

CYRUS – THE SHEPHERD OF GOD

I.

Introduction

It happened more than 2500 years ago. While Babylonian ruler Belshazzar was getting drunk at the great feast he made for a thousand of his lords, desecrating the vessels from the Jerusalem's temple and praising man-made gods, and while Babylonian army was out in the country to defend Babylonian kingdom against Persian army led by Cyrus and his allies Medes led by Darius, a small division of Persian army took the capital city of Babylon by a surprise. The same night that Belshazzar saw the hand writing on the wall of royal palace the message from God announcing him the end of his rule, the end really came. (Daniel 5:1-6, 22-30).

Year 539 BC marked the end of New Babylonian Empire and for tens of thousands of Jews from Judah who lived in Babylonian captivity since the time of Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar this event brought the hope of their return to their homeland. How could they have such hope? It was because the prophecies pronounced by prophet Jeremiah were being fulfilled once again! - Jer. 25:11-12, 29:4,5,10

King Cyrus II. of Persia entered the city of Babylon and gave Babylonian kingdom to his elderly ally Darius the Mede, although Cyrus in effect had the dominion in it. Babylonian Empire and its domains, including the land of Judah found themselves under Medo-Persian rule. This way, the Jewish prophet Daniel who held the highest position in Babylonian administration after overthrow of king Nabonidus and his son and co-ruler Belshazzar, was incorporated into new administration and he prospered greatly under king Darius and later under king Cyrus who became the sole ruler of Persia, Media and Babylonia. - Daniel 5:29-31, Daniel 6:1-3, 25-28

II.

Who was Cyrus and what was so special about him?

Who was Cyrus and what was so special about him? Cyrus was born as the son of the local Persian king Cambyses I. and the Mede princess Mandane. Few facts are known of Cyrus' early years. The works of ancient writers focus mainly on different oracles predicting to a young prince a great future. After the death of his father, Cyrus became the ruler of a small kingdom in today's southwestern Iran. He was vassal of his grandfather Astyages, the king of Medes, but he rebelled against him, defeated him in a war and deposed him from his throne. Later Cyrus united Persians and Medes in one empire. By the end of his life, Cyrus' empire stretched from Asia Minor and Judah in the west to the Indus River in the east and was the largest empire the world had ever seen. However, what was so special about Cyrus, was his role in God's plan to bring salvation to mankind.

Isaiah prophesied great things about Cyrus cca 160 years before his victory over Babylonia and more that a century before Cyrus was even born. Let's read them from Isaiah 44:28, 45:1-6, 13.

III.

What was the attitude of Jews towards Isaiah's prophecies?

What was the attitude of Jews towards Isaiah's prophecies about Cyrus? I can imagine that Isaiah's prophecies about Cyrus must have sounded as incredible fables to the ears of his contemporaries and following generations. For Jerusalem to be built and for the foundation of the

temple to be laid that would require that both Jerusalem and God's temple would have to be destroyed! That was something unimaginable for Jewish mind. God would not allow that happen! He was with king Hezekiah and protected Jerusalem against terrible Assyrian army. God would not forsake them! This is how I imagine the reaction of most of the Jews to Isaiah's prophecies about Cyrus. However, it is not a mere imagination.

Even years later after Isaiah's prophecies, when Assyrian Empire was already destroyed by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, when Nebuchadnezzar already invaded Judah, took its King Jehoiachin and inhabitants of Jerusalem to captivity and carried away all the treasures of the temple (2. Kings 24:12-17) and when Jews in Judah were facing yet another war with Babylonians because of their treason under King Zedekiah installed by Nebuchadnezzar, they still could not believe prophets that God would allow Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem. In reality they did not believe God that He would bring such judgement against them for their sins.- Jeremiah 37:7-9, 2. Chronicles 36:14-20

Cca 160 years passed since Isaiah's prophecies about Cyrus and the situation was very different. Those Jews who survived God's judgement had now very good reasons to believe Isaiah and Jeremiah. And they could rejoice for in the first year of Cyrus' rule over Babylon (about 536 BC?), he issued a decree that allowed Jews to return to their homeland, to Jerusalem and commanded them to rebuild God's temple there with his support. - Ezdra 1:1-4

IV.

What was Cyrus' role in God's plan of salvation?

Now, let's turn our attention back to Cyrus. What was Cyrus' role in God's plan of salvation? We have already read about it. Let's read again in Isaiah what God proclaimed about Cyrus - Isaiah 44:28. And now let's read again in Ezdra what Cyrus proclaimed about God - Ezdra 1:2.

Someone may think that Cyrus did not do anything special. He was the most powerful monarch on the face of the earth. It was easy for him to issue such proclamation.

Well, let me tell you that God in order to fulfil His plans used Cyrus likewise in the past He had used Assyrian and Babylonian kings. These kings were God's instruments. God delivered them other nations, but Assyrian and Babylonian kings prided themselves that they did everything by their own might. Isaiah 10:5-6, 12-13, Isaiah 14:4-6, 12-15

Unlike Assyrian and Babylonian kings, Cyrus was humble enough to realize that he used to be an unimportant king of an unimportant vassal kingdom and now he is the king of the kingdoms of the earth! He did not pride himself that he did everything by his own might, on the contrary he recognized that it was the true God who gave him those kingdoms and proclaimed it through all his empire. (Isaiah 45:3, Ezdra 1:2)

At that time, it was inherent (bylo vlastní) to pagan religions and cultures that kings of the pagan nations ascribed their victories to help of the pagan gods that they worshiped. That's what Assyrian and Babylonian Kings did (2. Kings 19:37, Ezdra 1:7). What a change it was when Cyrus bore testimony to the nations that the true God who delivered him all these nations, their kings and their treasures is God of Israel, the God of Jewish slaves! And not only that, but also that this God gave him charge to build His temple not in his own capital city, but in Jerusalem that was then but a pile of ruins. As I have said earlier Cyrus fulfilled this charge by allowing the remnant of God's people to return to their land and commanding them to build God's temple. By that proclamation and fulfilling

the charge, Cyrus put himself on the level of Jewish slaves in the sight of his countrymen and subjects. In reality he humbled himself on the level of God's servant.

Now, the return of the remnant of God's people from Babylonian captivity to their land allowed by Cyrus was probably as significant event as the exodus of Israelites from Egyptian captivity. In both cases God's people were freed from slavery due to God's intervention. Both these events were essential for keeping them as a nation set apart by God from other nations in order that prophesied Savior could come through them to the world, they might be able to identify Him and bear testimony of Him to all the nations.

Further, back in the past there was one nation of Israel made out of 12 tribes. Then from the time when the kingdom was divided tribes of Juda and Benjamin were in Judah Kingdom and other tribes referred to as Israelites were in Northern Kingdom of Israel. Later Assyrians destroyed Northern Israel and Israelites who survived were scattered in Assyria and Media (2. Kings 15:29, 17:6). Yet later Babylonians destroyed Judah Kingdom and Jews who survived were scattered in Babylonian Empire. (2. Kings 24:14-16) Seems like under Cyrus' rule over Assyria, Media and Babylon the remnant of God's people that returned to their land was not only from Juda and Benjamin tribes, but also from Israeli tribes and this faithful remnant of God's people as whole is referred to as Israel again. - Skutky 26:6-7

V.

Did Cyrus know that he was chosen by God for some task?

Did Cyrus know that he was chosen by God for some task? From Isaiah 45:1-6 I make conclusion that Cyrus did not recognized the true God prior to his victory over Babylon, for God says that Cyrus had not known Him. How then Cyrus came to the knowledge of God, what God did for him and what was God's will for him? Since we have no record that God spoke directly to pagan Cyrus, we can assume that Cyrus learnt about it. From who could he learn about it? How about from prophet Daniel who held the highest position in Babylonian administration? It is reasonable to believe that Daniel met Cyrus, told him what God did for him, what was God's will for him, how it was prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah and Cyrus believed it and he issued the decree which set Jews free and ordered them to build the temple and thus he obeyed the will of God and actively helped to fulfill God's plans to bring salvation to mankind. That means even to each of us.

VI.

Cyrus helps to fulfill God's plans even after his death

One more interesting thing about Cyrus is that he helped to fulfill God's plans even after his death. How is it possible? Jews in their homeland met with many hardships and obstacles from their enemies who used lies, bribes, threats and violence to stop them from building the temple. - Ezdra 4:1-5 These enemies were successful and made Persian king Artaxerxes to stop the construction of the temple. - Ezdra 4:21 But Jews encouraged by prophets Haggai and Zechariah renewed the work on temple under Persian king Darius. This is different Darius from the one I mentioned earlier. Once again they were approached by their enemies, but this time Jews referred to the command of King Cyrus that the temple should be built. King Darius ordered to search the archives, found out that it was the truth and ordered that the command of the great King Cyrus would be respected by his subjects. - Ezdra 6:1-12 In the end God's will was fulfilled. - Ezdra 6:15-16

VII.

What is the lesson for us today?

What is the lesson for us today? In His own time God appoints His Shepherds to do his will. More than 2500 years ago it was Cyrus who humbled himself to the level of God's servant. God's will then for the remnant of physical Israel was to return to their land, build the temple, renew their covenant with God and expect the coming of the Savior who would be God's Shepherd and King of the new spiritual nation of Israel. - Ezekiel 37:21-27

This Savior, Shepherd and King of the spiritual Israel is Jesus Christ who came more than 2000 years ago. Although He was in the form of God, He took on Himself the form of a man and humbled Himself on the level of God's servant. He died for our sins, rose from the dead and offers to everyone who believes and obeys Him salvation from their sins and eternal life in God's Heavenly Kingdom, but to everyone who rejects Him punishment for their sins and eternal separation from God.

God's will nowadays is that as many people as possible would be saved and thus become the part of the spiritual Israel. That is the reason why Jesus gives us command to make him disciples of all nations baptizing and teaching them all that He commanded.

While, God's shepherd Cyrus commanded Jews to build physical temple for God out of stones and they fulfilled this command, our Shepherd Jesus commands us to help to build the spiritual temple for God out of living stones, represented by people who obey Jesus' gospel. The only way how we can do it is by preaching them gospel, that is God's power for salvation.

In that we can take example from Cyrus. Although he was a gentile and king of the kingdoms of the earth, after all that God did for him, he did not find it beneath him to proclaim God's name to the nations who did not believe in true God.

VIII.

Invitation

God's will will always be done. King of the kingdoms of the earth Cyrus and the King of Kings Jesus Christ are the evidence of it. Christians who live in the present time and who are part of spiritual Israel are also evidence of it. Are you out of Christ and desire to be saved from the punishment for your sins and to become a part of the spiritual Israel and a living stone of God's temple? Be saved today!

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