

CYRUS THE GREAT

1. Cyrus (כורש) II the Great was the Persian king who founded the Achaemenid dynasty and Persian empire. He ruled from 559-529 bc. His name occurs twenty-two times in the Bible.
2. His grandfather was Cyrus I, who ruled Anshan/Persia from 600-580 bc. His father, Cambyses I, ruled Anshan from 580-559 bc. Cyrus' mother was Mandane, daughter of the last Median king, Astyages (585-550 bc). The ancestor of the dynasty was Achaemenes.
3. Sometime between 700-680 bc, the Jewish prophet Isaiah predicted by name the coming of Cyrus, which took place 120-140 years later.
 - a. **Is 44:28** 28 ...Who says of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfil all my purpose, saying of Jerusalem, She shall be built, and of the temple, Your foundation shall be laid.
 - b. **Is 45:1** 1 Thus says Yahweh to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed....
4. Cyrus succeeded his father in 559 bc. Ambitious and daring, he aligned his kingdom with neighbouring peoples and tribes into a solid block of Persian power, then revolted against his grandfather Astyages of Media. In 549 bc, Cyrus conquered his grandfather and founded the Persian (or Achaemenid) empire. His military victories eventually put him in possession of the largest empire the world at that time had yet seen.
5. Cyrus conquered Croesus and the kingdom of Lydia around 546 bc. Then he overran the northern mountainous region between the Caspian Sea and the northwest corner of India. Finally he turned his attention to the Babylonians. On 16 Oct 539 bc, the Persians under General Gobryas/Gubaru entered Babylon, having diverted the river and thus been able to penetrate the city along the dried-up river bed. Nabonidus was taken prisoner but treated with respect and mercy. Sixteen days later Cyrus himself entered the city, to the acclaim of many of its inhabitants.
 - a. **Da 5:30-31** 30 That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. 31 And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.
 - b. Herodotus, 1.189-191.
6. By ancient standards, Cyrus was a generous and sympathetic ruler. In his first year he issued a decree by which he gathered all exiles, returned them to their homes, and restored deities to their temples. The Jews were included.
 - a. **2 Ch 36:22** 22 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: 23 Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, Yahweh, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may Yahweh his God be with him. Let him go up.

- b. **Ezr 1:2** 2 Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: Yahweh, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.
- c. **Ezr 4:3** 3 But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God. But we alone will build to Yahweh, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.
- d. **Ezr 6:3** 3 In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits....
- e. The Jews, however, were frustrated from finishing temple construction until the days of Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah.
 - (1) **Ezr 4:5** 5 ... And bribed counsellors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.
 - (2) **Ezr 6:14** 14 And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.
- f. "In the first year of the reign of Cyrus, which was the seventieth from the day that our people were removed out of their own land into Babylon, God commiserated the captivity and calamity of these poor people, according as he had foretold to them by Jeremiah the prophet, before the destruction of the city, that after they had served Nebuchadnezzar and his posterity, and after they had undergone that servitude seventy years, he would restore them again to the land of their fathers, and they should build their temple, and enjoy their ancient prosperity. And these things God did afford them; for he stirred up the mind of Cyrus, and made him write this throughout all Asia: 'Thus saith Cyrus the king: Since God Almighty hath appointed me to be king of the habitable earth, I believe that he is that God which the nation of the Israelites worship; for indeed he foretold my name by the prophets, and that I should build him a house at Jerusalem, in the country of Judea.' This was known to Cyrus 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.' This was foretold by Isaiah one hundred and forty years before the temple was demolished. Accordingly, when Cyrus read this, and admired the Divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was so written; so he called for the most eminent Jews that were in Babylon, and said to them, that he gave them leave to go back to their own country, and to rebuild their city Jerusalem, and the temple of God, for that he would be their assistant, and that he would write to the rulers and governors that were in the neighborhood of their country of Judea, that they should contribute to them gold and silver for the building of the temple, and besides that, beasts for their sacrifices."¹

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 11.1.

- g. During excavations (1879-82) at Babylon, archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam discovered a clay barrel inscription on which Cyrus told of taking the city and of his resulting policies. Isaiah and Chronicles reflect the content of the Cyrus Cylinder, which says that captured peoples were allowed to return home and build sanctuaries to their own gods.
7. During the first three years of Cyrus' rule over Babylonia, Daniel prospered. But then, according to Josephus, he was removed to Media or Susa, the Persian capital.
 - a. **Da 1:21** 21 And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.
 - b. **Da 6:28** 28 So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.
 - c. **Da 10:1** 1 In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia a word was revealed to Daniel, who was named Belteshazzar.
 - d. Josephus, *Ant.* 10.249.
8. According to Herodotus, Cyrus died in a terrible disaster which destroyed the Persian army fighting the Massagetae. The tomb of Cyrus can still be seen at Pasargadae in Iran. Cyrus was succeeded in 530 bc by his son Cambyses II.
9. Because of these achievements, Cyrus' reign has been characterized as a great turning point in ancient history. The Achaemenid empire continued for two hundred years until another great turning point in ancient history, the coming of Alexander III the Great.

Bibliography

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