

## Thus Saith Cyrus, King of Persia .....

Perhaps the most dramatic, most memorable and almost certainly esoteric moments in the Ceremony of Exaltation, is the exchange between the First Principal and the Principal Sojourner when seeking employment on the construction of the Second Temple. This is normally accompanied by much theatre and amateur dramatics, as the mood takes the Principal Sojourner. After scorning (usually with some dramatic embellishment) any suggestion that the Principal Sojourner, the First Assistant Principal Sojourner and the Candidate (standing in a line of three) might either be descended from those who basely fled when the City (Jerusalem) and Holy Temple were sorely oppressed or were otherwise descended from, essentially, farm hands (our ancient Companions were anything but snobs!), the Principal Sojourner declares that they are "nobly born" who, for their sins, were held captive for 70 years by Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon until released in the first year of the reign of Cyrus, King of Persia.

Continuing, and with much drama, the Principal Sojourner, portentously recites the proclamation of Cyrus -

*"Thus saith Cyrus, King of Persia, All the kingdoms of the Earth hath the Lord God of Heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him a 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".*

This is a quotation from the prophet Ezra (VSL Ezra 1:1) which itself reproduces the Edict of Cyrus recorded in II Chronicles 36:23.

But who was Cyrus, King of Persia? What was his proclamation and why did he issue it? Is it even true? Why does he matter? Indeed, does he matter? Does he have a lesson for us as Masons?

He did indeed exist and is well chronicled by Greek and Roman writers (both Herodotus and Xenophon). He was born in Iran in about 600 or 573 BCE and died at the ripe old age for the time of 70 on 4 December 530 BCE after having reigned for 30 years. He was possibly killed in battle. He was known by many titles, Cyrus the Elder by the Greeks, but more commonly as Cyrus the Great or Cyrus King of Persia.

I reproduce below what is thought to be an image in bas-relief of Cyrus -



(Illustration from "*Illustrerad verldshistoria utgifven av E. Wallis. volume I*": *Relief of Cyrus.*)

Cyrus, the son of a king, was born into a world where life was cheap and often was at the whim of the ruler who held sway as an absolute autocrat. As the son of a king, this is the world and moral bubble (as exemplified by the line of succession in North Korea today) in which he would have been brought up – indeed, there is some mythology around his early life which is somewhat bloodthirsty (involving cannibalism!), but it is unsubstantiated and its very hyperbole suggests it is untrue.

He was the founder of the first Persian Empire, conquering most of what we would now describe as the Middle East and later expanding into Western Asia. His Empire during his lifetime was the greatest that had ever been achieved at that time and was not to be rivalled until the Roman Empire 500 years later and the British Empire! However, whatever may have been his military prowess and empire-building, for what he has been chiefly remembered by both posterity and in our ceremony of Exaltation, is for his enlightened thinking which was not to be seen again for the next 1,750 years.

Conquest until, sadly, relatively recent times was normally followed by pillage and often genocide. However, at the time of Cyrus, this was the established practice and was to be expected by the vanquished - an example being the treatment reportedly meted out to the Midianites by the Children of Israel (see Numbers 31:7). Most recently we look at the desecration of sites holy to other religions by so-called ISIS, the Nazi Blitzkrieg and subsequent Holocaust in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the treatment of the South American indigenous people by Cortez and the North American indigenous people by Europeans, not to mention both the 30 Years War and the 100 Years War in Europe. These are just a few examples from very many.

Although today morality has moved on (albeit not so as to bring this to an end – mankind has not really learnt from the Nuremburg trials), in the days of Cyrus, it was the norm – although happening 400 years later, one only needs to look to the sacking of the Second Temple, the very structure that the Sojourners were employed in building, by Titus in 70 CE and the celebration of the event by the Romans on the Triumphal Arch of Titus in the forum in Rome as shown below (although current research suggests the famous frieze of the holy vessels being paraded actually predated the sacking itself and therefore was somewhat aspirational!).



(Photograph: Arch of Titus – The Menorah - npr.org)

In 1513 CE, the Italian political theorist Niccolò Machiavelli postulated in his iconic work and essay on power, *“The Prince”*, whether it is better for a Prince (by which he really meant any person in a position of power over others) to be feared or to be loved. He came to the former conclusion.

1,500 years earlier, Cyrus came to the opposite conclusion and, turning his back on the moral imperative and norms of the day, not only tolerated but respected and encouraged the human rights, religions and cultures of the territories he conquered. In these territories he set up local administrations (ruled by *“Satraps”*) which administered the territories not by fear but by engendering a community working to the advantage of all. By doing so, he both acted as the just and moral ruler, but also was able to administer and keep the peace with limited resources within his territories.

Following his conquest of Babylon (of which he proclaimed himself King), his treatment of the exiled Jewish community held captive by Nebuchadnezzar exemplified this approach. Not only by the Edict of Cyrus (see above) did he free the captive Jewish population, but he did so without requiring them to pay any compensation or any tribute to him, as would have been usual at this time. This is a far cry from (but a useful comparison with) Pharaoh as recorded in Exodus! In not requiring any payment in return for freedom, this suggests that Cyrus was not so much motivated by any political pragmatism, but by an apparent genuine altruism.

It is relevant in this regard that it is argued by scholars that Cyrus was a devotee of Zoroaster, a monotheistic prophet who taught moral standards not based on self-interest reminiscent of the teaching of the First Degree in Freemasonry. Zoroastrianism was an important religious influence in Persia at the time and right up until the Islamic conquest in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Such belief in a single moral Supreme Being may well have led Cyrus to have an innate empathy with the Jewish people.

In 1879 a clay cylinder was discovered in the foundation of the temple of Marduk in Babylon written in Akkadian cuneiform in about 539 BCE. It is currently kept in the British Museum and is known as the Cyrus Cylinder. This sets out what is regarded by historians as the first manifesto in human history of how to run a society consisting of different and diverse nationalities and faiths. Although it is in many ways self-serving and aspirational, rather than being a proclamation of actual intent, its importance is the fact it was written at all. Conquers at this time did not tolerate multi-faith societies – the Romans 500 years later did

not tolerate them, except rarely if it suited their political ends (by way of example, up to a point, the Jewish population of Judea) and as for the Spanish inquisition, let's not go there!



*(The Cyrus Cylinder – The British Museum)*

His treatment of the Jewish population resulted in Cyrus being uniquely held up in the VSL as a non-Jewish moral paragon – Isaiah 45:1 *“Thus saith the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden ....”*. Interestingly, he is described as “anointed”, a word also used for the Messiah (meaning in Hebrew *“The Anointed One”*) in the VSL. It is also worth noting that in the carved relief of Cyrus illustrated above, he is depicted with cherubs’ wings – these are worth comparing with the descriptions of the wings on the cherubs on the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus 25:18.

In Isaiah 44:1 it was prophesied that Cyrus would rebuild the Temple (which so exercised our Sojourners) and Ezra 5:13 described how Cyrus not only gave the order that the Temple should be rebuilt, ordering Zerubbabel to build the foundations (which is the very work on which the Sojourners were engaged), but ordered that all the holy vessels which had been plundered by Nebuchadnezzar and desecrated in Babylon should be returned (only later to be carried off in Triumph by Titus).

Not only is Cyrus one of the very few potentates (if not the only potentate) of the region honoured and distinguished in the VSL as being amongst the righteous, but in Iran, what is thought to be his tomb is revered and he is respected as their “Father”, a title used of him during his lifetime by subjects of territories he himself conquered; according to the Greek writer Xenophon –

*“And those who were subject to him, he treated with esteem and regard, as if they were his own children, while his subjects themselves respected Cyrus as their "Father" ... What other man but 'Cyrus', after having overturned an empire, ever died with the title of "The Father" from the people whom he had brought under his power? For it is plain fact that this is a name for one that bestows, rather than for one that takes away.”*

*(“The Cyropaedia : or, Institution of Cyrus, and the Hellenics, or Grecian history” as translated by J. S Watson and Henry Dale -1855)*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Babylonians regarded him as their “Liberator”. He is said to have been admired by Alexander the Great and his writings in modern times influenced Thomas Jefferson in the drafting of the United States Declaration of Independence, one of mankind’s

great declarations of freedom (albeit perhaps not extending to the issue of black slavery which had to await being addressed until a Civil War and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution in 1868).

Cyrus King of Persia reverberates through our ceremony of Exaltation embodying many of the values that we as Masons generally, and Royal Arch Masons in particular, seek to uphold. As Masons, it is worth remembering the words of Cyrus himself as quoted by Xenophon–

*“Success should always call for showing greater kindness, generosity and justice; only people lost in the darkness treat it as an occasion for greater greed.”*

*(“The Education of Cyrus”*: Trans. Wayne Amber; Cornell University Press)

This is the Cyrus who sits at the heart of our Royal Arch ritual and whose wisdom underpins its teachings, being a lesson to us all.

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