clay tablet. The Cyrus Cylinder was discovered in Babylon in March 1879 and is now

preserved in the British Museum. It has historical value for all humanity because it is the first tablet of human freedom.

The charter of Cyrus refers to the liberation of all nationalities and ethnicities formerly enslaved. The cylinder texts indicate that everyone is entitled to freedom and choice, and that all individuals should respect one another. The cylinder also calls for resisting oppression, defending the oppressed, respecting human dignity and recognizing human rights.

The translation of the charter of Cyrus, the founder of human rights, is as follows:

*I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of the lands of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the universe,... after entering Babylon in peace, amidst joy and jubilation, I made the royal palace the center of the rule... and as for the citizens of Babylon whom (Nabonidus) had made subservient in a manner (totally) unsuited to them against the will of the gods, I released them from their weariness and loosened their burden... I also gathered all their people and returned to them their habitations...<sup>4</sup>*

On October 14, 1971, the Iranian Shah's sister, Princess Ashraf Pahlavi presented a replica of the cylinder to the U.N. Secretary-General on behalf of the country of Iran. She said,

*... the heritage of the Cyrus was the heritage of human understanding, tolerance, courage, compassion and above all, human liberty.*

In September 2010, the National Museum of Iran opened the Cyrus Cylinder exhibition, and the British Museum loaned their Cyrus Cylinder for the exhibit. The exhibition promoted the idea that the Iranian nation has always supported justice, devotion, and human values since the earliest times.

Many Iranians respect Cyrus the Great because of his regard and actions in dealing with people's rights and for his benevolence, establishing human rights and pursuing freedom and liberty for enslaved people. He focused on creating justice in his empire – which was one of the largest empires in human history. He also predicated his Kingdom on respect and tolerance for various, differing religions. His strategies still serve as a template for enlightened, compassionate leaders.

The Greek historian Xenophon celebrated Cyrus because,

---

<sup>4</sup> [www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W\\_1880-0617-1941](http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1880-0617-1941)

*He honored his subjects and cared for them as if they were his own children and they, on their part, revered Cyrus as a father.” (Cyropaedia, Xenophon, 430-354 BC)*

Cyrus is called “Great”. He is rightly to be honored for his regard for the marginalized, the disenfranchised, and the forgotten. Great leaders honor, care and serve their people, just as the Lord Jesus Christ exemplified in his ministry. And Jesus instructs his disciples to act likewise,

*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant... (Matt 20:25-26)*

## The purpose of freedom

Although Judah and Jerusalem are not mentioned explicitly in the cylinder, it shows that Cyrus was concerned about the freedom of his subjects. It shows his benevolent policies and good governance, and it supports the biblical narrative that he was concerned about the religious freedoms of captives such as the Jews.

Here’s what the book of Chronicles records for us,

*In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:*

*“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: “ ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up, and may the LORD their God be with them.’ ” (2Chronicles 36:22-23, Ezra 1:3)*

When Cyrus ordered the Jews to return to Jerusalem, freedom was not the only goal. They were not free to do whatever they wanted. They were tasked to build God’s house in Jerusalem.

They made some progress. Despite the opposition of the local leaders at the time, Nehemiah and the people rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. However, as time passed, the people of Israel prioritized their own comfort and did not worry much about building God's house. They were moving away from the purpose for which they were released. God has to remind them that they were freed for a purpose,

*This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the LORD. “You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the LORD Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house.  
(Haggai 1:7-9)*

All of this is a lesson for us.

Just as the Jews were unable to obtain their freedom by their own might, we are also unable to free ourselves from the captivity of death and sin by our own might too. Just as Cyrus saved the Jews from captivity and slavery; similarly Jesus saves us from the captivity and slavery of sin.

In this, Cyrus was a type (or example) of the Messiah.

And just as Cyrus is called a shepherd in the Bible, Jesus Christ is the good shepherd. He is a shepherd who never abandoned the flock, and who sacrificed his own life to free us from the captivity and slavery of sin.

But this freedom we get in Jesus Christ is for a purpose,

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)*

Therefore, the best use of this freedom we have is to work to build God’s house, to serve God and each other with love, just like the people of Israel in Ezra and Nehemiah’s time. And an outcome of this service to God, in love for each other, is the gift of life everlasting:

*But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. (Romans 6:22)*

We must not allow our own comfort or convenience to get in the way of the vision God lays in front of us. We must not forget that we have been freed, but rather devote ourselves to work the purpose God has for us. Losing our vision could return us to captivity and slavery.