

Lesson 26 Isaiah 44:24-45:8 The Cyrus Prophecy and Historical Background

Introduction

We have just completed the second major section of the Book of the Servant titled, “The Redemption of Israel.” That section set us up for the remaining two sections of the Book of the Servant, “The Great Deliverance,” and, “The Greater Deliverance.” I’ll set up the structure for the Great Deliverance in our next lesson.

In this lesson we are giving our full attention to one of the most astounding prophecies in Scripture, comparable in its specificity and unlikeliness only to some of the more detailed prophecies about Jesus Christ. Concerning specificity, this prophecy gives us a name that no one had ever heard of. God’s shepherd will be named, “Cyrus.” That’s pretty specific. Concerning unlikeliness, the name belongs to a people on nobody’s radar. Isaiah has already stretched the imagination of his readers by prophesying the rise of Babylon over Assyria. As unlikely as that might be, at least his readers were very familiar with the name of Babylon, and even the concept of Babylon as a powerful empire that might conceivably rule over Judah. It is not likely. Babylon had not ruled an empire for a thousand years, since the time of Hammurabi. But at least Babylon is part of the cultural imagination.

In 700 BC, nobody in this region knows anything about Persia. They are not a player. They are insignificant tribes north and east of Mesopotamia. And if we don’t know anything about Persia, how in the world could we be expected to know anything about the future leader who is going to bring to meld the Persian tribes together and conquer the world?

It is such an unthinkable claim that scholars assume this part of the book cannot be original to the prophet Isaiah. How could he look ahead 150 years to prophesy about a Babylonian Empire, not yet in existence, being conquered by another empire of an unknown people led by an unknown king?

I’ll address this prophecy from two perspectives. First, I want to provide some historical context. I’ve done that a couple of times in this Isaiah series. We did it in the very first lesson, addressing Isaiah 1:1-2, and then again in lesson 17, addressing chapters 36-39. This will be our third history-heavy episode. After considering the historical context, we will then consider the meaning of the text. So, we’ll come from both perspectives.

Before addressing the history, let’s read the text, so we have the prophecy in mind. Our text is Isaiah 44:24-45:8. It is just 13 verses separated into two halves with God first speaking to Judah and then speaking to Cyrus. We start in the first 5 verses with God’s message to Judah. The message assumes that Jerusalem has been destroyed and most of the people taken off into exile. So, this is looking ahead 150 years. As we read, notice how the text starts by contrasting God’s ability to guarantee His word against the deficiencies of human diviners and soothsayers.

The Historical Context

The Prophetic Text (44:24–45:8)

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| <p>²⁴ Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
“I, the LORD, am the maker of all things,
And spreading out the earth all alone,</p> <p>²⁵ Causing the omens of boasters to fail,
Causing wise men to draw back</p> <p>²⁶ Confirming the word of His servant</p> | <p>and the one who formed you from the womb,
Stretching out the heavens by Myself
Making fools out of diviners,
And turning their knowledge into foolishness,
And performing the purpose of His messengers.</p> |
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Now with that contrast in mind – the false diviners vs. God’s true messengers - God gives us His message. And notice how the text builds towards Cyrus and the task he is to perform.

It is I who says of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be inhabited!’ And of the cities of Judah, ‘They shall be built.’
And I will raise up her ruins again.

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| <p>²⁷ “It is I who says to the depth of the sea, ‘Be dried up!’
²⁸ “It is I who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd!
And he declares of Jerusalem, ‘She will be built,’</p> | <p>And I will make your rivers dry.
And he will perform all My desire.’
And of the temple, ‘Your foundation will be laid.’ ”</p> |
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The next 8 verses are a word from God to the future king Cyrus, beginning with what God will do and ending with who God is.

- ¹ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed,
To subdue nations before him
To open doors before him
- ² “I will go before you
I will shatter the doors of bronze
- ³ “I will give you the treasures of darkness
So that you may know that it is I,
- ⁴ “For the sake of Jacob My servant,
I have also called you by your name;
- ⁵ “I am the LORD, and there is no other;
I will gird you,
- ⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting
of the sun
- ⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness,
I am the LORD who does all these.
- ⁸ “Drip down, O heavens, from above,
Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit,
- Whom I have taken by the right hand,
And to loose the loins of kings;
so that gates will not be shut:
and make the rough places smooth;
and cut through their iron bars.
And hidden wealth of secret places,
The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by
your name.
And Israel My chosen one,
I have given you a title of honor
Though you have not known Me.
Besides Me there is no God.
though you have not known Me;
That there is no one besides Me.
- I am the LORD, and there is no other,
Causing well-being and creating calamity;
And let the clouds pour down righteousness;
And righteousness spring up with it.
I, the LORD, have created it.

The Historic Context

The name “Cyrus” appears 15 times in the Old Testament. The Hebrew pronunciation is, “Koresh.” My Iranian friend Donya wrote the Persian script for Cyrus’ name in my Bible here at this verse, at 44:28, and told me to pronounce it as, “Koorosh.” I really should have. My friends Donya and Shayan who speak Persian, who are Persian, teach about Cyrus. I’m going to do my best. For a long time I have thought that the country name “Iran” is a more modern designation. I tend to connect Iran with Islam, and Persia with the more ancient religion of Zoroastrianism and the whole empire in the Bible. I’ve recently learned that Persia and Iran are both names used from ancient times for the same people and same geographic territory. Persian and Iranian can be interchangeable.

With the conquest of Cyrus and the rise of Persian Empire, Persian culture became a major influencer in the ancient Near East, I think we can say, for the past 2500 years, from then to today. The Mesopotamian empires prior to Persia maintained a continuity of culture no matter who happened to be governing the territory, whether Assyrian, or Babylonian, or Semite tribes who took on the Assyrian and Babylonian mantels. Whoever conquered was consistently conquered themselves by the Sumerian culture of Mesopotamia. For almost 3000 years, even when everyone was speaking the Semite trade language Aramaic, the elite classes were still using the Sumerian language, and the culture still had this Sumerian flavor to it.

The Persian conquest broke that chain of continuity. Persian became the language of the elite. Rather than adopt the culture of the conquered, Persia dominated both politically and culturally. A later example of Persian cultural dominance is seen at the end of the first Persian dynasty, when the conqueror Alexander the Great invades. A point of contention between Alexander and his Macedonians arose as Alexander adopted Persian titles and Persian practices. So, rather than imposing Macedonian or Greek culture on the Persians Alexander was overcome himself by Persian culture. Persian cultural influence stretched west to east: from Rome and beyond in the west, to China in the east, and north to south from the Asian steppes down to Egypt.

This future of Persia with her might and her influence was clearly seen in the mind of God. It was totally unseeable in the mind of any man. Nobody in Isaiah’s date would have considered a tribe

from Persia an option to rule in Mesopotamia. It's unthinkable. Throughout Biblical history, there is always at least one superpower to the north and a superpower to the south. Egypt always holds the southern superpower position. So if you're wondering who is ruling below Israel in the Bible, it's Egypt. To the north, the superpower changes from time to time. We get some mention of the Hittites back in Moses' day, then later, during the time of the divided kingdom, we encounter the neo-Assyrians, followed by the neo-Babylonians, followed by the Persians. They are called neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian because they are the latest version of these empires. The older versions existed in the time of Abraham, Moses, and the Judges, but Assyria and Babylonia do not show up significantly in the Biblical story until the later prophets.

To keep things simple, we will drop the "neo-" and just call them, "Assyria," and, "Babylonia," or, "Babylon." It is helpful, as you're trying to keep this in your mind, to associate the Assyrians with the fall of the Northern Kingdom Israel, Babylon with the fall of the Southern Kingdom Judah, and Persia with the return of Israelites from exile. Almost all of the prophetic books of the Old Testament can be placed in one those three contexts: either the context of the Assyrian threat, or the context of the Babylonian threat, or the return under Persia. The books of Joel and Obadiah being the only two exceptions, because it is not possible to determine a date for these two authors from their books. Everybody else is either Assyrian threat, Babylonian threat, or return under Persia.

Isaiah's prophecy is quite unique in the scope of history covered in that it touches on all three contexts. Not only does Isaiah deal extensively with the Assyrian threat of his day; he also sees ahead to the resurgence of Babylonia, and then even further ahead to the rise of Persia under Cyrus.

In Isaiah 1-39, what we have been calling, "The Book of the King," we dealt mostly with Assyria. Tiglath-Pileser III, who Ahaz unwisely courted back in Isaiah 7, elevated the Assyrian kingdom once again to empire status. Assyria was still going strong under Sennacherib, who Hezekiah resisted in Isaiah 36. Sennacherib's death is recorded in Isaiah 37, along with 120,000 soldiers who died by plague. Empires were often destabilized with the death of a strong ruler like Sennacherib. We should think, even more destabilized with the deaths of 120,000 soldiers. Assyria's vassals were certainly thinking at that time that, you know, maybe now is it, maybe this is when we can grab a piece of the larger pie.

But that didn't happen right away. The decline of Assyria was not a guarantee in Isaiah's time. Sennacherib's heir, Esarhaddon, also mentioned in Isaiah 37, successfully consolidated power and eventually led an invasion into Egypt, expanding Assyria's geographic dominance to its greatest extent ever. You know, people weren't thinking Assyria's over. The Empire might have been in decline, but that would not have been clear to any of the people living under Esarhaddon's reign when Isaiah completed the writing of this book. People weren't thinking Assyria was about to fall.

It might be possible for Isaiah to guess at a Babylonian resurgence. There is usually someone guessing future events correctly because there so many people are putting forth their option. If you get 20 political pundits guessing on the outcome of a war, somebody is going to get it right. There is always someone who is going to pick the right team to win at Superbowl. The Dallas Cowboys' fans are always going to be rooting for Dallas, and Philadelphia Eagles' fans are always going to be rooting for Philadelphia. Somebody is going to be right at some point. Maybe there was some Babylonian fan writing about re-establishing the Babylonian Empire, so somebody thought that Babylon could rise again. Just like there is always some Croatian betting on Croatia to win the world cup. It has not happened yet, but if it every does, that guy will be right.

Betting on Babylon, Isaiah was certainly in the minority. Sure, Babylon had once reigned over all Mesopotamia. But placing a bet on Babylon taking down Assyria might be like placing a bet on the United Kingdom to take out the United States. The United Kingdom, sure, they once ruled a worldwide empire. They were it. But can you imagine now the United Kingdom crushing the United States in a decisive military campaign? Can that happen any time in this generation? Is it even thinkable?

Maybe it is not so hard to imagine Babylon is rising up again as it is to imagine Assyria being demolished. At this point in history, Assyria is the Iron Empire. They have all the technology, all the chariots. They are putting trained armies into the field. These are professional soldiers and they can put in more than one army of 50 thousand men at a time. Their Empire is vast. Their resources are enormous. Their cities are impregnable. Their technology is the most advanced.

Dan Carlin suggests this comparison in his Hardcore History podcast on Persia called, "The King of Kings," (which, by the way, I highly recommend), he asks something like this, I changed it a little bit but, what would the world look like if you woke up tomorrow and the news headlines read, "The United States of America is no more. Washington D. C. has fallen. The White House is burnt to the ground. The Supreme Court is gone. The Capital building is gone. The Washington memorial has been carried off to London. Abraham Lincoln's statue carried off as well. New York has fallen. Los Angeles has fallen. Chicago has fallen. The United States is done." No recovery. It can never raise up again.

Who would predict that? And how can you imagine that? And what would the world be after that? The scramble for power to fill the void of a United States that was here yesterday and is gone tomorrow. In 612 BC, news began to spread from Mesopotamia outward, "Nineveh had fallen." It was looted and burned. Assyria was no more. Babylonians, allied with Medes from the Asian steppes, had brought down Goliath. They defeated the Assyrians. The unthinkable had happened. The undefeatable had been defeated. What is going to happen next? With the Assyrians gone, who fills the power vacuum? Who will gain and then, who will lose?

Four major players jostled for control of the former Assyrian territory. The Lydians controlled most of Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. The Medes controlled north of Mesopotamia from the border of Turkey, practically all the way to India. And that includes the Persian homeland, but nobody is thinking about them yet. And after 1000 years, the Babylonians were once again masters of Mesopotamia. Down south, no surprise, Egypt is in control.

During this jostling for power, all the smaller regional powers had decisions to make. How much land should they try to grab for their own, and with whom should they ally? Can they get together enough of the little guys so they can stand up to the one of the big guys, or should they cast in their lot with one of the big guys? This has been a regular theme in the book of Isaiah. Back in chapter 7 Ahaz, struggling with this kind of decision when faced by the regional powers of Israel and Syria, made alliance with Assyria. That turned out poorly. They invited a lion to their back yard to deal with a snake. Later, the whole backdrop of chapters 28-39 is about Hezekiah's decision to trust Egypt for help against Assyria, contrary to Isaiah's advice. Hezekiah later repents and God saves Israel from Sennacherib. The future rulers of Judah are going to have the same kind of decision to deal with. Do they ally with Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, or do they turn south for help from Egypt, or do they remain neutral, trusting in Yahweh alone?

God gives Isaiah eyes to see what will be. Judah's leaders will regularly break treaty with Babylon, just as they did with Assyria. But they will not trust Yahweh. They do not break treaty because of this faith in this walk with God. Babylon will eventually become fed up with Judah and God will allow Babylon to conquer and to send Jews into exile. Isaiah is saying this is what is going to happen. That prophecy in itself is astounding. Remember, in Isaiah's day, Assyria looks unbeatable. Still, at least Babylon was a possible player.

But to predict the rise of Persia and to name some unknown Cyrus is beyond belief. The most astute political pundit, or most in-touch spiritual advisor, or most observant genius mentalist would never come up with such a precise and unthinkable prophecy as the overthrow of Babylon by a Persian named, Cyrus. The only way to believe this is to believe that there is a God who knows what will be and is able to ensure, through His sovereign wisdom and power, that what He sees will, indeed, become just as He has seen it. And that's why no secular scholar is willing to date this section of Isaiah during the lifetime of Isaiah. This cannot be unless you factor in God.

I did not name Persia among the four major powers competing for the former Assyrian territories: Lydia, Media, Babylonia, and Egypt. That will change rather quickly and dramatically. The dominance of Babylon in Mesopotamia will be short lived, only 73 years from the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC, to the fall of Babylon in 539 BC.

Cyrus became king in 559 BC, 53 years after the demise of the Assyrian Empire. Twenty years later, he had defeated and subjugated all the northern rivals for empire. He began with the Medes.

From what I have read, the Medes and Persians are like cousins. The relationship is close. They were semi-nomadic tribes, meaning that culturally the Median and Persian tribal groups moved around on the Asian steppes north of the Zagros mountains, they were very good with horses so they looked like nomadic people, but they also had established cities. So they're not a fully nomadic people. Herodotus wrote that every Persian boy was taught three things: how to ride a horse, how to shoot a bow, and always to tell the truth. The Median king Astyages was the suzerain over his Persian vassals. The first major move Cyrus made after he became leader over the Persians, which we don't really know much about that story, the first major move he made was to revolt against Astyages, successfully bringing the Median and Persian tribes together under his leadership with Persia on top. So it's flipped. You often see in the Bible the Medes and the Persians. Well, after Cyrus it should be, "the Persians and the Medes," because people are used to the Medes being in charge, but not anymore.

Cyrus turned next to Asia Minor, where he defeated the Lydians. That expanded his Empire all the way to Greece, or the border with Greece, which is going to cause Persia all kinds of headaches in the future. Coming into contact with the Greeks, sets up some history you may know about: the Persia-Greek wars in the reigns of Darius and Xerxes. Some of the famous battles that still live in the Western consciousness are the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae, the naval battle at Salamis, and the runner who announced the Greek victory from Marathon. Those names ring a bell. But that is all for a later time after Cyrus.

After he conquers the Lydians, Cyrus spends a decade consolidating his rule. Then he turns to Babylon. Both Biblical and non-Biblical texts contribute to our knowledge of Babylon's fall. The year is 539.

The Biblical depiction is in Daniel 5. Belshazzar holds a great feast while the Persian army sits outside the gates of Babylon. Belshazzar has brought out for use the gold vessels taken from God's Temple in Jerusalem. He then famously sees the writing on the wall as God causes a hand to write out these damning words, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin." The prophet Daniel is brought in to provide an interpretation. This is what he told Belshazzar.

MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. (Daniel 5:26-28)

Belshazzar dies that night. Darius the Mede, a commander in the Persian army, entered the city and took control. That's the Biblical record of events.

We get additional information from the Persian record. The Cyrus cylinder, a small cylinder discovered in the ruins of Babylon and dated to this period, credits the fall of Babylon to Nabonidus' failure as king to honor the god Marduk.

Nabonidus was Belshazzar's father. Looks like they were co-ruling, or maybe Belshazzar had authority in Babylon. Nabonidus was known for his love of antiquities and for his promotion of the moon god Sin over Babylon's patron god Marduk. Nabonidus spent most of his time away from Babylon. Doing so, he created a lot of ill will with the powerful priestly faction by missing, in a row, ten New Year's celebrations in the city at which as king he was supposed to take the hand of Marduk and receive the god's blessing on Babylon. Nabonidus' failure to stand before the statue of Marduk and honor him created resentment in Babylon, especially in light of other economic and political problems, and those, then, were attributed to Marduk's displeasure, and Nabonidus was the cause.

As the Persian army approached Babylon, Nabonidus also collected various idol gods from Mesopotamia vassal peoples and had those gods brought into Babylon. The reason is not explained in the text, but a positive reason for rounding up the gods of the peoples was to protect them from the Persian invasion. So the invaders get as far as the wall of Babylon, then they're stopped, and they're not able to get any of the gods and take back as trophies. A more negative view suggests that Nabonidus collected the people's gods in ransom to assure their continued allegiance. You know, we've got your gods in Babylon. If you don't want them to fall to the Persians, you better fight with us.

Scholars think Cyrus used this growing ill will against Nabonidus to turn his subjects against him. So even while there's fighting outside Babylon, there is a lot of propaganda going on. Somehow the word was getting into Babylon, "Do not resist us and there will be no punishment! We are going to take out the leaders, but we will return you and your gods to your homeland. Just welcome us in." The Cyrus cylinder argues that Marduk rejected Nabonidus and choose Cyrus instead to rule over Babylon. And the stories we get, but the Biblical story and the Persian story is that Persia went in and took Babylon without destroying the city.

After that, Cyrus does allow peoples to return to their cities, along with their gods, the ones that had been held in ransom, and ones who had been gathered before, and that's going to include the Jews and the artifacts from the Temple; those very artifacts that Belshazzar was dishonoring in the feast. Those artifacts from the Temple of Yahweh are now going to be returned.

The Biblical record attests to Cyrus' policy of tolerance towards Judah in the last paragraph of the book of Chronicles and the first paragraph of the book of Ezra. I'm going to read from Ezra 1:1-3. The reference to the first year is the first year of Cyrus' reign over Babylon, or the first year of his reign over the Israelites. He has already ruled the Persians for 20 years. Ezra 1:1-3,

¹ Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying: ² "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ 'Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem.'"

The reference to the word of Jeremiah being fulfilled is the word that Israel would be captive for 70 years in Babylon before the return. Both the exile and the return took a number of years. So, when to start and end the captivity is not clear. I like to think of it in God-centered terms, starting with the destruction of His Temple in 586 BC, lasting until the completion of the new Temple in 515 BC, a span of 70 years. Cyrus' proclamation of return allows for both the return of the people and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, which includes the rebuilding of the Temple. And that satisfies the prophecies both of Jeremiah and of Isaiah. There is a lot more to read about the return in the book of Ezra, but I will leave that there. So what we have covered: this is the historical context of the Cyrus prophecy here in Isaiah, from the fall of Assyria to Cyrus' decree that the Jews may return and rebuild.

Now let's look back over our 13 verses and consider the meaning of the prophecy with this historical context in mind. We will, again, divide the prophecy into two parts, with God first addressing Judah, and then addressing Cyrus. We start by reading again the address to Judah in Isaiah 44:24-28.

The Meaning of the Text

The Word to Judah (44:24-28)

²⁴ Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb,
"I, the LORD, am the maker of all things, Stretching out the heavens by Myself
And spreading out the earth all alone,

²⁵ Causing the omens of boasters to fail, Making fools out of diviners,
Causing wise men to draw back And turning their knowledge into foolishness,

execute this plan after they got permission from the Persian leaders. So there are people involved. From the human perspective we see that. But God is the One who empowers men to will and to do. This is God's plan announced 150 years in advance, so that as it begins to happen, we will not confuse the work of the human agents with the work of the primary agent who is God. We don't want another tower of Babel in Jerusalem. You know, Nehemiah holding up the brick and saying, "Look what I have built! Nothing can stand! Look how great we are! We have come back! We have done it again!" So, God is giving this prophecy so far ahead so that there will not be a doubt who made this happen. He formed Israel from the womb. He will later form Cyrus from the womb. God will raise Cyrus to power to be a shepherd for His people.

Now, God speaks directly to Cyrus, Isaiah 45:1-8.

The Word to Cyrus (45:1-8)

<p>¹ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, To subdue nations before him To open doors before him</p> <p>² "I will go before you I will shatter the doors of bronze</p> <p>³ "I will give you the treasures of darkness So that you may know that it is I,</p> <p>⁴ "For the sake of Jacob My servant, I have also called you by your name;</p> <p style="text-align: center;">⁵ "I am the LORD, and there is no other; I will gird you,</p> <p>⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun</p> <p style="text-align: center;">⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, I am the LORD who does all these.</p> <p>⁸ "Drip down, O heavens, from above, Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">I, the LORD, have created it.</p>	<p>Whom I have taken by the right hand, And to loose the loins of kings; so that gates will not be shut: and make the rough places smooth; and cut through their iron bars. And hidden wealth of secret places, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. And Israel My chosen one, I have given you a title of honor Though you have not known Me. Besides Me there is no God. though you have not known Me; That there is no one besides Me.</p> <p>Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these. And let the clouds pour down righteousness; And righteousness spring up with it.</p>
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At the end of the word to Judah, God calls Cyrus, "His shepherd." At the beginning here of his word to Cyrus, He calls Him, "His anointed." Those are lofty titles. The Hebrew for "anointed" is, "messiah." All the kings of Israel were anointed by God. They were all "messiah" in a more general sense. They were chosen ones – chosen to lead, to shepherd. There is one true Messiah. Cyrus is not that Messiah. He is not the Servant of the Servant songs in Isaiah.

So, why use the language of shepherd and messiah for Cyrus? Because in his role as a servant for God to bring about the national redemption of Israel, Cyrus foreshadows the true Servant, the true Shepherd, the true Messiah who will accomplish the greater deliverance of spiritual redemption for God's people, and will establish a truly righteous and truly eternal kingdom on Earth. Cyrus is not that Servant. He foreshadows that Servant.

The role Cyrus is to play has already been suggested back in 41:2 and 25 in our previous lessons.

<p>² "Who has aroused one from the east He delivers up nations before him He makes them like dust with his sword,</p> <p>²⁵ I have aroused one from the north, and he has come; And he will come upon rulers as <i>upon</i> mortar,</p>	<p>Whom He calls in righteousness to His feet? And subdues kings. As the wind-driven chaff with his bow. From the rising of the sun he will call on My name; Even as the potter treads clay.</p>
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Cyrus is both “one from the east” and “one from the north.” The ancient Persian homeland was on the northern border of the Persian gulf, almost due east from Jerusalem. And the Persian Empire’s center of power in Mesopotamia was northeast of Jerusalem. So Cyrus can be said as one from the north or as one from the east. The language of conquering king in 45:2 and 25 fits the task ascribed to Cyrus here in 45:1-2. And this is what he has to do.

¹ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, To subdue nations before him To open doors before him	Whom I have taken by the right hand, And to loose the loins of kings; so that gates will not be shut:
² “I will go before you I will shatter the doors of bronze	and make the rough places smooth; and cut through their iron bars.

Cyrus certainly subdued nations. First, he defeated the Medes. Then the Lydians. Then the Babylonians. “To loosen the loins of kings” is particularly picturesque. That means you crap all over yourself out of fear at the thought of the coming of the Persian army, of Cyrus. He took out all the major players in the north, so certainly he loosened the loins of the smaller, regional players. God opened doors for Cyrus. Cyrus went through. God made rough places smooth, He cut down the bars of iron. Cyrus went through everything. Success after success after success.

This is the Lord’s plan for the rescue of Israel. And He is doing more. We see that He is doing more than just planning the rescue of Israel. He has reasons for announcing this plan so far in the future. Why give us this prophecy if things are going to happen 150 years later? Three reasons come out in verses 3-7. First, verse 3,

³ “I will give you the treasures of darkness So that you may know that it is I,	And hidden wealth of secret places, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.
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That’s the first reason. That is God speaking directly to Cyrus. So that you (Cyrus) may know that it is I the Lord, the God of Israel who calls you by name. So that Cyrus will have knowledge. The text continues.

⁴ “For the sake of Jacob My servant, I have also called you by your name;	And Israel My chosen one, I have given you a title of honor Though you have not known Me.
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So God honors Cyrus not just for Cyrus, but for the sake of Jacob, His servant, and Israel, His chosen one. It’s for the sake of their rescue, their redemption. But the reason this was being told ahead in the future, and this is a regular theme of Isaiah, is that Israel will know their God; that they’ll read these prophecies, they’re the ones most likely to have them, they are the ones who should have access, who should know the Isaiah prophecies, and it should cause them, when Cyrus raises up, it should cause them to worship their God, to know their God. There is a third reason. Verses 5-7,

⁵ “I am the LORD, and there is no other; I will gird you,	Besides Me there is no God. though you have not known Me;
⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun	That there is no one besides Me.

I am the LORD, and there is no other,

⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, I am the LORD who does all these.	Causing well-being and creating calamity;
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Did you catch the third reason? The first was that Cyrus may know. The second is that Israel may know. The third here is that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun. The sun rises in the east and it sets in the west. God gave this prophecy so that the whole world would know that there is no God other than the God of Israel. That God is truly God. And if Cyrus had embraced Yahweh as the one and only God, then he may have become an instrument to spread of the knowledge of God beyond India to his east and all the way to China, beyond Greece to his west all

the way to Rome. Cyrus doesn't do that. He has this vast empire. And he does proclaim Yahweh as God in Israel. If you notice the language used before in Ezra, it sounds like Cyrus is a worshipper of Yahweh, and he is. He is a worshipper of Yahweh, but he is a worshipper of lots of gods. But the idea that "I am the Lord and there is no other," that God is exclusively God, there is no evidence that Cyrus actually yielded himself to that reality. It is going to be up to the ideal Servant to provide a sign of God's glory, that will be pronounced as far as the east is from the west. This servant, Cyrus, who is a foreshadowing of ideal, plays a role in that. But it doesn't come to full fruition under him. It's going to have to wait until the true Messiah, the true Servant comes. And we will see that sign that goes out to the remotest places of the Earth in the last paragraph of the book of Isaiah.

These three reasons for the prophecy still stand, as a witness of God's nature to Cyrus; as a witness to Israel; and as a witness to the world. God says, "I called you by name... I gave you a title of honor... Though you have not known me." And this is another part of the nature of the witness. God specifically named 150 years in advance the one who would fulfill the role. By giving him this role, God conferred a title of honor on him. He is called, "God's shepherd." He is called, "an anointed one." In spite of that fact, he did not know the name "Yahweh." Cyrus did not know about Yahweh. Maybe after he conquered Babylon he came to know, but before that he didn't know. Cyrus didn't know Yahweh, but Yahweh knew Cyrus. That's the reality for all of us. God sees us in our mother's womb. Before that, we're in His mind. He knows us, though we don't know him. Everybody is given a role to play. Everybody is given this opportunity to bring to fruition God's plan in their life, if we will submit to that knowledge. God knows us. He calls us. He chooses us. We respond. Cyrus will come to know Yahweh, just not as fully as we would hope he would come to know Yahweh.

The nature of the witness, that it was delivered 150 years in advance about some obscure person in some obscure nation, the nature of the witness gives proof to the content. The content of the witness is this: the revelation of the nature of God.

I am the LORD, and there is no other,
7 The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity;
I am the LORD who does all these.

I imagine Daniel the prophet, counselor of kings, being so excited about the moment he could bring this text of Isaiah to Cyrus and show him his own name in the Word of God. And Cyrus, as I've said, he does give honor to Yahweh. But I have not seen evidence that he took these words to heart, that "I am the Lord and there is no other. I Yahweh alone am God."

It may be true that Cyrus worshipped the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda. That is the Persian tradition. I've had trouble finding texts that show Cyrus as serious about Ahura Mazda being the one true god. That's Zoroastrianism, which is really unique for its monotheism. Ahura Mazda is considered the one true god engaged as truth and light against the powerful forces of lies and darkness. Zoroastrianism is almost dualistic, that there's a god of good, and light, and truth; and a god of wickedness, and darkness, and lies, but the Zoroastrians believed that Ahura Mazda must eventually triumph. So it's not truly dualistic. Ahura Mazda will be the one standing in the end. The texts we receive about Cyrus show that he was not exclusively monotheistic. And we might make that mistake when we are reading from a Christian worldview Cyrus' decree in Ezra 1:2 "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build him a house in Jerusalem." When we read that, it sounds like someone showed Cyrus Isaiah's prophecy, and it sounds like he believes in God.

And I, again, I imagine that he did believe in Yahweh. But I imagine he believed in Yahweh similarly to how he believed in Ahura Mazda of Persia, and how he believed in Marduk of Babylon, and he believed in countless other gods that he helped return home. I don't think this was just a political strategy to return everybody's god home as part of solidifying his empire. I think Cyrus also wanted the good will of the gods. He believed in all the gods and he wanted the peoples praying to their gods on their behalf. He wanted the good will of the gods. Here is the example from the Persian perspective. Again, the Cyrus cylinder gives this report. And what I am about to read, Cyrus is the one speaking.

When I entered Babylon as a friend and (when) I established the seat of the government in the palace of the ruler under jubilation and rejoicing, Marduk, the great lord, [induced] the magnanimous inhabitants of Babylon [to love me], and I was daily endeavoring to worship him.

May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me (to him); to Marduk, my lord...¹

We cannot know whether Cyrus eventually took to heart God's words to him in Isaiah. We don't know what happened later in the life of Cyrus. "I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God." He has definitely come close to truth, and I hope before his death that he yielded all the way to Yahweh as the one and only true God.

In verse 7, God declares Himself to be the one who forms light and creates darkness. That is an interestingly appropriate choice of words in speaking to a Zoroastrian Persian, who thinks of Ahura Mazda as light and the enemy as darkness. But it is not a choice of words that has to be dependent on Zoroastrianism. Darkness and light are themes in the Old Testament from the first verses of Genesis. To form light is a creative action. It is also interesting in the text here that God says He creates darkness. It doesn't seem like you need to do anything to create darkness. Darkness is the absence of light. In the beginning "the earth was formless and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep (Genesis 1:2)." Then God said, "let there be light," and there was light. So it doesn't sound like to me you needed to create darkness. Darkness just is the absence of light. But you need to create light to dispel the darkness. We could say that God created darkness in that He created physical space separate from Himself, and that creates the context for the conception of darkness. But I am pretty sure I am overthinking the verset and this idea about creating darkness. Light and dark here are probably meant as metaphors for blessing and curse, and that is indicated by the parallel verset. And this is leading us to our conclusion of verses 7-8,

I am the LORD, and there is no other,
⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity;
I am the LORD who does all these.

Light and dark are parallel to well-being and calamity. God causes both. God sent Judah into exile. He was the ultimate cause of that calamity. Not Nebuchadnezzar. God rescued the Jews from exile. He was the ultimate cause of that well-being. Not Cyrus.

God is just and good in all that He allows, whether it's well-being or calamity, even when that calamity is brought about by evil men, or when the well-being is accomplished by one who does not know God. God's plan in dealing with wicked human beings involves both tragedy and blessing. There is pain and bounty. There is sin and there is evil, but that is brought in by human beings. God's actions throughout are righteous. And the results are ultimately good and true, verse 8, our last verse,

⁸ "Drip down, O heavens, from above, And let the clouds pour down righteousness;
Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit, And righteousness spring up with it.
I, the LORD, have created it.

God sees everything so far ahead. And God ultimately works all things together for the blessing of those who love Him. God's righteous plan for His people requires the Jewish return to Israel. If He has declared redemption for Israel, which He has, then He is bound by His own nature to accomplish His own word. God's faithfulness to His word goes all the way back to His promise to Abraham that through Abraham's seed all the nations of the Earth would be blessed. And at this point in Isaiah's day, God's faithfulness is also stretching ahead to Jesus, the true seed of Abraham through whom the blessing of the nations would come. The rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple are both necessary

¹ J. B. Pritchard (Ed.). *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament, 3rd ed. with Supplement.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 316.

events to prepare for the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant through the coming of the true Messiah.

With this in mind, I don't think it is too hard to argue that Cyrus of Persia is one of the most important, influential men of all time. Yes, he was incredibly successful as the king who picked up the pieces of the Assyrian Empire, establishing a new empire that would be influential for thousands of years, continuing even into our day through the modern state of Iran. And for all that Cyrus is one of the great men of history, on par with an Alexander, Genghis Khan, Napoleon.

But even as astounding as the founding of the Persian Empire was, it was not nearly the most influential accomplishment of Cyrus. He freed the Jews and enabled their return. How radically different would our world look if the Jews had never come back from exile? If The temple had never been rebuilt? If Jesus Christ had never been born? No Judaism. No Christianity. No Islam.

Cyrus was a watershed man. The flow of history could have taken an extremely different turn apart from him, or depending on how he lived out his life. Cyrus is certainly one of the most influential men who has ever lived - from the human perspective of history. And even in proclaiming this ahead of time, Isaiah reminds us that God is the primary agent through history. God is the one who will rise up Cyrus. God is the one who will initiate the decision in Cyrus to rebuild Jerusalem. God is the one who does this. God is the one in whom we trust and that's why we have been given this prophecy so far in advance, so that we could realize, so we can put our trust in the God who sees. Nothing you are going through, nothing that is happening is not part of God's plan, and no one can overcome the plan of God. The Christian does not despair because we know we win. Hope never dies. Jesus is the rock and the increase of His government is a guarantee. He will reign. He does reign. God assures us,

²⁸ "It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.'
And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.' "

I am the LORD, and there is no other,

⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity;
I am the LORD who does all these.