

A Portrait of Cyrus II

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There are a number of characters, which have played a major role in the ability for the exiled Jews in Babylon to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. Obtaining an impression as to the main characters helps us in further understanding the circumstances and history surrounding the Temple.



A Bas-Relief found in Pasargade, the capital city of Persia founded by Cyrus II. It depicts Cyrus the Great (580-529 BC).

Cyrus II, King of Persia (a.k.a. Cyrus The Great, and Kurash The Great):

Who was Cyrus II? The Royal Arch degree informs us of his importance in the following passage:

“When Cyrus was King of Persia, he issued a decree saying: The Lord God of Heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which

is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel.”

The Hebrew Bible has a more extensive declaration: (From The



Hebrew Bible, Ezra 1:1-8)

“In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: "Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: "All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him! Let everyone who has survived, in whatever place he may have dwelt, be assisted by the people of that place with silver, gold, and goods, together with free will offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.' Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and Levites---everyone, that is, whom God had inspired to do so---prepared to go up to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. All their neighbors gave them help in every way, with silver, gold, goods, and cattle, and with many precious gifts besides all their free-will offerings. King Cyrus, too, had the utensils of the house of the Lord brought forth

that Nebuchadnezzar had taken away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his god. Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought forth by the treasurer Mithredath, and counted out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.”

It is of interest to note that the “Prince of Judah” mentioned in the above quotation, is the position of King of the Royal Arch today.

However, it seems that Cyrus II not only returned the Jews to Jerusalem, but also others as can be seen from the following declaration (I have added some explanations in brackets at the bottom):

I am Kurash (1), King of the World, Great King, Legitimate King, King of Babilani (2), King of Kiengir (3) and Akkade, King of the four rims of the earth, Son of Kanbujiya (4), Great King, King of Hakhamanish (5), Grandson of Kurash, Great king, King of Hakhamanish (6), descendant of Chishpish (7), Great king, King of Hakhamanish, of a family which always exercised kingship; whose rule Bel (8) and Nebo (9) love, whom they want as king to please their hearts. When I entered Babilani as a friend and when I established the seat of the government in the palace of the ruler under jubilation and rejoicing, Marduk (10), the great lord, induced the magnanimous inhabitants of Babilani to love me, and I was daily endeavoring to worship him.... As to the region from as far as Assura and Susa, Akkade, Eshnunna, the towns 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 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 them to their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Kiengir and Akkade whom Nabonidus (11) had brought into Babilani to the anger of the lord

of the gods, unharmed, in their former temples, the places which make them happy.

(1) Greek for Cyrus (2) Babylon (3) Sumer (4) Cambyses II (5) 5th ancestor to Darius The Great, after whom the Achaemenian Dynasty was named (6) Chief of an Aryan tribe in Persia who founded the Achaemenids dynasty (7) Son of Hakhamanish (8) Lord of Heaven & Earth (9) God of wisdom and writing (10) Son of EA, and God of righteousness (11) Last King of Babylon before being overthrown by Cyrus The Great

Before Cyrus captured Babylon, it was ruled by the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans were an ancient Semitic people associated with the Aramaeans. Their invasion of Southern Babylonia from the 10th-8th centuries BC was nearly simultaneous with the Aramaean invasion of Syria. They ruled Babylonia and established a number of states that resisted extinction during the Assyrian conquests. The Chaldean Empire fell to Cyrus of Persia in 539 B.C.E.

Cyrus, later known as Cyrus The Great, lived from 580-529 BC, and was the first Achaemenian Emperor of Persia, who issued a decree on his aims and policies, later hailed as his charter of the rights of nations. Inscribed on a clay cylinder, this is known to be the first declaration of Human Rights, and is now kept at the British Museum. A replica of this is also at the United Nations in New York. He was King of Persia from 559 BC until 530 BC. His mother was the daughter of the Median King Astyages, his father was a vassal to that King. As such, he was actually half-Mede.

Cylinder seal and inscription of Cyrus the Great from Babylon



He was also the founder of Achaemenid power and the Persian Empire. He conquered Media between 559 and 549 BC, then Lydia in 546 BC, and Babylonia in 539 BC (See map), which put the city of Babylon (where the exiles of Jerusalem lived) as well as Jerusalem itself under his control. He placed Jews in power in Palestine, creating a buffer state between Persia and Egypt, and for this he is spoken of approvingly in the Old Testament. He is said to have respected the religion and customs of each part of his empire.

About 70 years after the capture and exile of the Jews in Babylon, and only a few months after Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon, he issued the famous decree as outlined above. At first only a few Jews took up the offer, for most had been born in captivity, and had never been to Palestine. The first group to go to Jerusalem from Babylon were led by Shesbazzar, Prince of Judah in 537 BC, and started their work to rebuild the Temple. It was another 17 years later that a much stronger contingent of Jews arrived in Jerusalem led by Zerubbabel.

It was under Zerubbabel the Governor of Judah, Joshua the High Priest, and the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah that the Second Temple was eventually built and dedicated in 516 BC.

However, soon after the work commenced on the Temple, tribes surrounding the temple, who did not have much Jewish blood, became violent. Cambyses II succeeded Cyrus II, and taking note of the violence, ordered work at the Temple to be halted. Cambyses II was in turn succeeded to the throne by Darius Hystaspis (a.k.a. Darius I), who re-confirmed Cyrus II's order, and ordered the governor of the area to cease troubling the workers so that the work could once again continue. The Samaritans appealed to Darius I to once again stop the work, but Haggai's strong encouragement convinced Darius I to continue with the work. In fact, Haggai was so successful, that Darius I allowed the stolen treasures to be returned to Jerusalem under armed escorts. The temple is finally completed in 516 BC, but oddly Zerubbabel is not mentioned in the Bible about the completion or dedication.

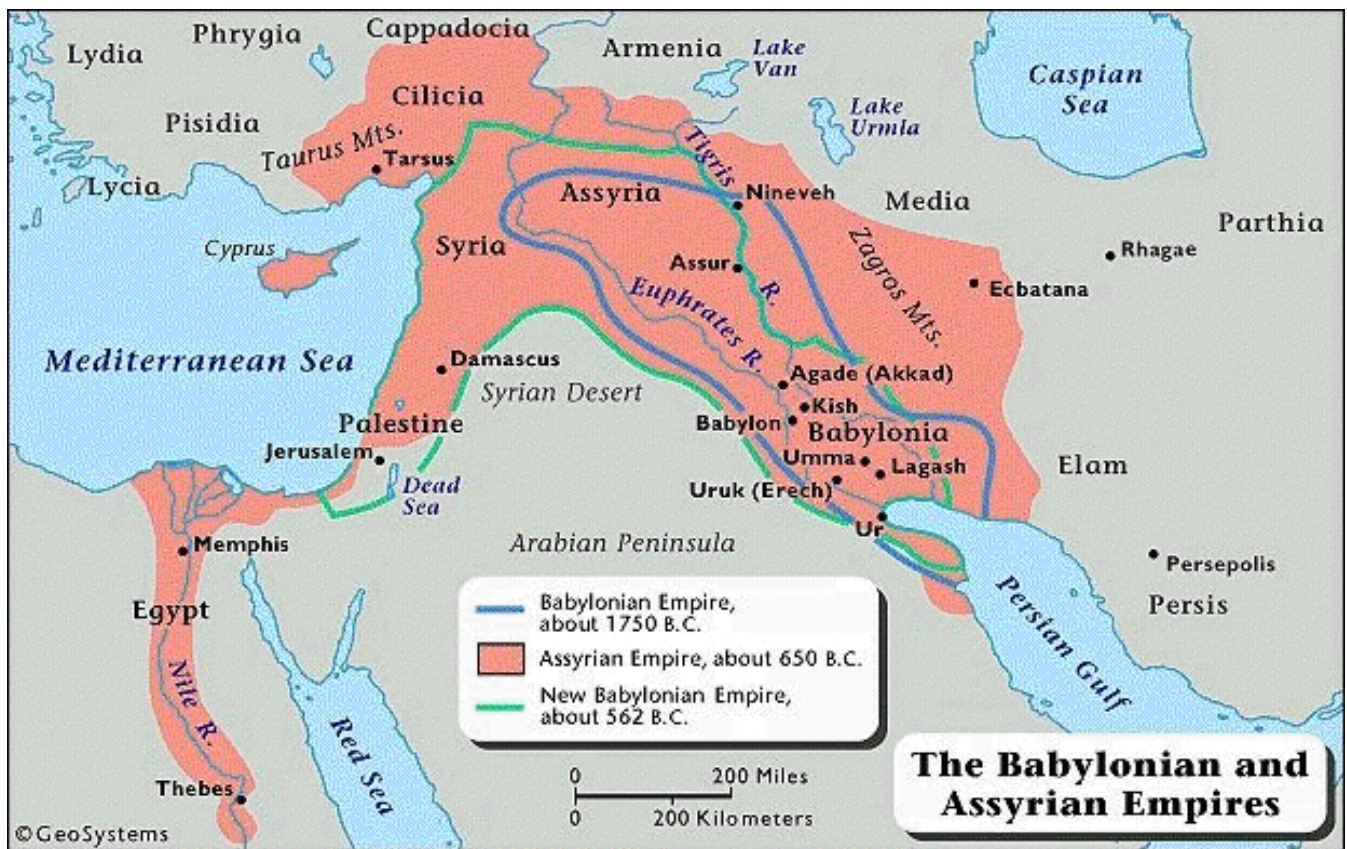
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Who's Who in the Bible, 1994



The Babylonian and Assyrian Empires