

# CONTRIBUTION OF PERSIAN KINGS CYRUS AND DARIUS TO THE PRESERVATION AND PROGRESS OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

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As Rainer Albertz notes, “it is one of the great miracles of human history that the exile, the loss of Israel's national and territorial integrity, did not spell the end of Israel's history,” (*Israel in Exile*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 1981, p. 2). He notes that “the Bible does not contain a continuous account of the exilic period. Only the margins are recorded.... It stands as a murky gaping hole”. (p. 3). And yet Albertz illustrates how much the Persian Kings, Cyrus and Darius contributed not only to the preservation of Israel but also to its progress in other ways.

Surprisingly Albertz states that Cyrus “capitalized on the popular mood” and opinion of the priests of Marduk that “defamed Nabonidus so spitefully,” and “Only later did it become apparent that the policies of the Persian Empire had much in common with the imperfect vision that Nabonidus had attempted to realize.” (p. 70). I for one, do not know of any other author opining so, and therefore it is unclear how far it is true, except perhaps some bias against the Persian rule which later on becomes apparent when he observes: “Of course, agreement not to seek a restoration of political autonomy and the loyal cooperation of the Judean organs of self-government with the Persians came at a high price acceptance of the strict Persian tax policies that Darius had established in 520. It was the poorer strata of the population who bore the burden. It was all too easy for them to be crushed by the rigid imposition of high taxes. They also had to look on as their own leaders mercilessly collected what was necessary to meet the Persian demands and even profited from the loans that the peasantry had to take out to pay these taxes (Neh 5:1-13). The price of the thwarted restoration was thus a chronic impoverishment of the poorer classes which created a deep division within Judean society, beginning in the middle of the fifth century at the latest.” (p. 132).

The above statements are quite surprising as they follow his positive estimation of the Persian rulers: “Clearly this novel form of organization, a sub-nation, was highly attractive to the lay and priestly leaders ..., since it gave them a measure of self-determination and co-determination that they could never have attained under the Davidic monarchy In return they were prepared to be loyal supporters of Persian rule from that time on, without interruption.”

“This loyal cooperation of the anti-Davidic coalition of priests and laity with the Persians paid off handsomely for the Judeans. Not only was the rebuilding of the temple completed in 515 with Persian support, but the Persians also allowed the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt under Nehemiah in 458 and granted Ezra (probably in 398) quite astonishing privileges: generous financing of the the temple cult from the royal treasuries, tax exemption for all cultic personnel, and authorization of the Torah as a locally binding code of Jewish law (Ezra 7:20-26). The Persians granted such privileges to very few temples in their empire.” (p. 132).

Much as I have researched this subject over decades, I hardly ever came across a work that deals with both Cyrus and Darius and analyzed the role played by Darius also for carrying out Yahweh's mission for Israel and exelites. We may wonder after reading this work if Darius ended up fulfilling this mission more than Cyrus could despite his genuine desire to do so. The author seems to imply it but a reader could decide on his or her own. Another reason I found this work useful is to review possible Persian influence on Israel in view of their close contacts though it is hardly undertaken in such works. However, many of the similarities between these two cultures I have noted elsewhere do prep up here, including separation of church and state and independence of priests.

Yahweh used the exile to test a totally new form of sovereignty, based not on power but on justice.

Yahweh summoned a new regent who would exercise this new form of sovereignty (Isa 42:5-9). God would make him a “commitment on behalf of humanity”, “covenant of the people” and a “light to the nations” (42.6). In other words, this ruler would first submit to justice and thus promote the well-being and moral orientation of the nations. He would intervene on behalf of the powerless and those condemned unjustly by freeing the prisoners (42:7). Thus he would restore their freedom and the land to which they had belonged. The rulers would exercise a new style of sovereignty, liberating and humane, to just, thus benefiting all nations of the world. “Concretely, their incredible new message was this: Darius, the Persian king, who had just seized the throne, would also deliver Israel from its Babylonian captivity.” (p. 408), 42:5-9 of the book of Deutero-Isaiah have so far eluded real explanation. The main problem is identifying who is called. The interweaving of political with “spiritual” functions in Isa 42:5-7 to uncertainty about whether the text referred to the Servant or to Cyrus.” “The proposed identification with Darius can resolve this question.” Of course, the text presents Darius basing his rule on a new legal order ... as his Behistun inscription already shows. That members of the Judean minority in Babylon were aware of this new idea, probably not as a

reality but as propaganda, is quite likely. The surprising thing is that the prophetic group assessed it so positively. Possibly it did not converge with their own ideas. That the benefits of the political concept promoted by Darius were not generally recognized at the time the text was composed (521 B.C.E.) may explain the statement in Isa 42:7a that Darius's mission, besides liberation, included "opening eyes that were blind." The singular expression, "the God Yahweh," which identifies the God of Israel as a manifestation of "the one and only Creator God," might reflect the new religious policies of Darius." (p. 409).

As an example of proof from prophecy (Isa 42:8-9). That the prophetic group could foretell not just Cyrus but now also Darius (42.9) is another proof of Yahweh's unique governance of history. As there were revolts against Darius, Yahweh could come to his aid as a warrior and triumph over his enemies (42:13).

"The Judean minority so identified themselves with Darius that they declared his enemies to be the enemies of Yahweh. In the context of this reinterpretation, the martial image of Israel as a threshing sledge in the salvation oracle from the time of Cyrus (Isa 41:15-16) now means that Israel, firmly loyal to Darius, will help put down the uprisings and establish the new legal order (41:1-4)." (p. 409).

The Cyrus oracle (Isa 45:1-6) is bracketed by Yahweh's contentious self-glorification (44:24-28, 45:7), mitigating the offensiveness of calling the Persian king "Yahweh's anointed" (45:1): if there is no aspect of reality not created by Yahweh, the almighty Creator of the world (44:24), not even darkness and woe (45:7), who would deny that Yahweh could also call the alien king of Persia, should he so desire? Just as he was able to command the waters of chaos, so he could appoint Cyrus as his own king to carry out his will (44:27, 28a), for example, to help carry out his wish to rebuild Jerusalem (44:26b)" (p. 43).

However, this Cyrus oracle in the year 521 had not come to pass. Babylon had not been captured and sacked, as the Deutero-Isaiah group had predicted prior to 539; neither had Cyrus to rebuild Jerusalem. This led to some retouching of the Cyrus oracle opening the possibility of a peaceful occupation of the city.

Speaking of Cyrus as the "bird of prey" whom God would summon from the east (46:11) to carry out his mission." However, the authors also had in mind Darius's conquest of Babylon, which had aroused everyone's spirits in the fall of 522." Thus here the two sovereigns coalesced; with complete justification, Yahweh could call them both "the man of his purpose" (46:11). (p. 46).

The oracle about the fall of Babylon (Isa 47:1-2, 5-8a, 10-15) had not been fulfilled under Cyrus, since Cyrus entered Babylon without a struggle in 539 and was greeted as a liberator by Babylonians. "however,

Darius's violent conquest of Babylon in December of 522, repeated in November of 521 after a new uprising in August, signaled the epochal turning point. It would be hard to overestimate the shock that these events triggered for both the golah and those who had remained in Judah. It can also be sensed in the oracles against Babylon in Jer 50-51, in Judah, it evoked the third Deuteronomistic reaction of the Book of Jeremiah (JerD). At last Yahweh seemed to have (through various) repaid the Neo-Babylonian Empire for all the suffering. One characteristic of this oracle was that it had categorized the arrogance of Babylon as a claim to omnipotence (47:8, 10; "I and no one besides me"). This Babylonian claim stood diametrically opposed to Yahweh's claim to be God alone (45:5-6, 18, 21-22; 46:9). Thus the disciples of Deutero-Isaiah demonstrated that it was their monotheistic faith that exposed Babylon's self-idolization and laid the theological basis for the downfall of the metropolis." (p. 477). (Same could be said about the faith of the Persian kings and scholars have often wondered if both being monotheists made the Israelites closer or special to the Persian kings than their other subjects.

Thus, the prophetic disciples once more built tension in their audience. What was the new, urgent message after this epochal caesura? One can guess the answer from the allusions to section 1 (compare 48:5 with 42:9, 48:11b with 42:8b): the call of a new king the call of Darius (48:12-16a).

"Much more enthusiastically than in the Cyrus oracle, the audience is called on to welcome this new call of a ruler as a crucial message of salvation (compare the appeals to listen and hear in 48:12, 16a). Just as he had called Israel, so he had now called Darius (48:12-13, 15). He would help Darius to defeat all his enemies and "in Babylon" Darius would carry out Yahweh's will and command (48:14). As a ruler so blessed, "Darius received a title of honor transcending even the messianic title of Cyrus: "Yahweh loves him" or "Yahweh's friend" (48:14), a title given elsewhere only to Abraham (41:9, also RE)." (p. 418).

In conclusion, Darius and the golah were under Yahweh's special protection through all times. Since Cyrus would not do anything significant to deliver Israel, (gap) to do so I would add the prophetic group decided that Darius who had likewise intended to base his imperial policies on justice and law, must be the deliverer of Israel called by God (42:5-9; 45:11-13, 48-12-16a), and they set the wheels in motion to assure that this God-given opportunity to return and rebuild Jerusalem would be seized and turned into political reality." (p. 440). Albertz's comments here were worth noting (gap). Such a theology of history has become alien to us twentieth-century Christians.

After the horrors of bestial genocide and the murder of the Jews on an industrial scale that a hitherto mostly Christian Germany inflicted on all of Europe, German theologians in particular have largely abandoned any attempt to connect God with history. The problem with such an approach is that it leaves the whole domain of international politics and world history almost totally untouched by God. Thus every idol imaginable happily moves in to fill this vacuum, virtually ignored by theology, whether in the name of the cold war or globalization. We must be clear: without the identification with Cyrus and Darius proposed by the Deutero-Isaiah group, there would have been no return of the golah groups, no new beginning in Judah, and thus no Judaism and no Christianity. In situations of crisis, only theological interpretation can lend history the clarity that enables correct decision and produce the consensus to carry them out. Here, I believe, the exilic theologies of history can make a contribution. (p. 441).

The followers of Deutero-Isaiah transferred the titles “anointed of Yahweh” and “beloved of Yahweh” from the Davidic king to the Persian kings Cyrus and Darius (Isa 45:1, 48:14) which meant Yahweh now exercised worldwide dominion over foreign rulers. Moreover exiled Israel itself was assigned the role of Servant of Yahweh, not to subjugate other nations to Yahweh but to establish justice for them (re:1-4) and to act as mediator of their salvation (49:6).

God's universal dominion now took on new meaning liberating the oppressed and empowering the powerless – first captive Israel (Isa 40:29-31; 41:17; 42:22, 49:9) and then all the victims of political oppression (42:6 (42:6-7; 45:22) to be achieved not by military power but by ensuing justice for the weak (42:3.; 51:4-5). This idea of God's mission replaced God's claim to world dominion. Later disciples of Deutero-Isaiah therefore transferred to the people the promises given to the Davidic rulers and Yahweh's covenant with Israel would not be realized in the pilgrimage of all nations to Zion (55:3b-5).

Alberty adds: “In light of these theological insights, we must ask in horror how it had been possible for Christianity, which harvested the fruits of early Judaism's flourishing mission, to corrupt its mission repeatedly well into the nineteenth century by employing force of arms and serving colonial interests. When Christian churches and nations thought they could usurp God's power and help their mission along by coercion, they relapsed not only from the new Testament but also from insights that Israelite theologians had already achieved in the exilic period. In addition, in the political sphere, the vision of the disciples of Deutero-Isaiah remains yet to be discovered; that the church, following in the footsteps of God's Servant Israel, has a mission to promote the resolution of international conflicts through fair and impartial justice (Isa 42:1-4; cf. 2:1-5.” (p. 443).

The physical joining of temple with palace was not considered infringing on Yahweh's majesty and holiness (43:1-13) and therefore the temple needed to be separated completely from the palace and political power, culminating in priestly autonomy. The followers of Ezekiel even wanted the temple to be independent economically and the priests self-sufficient.

While all the Utopian plans of Ezekiel could not be realized, however, it did lead to the independence of the priesthood after the exile and the autonomy of the Jerusalem temple.

“Under the umbrella of the Persian provincial administration, the post-exilic community was governed by a college of priests, a council of elders, and a popular assembly.” In short a form of separation of powers materialized, which attempted to do more justice to the glory of Yahweh. When we keep in mind this development, we are forced to ask how, until the most recent past, so many fusions of throne and altar can have appeared under Christian aegis. (p. 445).