

Why did Cyrus let them go?

The subject for this lecture will, I hope, present a different picture from anything that I have offered previously. I am taking just one small part of our ritual and trying to clear up a single matter — one with which we are all familiar. Trying to do this helps to pass many meetings.

It was doing precisely this during a Royal Arch ceremony three years ago that started me on the subject of my title of today: “Why did Cyrus let them go?”; but so that you may be quite clear about what I am referring to let me quote the relevant passage. In English Chapters it is usually related by the Principal Sojourner: Our ancestors, he says, “were led into captivity with Jehoiakim their king by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, there to remain for 70 years. . . The period of our Captivity expired in the first year of the reign of Cyrus, King of Persia, when it pleased the Almighty to inspire that noble prince to issue the following proclamation: ‘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...’ “ you know the rest too well for me to go on.

As usual we recite this passage, or hear it recited, every time we meet for an Exaltation (or what I read recently in a printed Lancashire ritual is an Exhalation — and that by the way is not a bad description of what we do if in reciting ritual we just expel hot air) but so familiar is this passage that perhaps we are not struck, as we ought to be, by its surprising content. Let us therefore just pause and consider the following questions:

i) Why should this ancient conquering monarch from another kingdom be willing to allow part of what he had acquired in Babylon to be dispersed and that within the first year of his reign?

ii) Why should a Persian ruler, who was presumably a follower of the sage, Zoroaster, be inspired by and recognize the words and direction of the Hebrew deity, Jehovah?

iii) Why, in any case, should he be especially concerned about his newly acquired Jewish subjects and even have the desire to assist them in building a Jewish temple in Jerusalem?

iv) Even more, and this appears in the Bible story and in other parts of present Masonic degrees in England, why did Cyrus not only allow the Jews freedom to depart but also gave them documents to authorize their return and to undertake their special work?

These are the questions that I now seek to answer and I trust that as we discover some answers to them we shall not only understand the background of our ritual better but we will be able to deliver it still more meaningfully in the future. So as to be able to do this we need to look at the events which led to the arrival of Cyrus just before his release of the Jewish exiles and their descendants. It means, of course, looking at a little bit of Middle Eastern history.

Before the period of their empire ended the Assyrians had removed or enslaved the people in the northern part of Palestine called Israel or Samaria, but the people in the southern part called Judah, which included Jerusalem as the

City of David, were able to maintain their independence. The Temple there, with which we are so familiar in the Craft ceremonies, was the focal point of the Jews' religious faith and became an increasingly important centre of encouragement and resistance to outside influences.

About 600 BC, Assyria was then taken over by another warrior people called the Chaldeans who seized the throne of Babylon and the height of their power came in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar the Great who had played an important part in removing the Assyrian rule.

It was because he perceived how serious a threat Judah was to his control of the Babylonian kingdom that Nebuchadnezzar finally decided to conquer Judah as well and bring its king, Jehoiakim, and most of the leading Hebrew families to Babylon, as our ritual says.

What we may not realise is that at first Nebuchadnezzar only took away the treasures from inside the Temple and left behind a puppet ruler called Zedekiah. When that prince also rebelled 9 years later Nebuchadnezzar came again and this time not only starved the people into submission after an 18 month siege but also sacked the city, burnt down the Temple and left it as a ruin. This was the real occasion of its destruction.

This attempt to remove for ever the idea of the place where the God of the Jewish people resided around the Ark of the Covenant was, however, unsuccessful. The Chaldeans never appreciated that for the Jewish race God was not a physical idol like one of their own gods and that hence the dismantling of the physical Temple, though regrettable, did not mean to the Jews either that their God had failed or that He was no longer concerned with them. In their land of exile, as their forefathers had once before discovered in Egypt, the presence of God was still-around. They might not have a Temple but they created new community gatherings with their own forms of prayer and worship. They gave these meeting places a name with which we are now familiar: we call them 'Synagogues'.

It was in these new gathering places that many of the new writings of the Jews were created, especially the events recorded in the first 12 chapters of Genesis. Even more important it was now that the words and writings of some peculiar Jewish men called 'Prophets' were compiled those of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel being the most renowned. Their influence was such that the Jewish exiles and even their children who had never seen Judah took firm hold of three abiding messages:

1. That whatever may have seemed to have happened to their Holy Places back in Judah God was still bound by a Covenant with them and they were now to be faithful to Jehovah, as so often they had not been.

2. They needed to realize that however much they might "sit down and weep by the waters of Babylon as they remembered Sion" (a phrase that is still used in Lancashire and Yorkshire Installation ceremonies) there was to be a limit to their exile. Meanwhile they regarded themselves simply as 'sojourners'.

3. That they were in the mean time to preserve their distinctive and new traditions whilst also benefitting from the opportunities made possible for their special talents and abilities in this land of exile. As the Book of Daniel in particular reveals the qualities of the Jewish exiles did not go unnoticed by their captors.

Moreover the years of residence in the unquestioned luxury, splendour and stability of the Babylonian kingdom for over 50 years meant that many of the Jewish families acquired their own wealth and skill.

Their special abilities as teachers, lawyers, financiers and administrators were soon evident.

Harold Lamb, in his book *Cyrus the Great* which intriguingly reconstructs the period, describes the noble Jacob Egibi “fat with good living, gripping high his fringed robe with one be-ri-inged hand while he held a jar of sweet scent to his nostrils with the other — Jacob Egibi of the Exchange, with a tall black slave holding a parasol over his shaven head and a short white slave wielding a staff to beat back the screaming beggars. They watched him step around the piles of public refuse and they shrieked, ‘Aid, mighty one — give aid to the starving’.

Instead of throwing out shekels or even shoes, Jacob turned into the door of the Hebrew prayer house where nothing could be seen in the dimness or heard in the silence. At the door his staff bearer held back the beggars and Jacob Egibi let fall his robe and told them, in the words of the Hebrew psalmist, ‘Lift up your eyes to the hills for from thence comes your aid’. Then this wealthy banker slipped into the inner room of this Hebrew captive colony.” (pp. 202f.)

What was therefore evident to both the Chaldeans and their eventual conquerors, the Persians, was that here were a people who had a God who travelled with them, to whose words, laws and directions they were prepared to be faithful — in some cases even to the point of death — and yet who were reliable and stable citizens of even a foreign state. Indeed as the passage just quoted shows they could make themselves very much ‘at home’. It was a characteristic that has stayed with the Jews right up to the present.

It was to a Babylon that contained such residents that the new Persian ruler finally came. Some 12 years after Nebuchadnezzar died there arose a young man called Cyrus who was the son in law of the King of the Medes — the people who had helped the Chaldeans, and especially Nebuchadnezzar, to overthrow the Assyrians. This young ruler of the Persians now deposed his father-in-law and thus created that famous alliance which gave us ‘the Laws of the Medes and Persians’. Yet this was not the extent of Cyrus’s ambition. He sought to extend his kingdom to the borders of what we today call Pakistan in the east, whilst to the west he was to become ruler of what we call Syria, Palestine, the northern borders of Saudi Arabia, all Egypt and even the southern coast of the Eastern Mediterranean. It was a formidable achievement that was to stir a similar ambition in a later young man called Alexander and meant, for them both, that they had to be able to control the peoples of many different backgrounds.

The Persians were a determined and could be a cruel people but they seem to have learnt from others’ experience and hence they were both less harsh towards the people they subjugated and much more tolerant of religious differences. These factors took their lead from the new ruler of Babylon so let us look briefly at this king called Cyrus.

His closest counsellors came to call him ‘Prophet’ and his troops called him their ‘shepherd’. He had all the essential gifts for a great warrior and ruler. He was immensely observant and had a sharp memory. He was prepared to consult and

to listen but having done both he was decisive and single-minded. Having selected a plan or policy he was prepared to pursue it and, if possible, to bring it to fruition. What he especially learnt as his years of travelling and conquest passed was that the territories that became his were diverse and complex. He soon discovered, for example, that if he was to be master of the uncouth Cimmerian people of the north-east as well as the sophisticated city dwellers of Egypt in the south-west then he must give up any notion of trying to treat every area alike. If there was one lesson that was fixed in his mind by the time he came to Babylon it was this — the tight, central control of the Chaldeans had meant that Babylon had become a breeding place of numbing slavery and its cities were clogged with populations that ought to be better employed elsewhere. Harold Lamb puts it like this:

“The captive peoples would go — the Amorites of the great plains, the Elamites of the hills, the boatmen of the marshlands, the Phoenicians of the sunset coast. These people, whether prisoners of war under former kings of Babylon, enslaved or held in forced labour, would be released with their families and belongings... By so doing he meant to increase the population of the (far-flung) provinces with the workers they needed whether agricultural or fishermen.” What led to this idea of repatriation was first and foremost the sheer hard-headed realism of this new Conqueror. He saw the mistakes that his predecessors had made and he was prepared to try other methods of control. As is recorded on one of the clay tablets from this time: “My soldiers went about peacefully, widespread through the extent of Babylon. I freed the dwellers from the yoke that was ill placed upon them.” We must note however that this was part of a thought-out policy.

We are not considering here the eager generosity of a well-meaning king. Cyrus knew that dispersal of his newly acquired ‘slaves’ would work but only if it was directed and authorized. He is not simply saying, as we believe that the Pharaoh in Egypt once said of the Hebrews, “GO”. What Cyrus is saying is, “I can see that if these dispossessed peoples are given a task to fulfil, a work of restoration and recovery of the land to achieve, then they will be more content and I will have a much more productive empire. That is why he gave them documents to describe their purpose in returning and the right to do it in his name.

If what has just been said answers half the questions that we posed at the outset — why should a conqueror so soon disperse what he had acquired and even give them written orders to carry out what he had agreed? — it does not yet answer the other two questions which touch on religious aspects of these events. We need to look at Cyrus again.

I have already said that Cyrus kept his eyes and ears open and was always ready to learn. What becomes clear to anyone who follows his life story is that at no point does Cyrus himself become attached to just one religious point of view. If he could be said to have a parallel in this matter he would have to be set alongside Queen Elizabeth I, for like her he was a pragmatist — i.e. he was shrewd enough to keep his own innermost opinions to himself and to accept what worked for the good of his realm. In his journeyings he meets several different forms of religious practice — the teachings of the Zarathustrians, the worship of the White Congregations of the Caucasus, the sacrifices before idols of

the Akkadians and Babylonians — and the strange, largely silent, imageless devotion of the Hebrews.

Though it is true that the cult of Zoroastrianism began with the life and teachings of Zarathustra the Mede around 800 B.C. and was eventually to become for almost a 1000 years the normal faith of the Persian people Cyrus was not himself a complete follower of that way. He acknowledged many of its practical moral tenets of active charity, care for animals and respect for human dignity and he even believed, as this religion taught, that we each have a guardian spirit, what was called a 'fravashi', which sought to bring out the best in each person's character. Yet he could not accept the idea that there was a heavenly being, Ahura Mazda, who was the supreme Master. If that was so Cyrus said, "Then am I, the King, at a loss, for I may serve no-one. I who judge all matters, cannot be judged." (And, by the way, if you ever wondered where the name of a super car, 'Mazda', came from now you know its origin.)

Cyrus had no hesitation about asserting his authority. I find it intriguing that when he entered Babylon at last as a conqueror he rode through the Ishtar Gate over palm branches laid down before him — though he rode on a horse — and was soon in the temple there telling the temple managers that to value a man as if he were of equal worth only with an ox and a plough was wrong and had to stop. He even stopped the tax on the supply of water saying that human beings had as much need and right to it as to the sun.

(Whatever would today's Water Companies say about that?)

Yet in matters of religion he was open to others' convictions. In the Babylon temple he stood up to worship and surprised those present by praying, "O Ahura Mazda, or whatever other gods there are". It is therefore not at all surprising that when a delegation of his Hebrew subjects sought an audience and Jacob Egibi, their spokesman, asked for one small favour, that Cyrus consented to permission being given for some of his people to return to Judah and restore their Temple. "It is ordered", he said, "that all the captive peoples who are in Babylon shall return to their homes. Are the Jews any different from the others? My word covers you also.

Set out when you will. Rebuild your temple."

To Cyrus this was not, I suggest, the result of a special instruction from J-H-V-H. It was just one more piece in the fulfilment of a wise policy of dispersion that he was only too eager to complete. If these people with their perceptive laws, their imageless God and their evident gifts as farmers, lawyers and money-changers had a special reason for going home then that was to be encouraged and supported. He wished them well and set them on their way.

But to the Jews it was something else. It was a miracle, a prophecy come true, a dream realized. To them Cyrus was inspired and must have been given his message from God himself. It had to be, as Isaiah put it, "Thus saith the Lord. . . that saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure; even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built, and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid." For the Jews their God was the only God of all the earth. How could Cyrus be any other than his servant doing his will? That is why they wrote it down as they did. That, they said for posterity, is why Cyrus let our people go.