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St. Lawrence of Rome

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It is truly remarkable that God spoke of a pagan ruler, a Persian emperor, as "My anointed Cyrus" (Isaiah 45:1) and called him "My shepherd" (44:28). Perhaps the extraordinary distinction accorded to Cyrus by these references is set in greater relief if we recall that the Hebrew word for "anointed" is "messiah" (in Greek *christos*) and that when God otherwise speaks of "My Anointed" in the Old Testament, the reference is to David (Psalms 132 [131]:17). The designation of Cyrus as "my shepherd," likewise, puts the attentive reader in mind of David (cf. 2 Samuel 5:2; Psalms 78 [77]:71). Who, then, was this Cyrus, of whom the Lord God speaks in these messianic and covenantal terms?

He was Cyrus II of Anshan, an ancient country found today in modern Iran. It lay to the northeast of the Fertile Crescent, just under the Caspian Sea. After the fall of Nineveh in 612, Anshan, traditionally subject to the Assyrians, became a vassal state of the Medes. In 550 its king, Cyrus II, defeated the Medes, thus becoming ruler of the entire empire of the Medes and Persians. In order to gain this victory, he had accepted the help of the Babylonians, who apparently did not reflect that a triumphant Cyrus would soon prove to be a greater threat to them than the Medes had ever been.

When their new danger did finally dawn on the Babylonians, they promptly formed a defensive pact with several countries, including Lydia, a kingdom situated in the west of the large peninsula that today we call Turkey. Before challenging Babylon, therefore, Cyrus determined to conquer Babylon's ally, Lydia. Accordingly, the king of Lydia, Croesus, having received assurances of military help from Egypt and Sparta, prepared to move east against Cyrus.

Prior to making that move, however, King Croesus of Lydia resolved to seek an oracular word from the god Apollo, whose shrine was at Delphi, as well as from other sources of divination (Herodotus 1.46-47). It was apparently in reference to all this feverish oracular activity (between 549 and 547) that the Book of Isaiah affirmed that God "frustrates the designs of babblers and drives diviners mad" (44:25). At the time there were many predictions being made about the struggle soon to ensue (Herodotus, 1.53-54; Isaiah 40:8; 47:12-13;

55:10-11).

On the strength of what Croesus learned, or thought he learned, from Apollo's oracle at Delphi, he prepared to attack Cyrus. Cyrus himself did not wait for his opponent to arrive. In the winter of 547/6 he launched his own attack, catching Croesus by surprise, taking his capital city of Sardis, and incorporating Lydia into his own growing empire.

The fall of Lydia struck panic among the Greeks (cf. Isaiah 41:5-6), who realized that rather soon they too would have to face this growing Persian empire. (They would do early in the following century, in the unforgettable battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis and Plataea.) The panic of the Greeks, however, was nothing to that of the Babylonians, who knew that they were next on the Cyrus's list.

To the Jews, however, and other peoples oppressed by the Babylonians, the recent victory of Cyrus over Lydia augured their own deliverance, so they watched his military progress with no little excitement (cf. Isaiah 41:1-4). Over and over, Israel was told not to fear, because God was about to deliver them from the Babylonians (41:8-15; 43:1,5; 44:8; 51:7,12; 54:4,14). They did not have to wait very long. On October 13, 539, Cyrus captured Babylon by a shrewd tactical maneuver that immortalized his fame in military history (Herodotus 1.190-191).

As we know from a record Cyrus left to posterity, an inscription on a clay barrel called the "Cyrus Cylinder," this Persian ruler of Babylon promptly proclaimed himself a servant of the Babylonian sun god, Marduk. In the Bible, nonetheless, Cyrus is ever regarded as the historical instrument of the true God, Israel's God. It was Cyrus who brought the Babylonian Captivity to an end in 538, authorizing the return of the Chosen People to their homeland, along with the restoration of the sacred vessels of Jerusalem's temple, which he ordered to be rebuilt (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-8; 4:3; 5:13-17; 6:3). Even as Holy Scripture describes the Emperor Cyrus in terms otherwise associated with King David, this gentile messiah (as it were) is rightly regarded as another type and foreshadowing of the true Messiah and Shepherd, Jesus the Lord, who delivers His people from a captivity more bitter than Babylon, restores them to the Promised Land, and builds for them a better temple. He is the true Cyrus, the Lord's Anointed and His Shepherd.

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