

## Some Thoughts on Cyrus the Great

### Part 1

Before we get to our hero Cyrus, we need to set up the story. Our story begins with the Assyrians. The Assyrians were some badass warriors who kicked butt and took names. Just as the Jews had done centuries earlier with their policy of *herem*, if you went to war against the Assyrians, they would utterly destroy you. They would torture, rape, mutilate, flay and impale the people they conquered. If it helps you understand the Jewish epic, Jonah was sent to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. While most people concentrate on the fantastical fish story, the far more important story is really a meditation on other more important issues. The Jewish god YHWH told Jonah to go to Assyria and tell them they would be destroyed if they did not repent. Jonah does not want to deliver this message. Does he not want the Assyrians to be saved? Does he not want to be killed delivering this message? We are never told.

In several ways the story reminds me of Abraham and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Unlike the groups that chant for the destruction of their despised group (e.g., Westboro Baptist and their suspicious fixation on homosexuality), Abraham appealed to YHWH's sense of fairness and negotiated with him to not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. For the record, the Sodom and Gomorrah story has nothing to do with homosexuality. The Jewish epic states clearly, and repeats in multiple places that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, the sin of Nineveh, and the sin at the time of the flood were all the same: *hamas*. This means injustice, lawlessness, and social unrighteousness. As Ezekiel says in words that should resonate today, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: arrogance. She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility, yet she did not support the poor and needy. In their haughtiness, they committed abomination before me . . ." The Jewish epic spends far more time arguing for social justice than it does with sexual behavior. Maybe there's a lesson there for us all.

On any account, back to our story. The Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE. For most of the two hundred years after, the southern kingdom of Judah had been a vassal to one kingdom or another. When our story opens in 586 BCE, Judah was a vassal to Babylon (who had conquered the Assyrians). For nearly fifteen years, several kings of Judah had rebelled against the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. Each time a king rebelled, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed a little more of Judah, Jerusalem, and Solomon's Temple (where the Jews worshipped their god YHWH). Finally in 586, King Zedekiah of Judah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. In retaliation, the Babylonians came in, starved the people into submission, killed Zedekiah's sons in front of him and then blinded him, killed the main people in charge of the revolt, utterly destroyed the temple and the house of every important person in town, and sent the majority of people into exile. This is known as the Babylonian exile.

Nebuchadnezzar is an interesting figure in his own right, and can help connect us to broader points in history and the Jewish experience. More on him later.

### Part 2

In an age without writing, one only lived on in the stories of others. Indeed, one of the main motivations for a Greek warrior was *kleos*: what people said about you, especially after you died. For *kleos* men fought in battle; for *kleos* they built monuments. I think of *kleos* when I think of Gilgamesh's boasts of the splendors of Uruk, which is now in ruins. I think of the futility of *kleos* when I think of Achilles' ghost

telling Odysseus that he'd rather be alive and the slave of a serf than live on only in kleos. I think of kleos when I think of Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar was the ruler of Babylon and responsible for the destruction of Judah and Solomon's temple. He was also responsible for one of the seven wonders of the ancient world: the hanging gardens he built to ease his wife Amytis' homesickness. The gardens were about the size of the floor of a stadium and built on a raised mound as tall as the roots of the largest trees were deep.

Nebuchadnezzar shows up in the first chapters of book of *Daniel* in the Jewish epic. In one scene, Nebuchadnezzar had an experience many of us can relate to: he had what he believed was a meaningful dream, but couldn't remember what dream was or what it meant. Here's what I find most interesting: the straightforward way that he, his advisors, and the author of the text considered dreams to be *meaningful*. In many epics, from Gilgamesh to the Jewish Joseph to Homer to Herodotus, dreams are considered to be a portal to the divine and to reveal mysteries. Even the founder of modern psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, believed that dreams were the royal road to the unconscious and that their latent content revealed the desires and conflicts of the subconscious. Many others, including myself, place little stock in dreams. My own willingness to listen to someone's dream is directly related to their gender, their desirability, and my desire to share the place where her dreams are made. Quite possibly, however, I'm wrong; what's the accuracy rate of dreams?

Back to my main point, however. While we have the ruins of Gilgamesh's Uruk, of Homer's Troy, Nebuchadnezzar's gardens, a pinnacle of his achievements, a main reason for his kleos, have left no trace. Indeed, many question whether the gardens ever existed at all. There's a message in here, I think about kleos, about perspective, and about our legacy. In the meantime, however, even Babylon will fall, and it will fall to our man Cyrus.

### Part 3

The early Christian theological Tertullian once wrote, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem or the academy with the Church?" While he intended this statement as a critique of pagan philosophy and science as opposed to the faith of the Church, part of the answer to this question brings in our man Cyrus.

There is a tendency to put people in nice little boxes. This is a good guy, this is a bad guy. For the Jews, Cyrus is clearly a good guy. If you remember, the last time we discussed the Jews they were in Babylonian exile. Around 540 BCE, however, the Babylonian kingdom fell to Cyrus and the Persians. Shortly after he began his reign, Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Judea and rebuild their temple. No, that's not true: Cyrus used Persian money to rebuild the temple. That's right, our man Cyrus paid to have Solomon's temple rebuilt. For the Jews, Cyrus was acting in reverence for their god YHWH, and even called him YHWH's anointed one: Messiah.

But, there's another side to Cyrus. Ten years earlier, Cyrus had treated the Greeks quite differently. The story goes that Cyrus asked the Greeks to help him defeat the Lydian king Croesus. The Greeks refused. After Cyrus defeated Croesus, the Greeks then feared that Cyrus would attack them, and so Sparta sent a messenger warning Cyrus not to harm any of the Greeks. In reply, Cyrus said he wasn't scared of them and that if he remained healthy he would attack them. Within a generation, this threat would be taken up in full by his successors Darius and Xerxes in the Persian wars.

Thus, in little more than the two-score and ten years allotted to humans, in around the time it takes Haley's comet to orbit the sun, someone could have been born at the destruction of the Jewish temple and die at the battle of Marathon. These events, involving Athens and Jerusalem, have shaped western culture. In many ways, it has been a struggle of trying to put religion and science into neat little boxes and saying one's good and the other bad. Just like judging Cyrus, however, the truth is more nuanced than that.

Christopher Robinson, PhD  
December 2012