

Biblical Bit Players: King Cyrus the Great**Isaiah 45:1-7, 12-13****January 22, 2012****Rev. René Rodgers Jensen****First Christian Church****Omaha, Nebraska**

Today we continue our series on Bit Players of the Bible with one of the unlikeliest of all of God's heroes, King Cyrus the Great of Persia. That's because Cyrus wasn't even a Jew. He was a Gentile, almost certainly a worshiper of idols, possibly never even heard of this strange Jewish God Yahweh, yet he becomes the instrument by which God's people are brought home from exile in Babylon. And upon this very improbable character God bestows the title of "God's Anointed." In Hebrew this title is "messiah." The Greek, it is "Christ." Clearly, God thought highly of Cyrus, but why.

To understand why, we need to look at a critical chapter in Israel's history—the Exile. Following the death of Solomon around 931 BC, the kingdom was divided in two, with the kingdom of Israel in the north, and the kingdom of Judah in the south. Around 200 years later, in 720 BC, the northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria, its people carted off into exile never to be heard from again—the lost tribes of Israel.

The kingdom of Judah continued, but it is small and militarily weak, so it has to form alliances with the more powerful empires around them. By the sixth century, its kings are engaging in a dangerous geopolitical game, playing Egypt and the newly rising power of Babylon against each other. Judah's King Zedekiah, despite the strong warnings of the prophet Jeremiah, decisively allies himself with Egypt. Babylon retaliates swiftly and decisively. In 587 the Babylonian King

Nebuchadnezzar marches in, defeats the Egyptian army, then besieges and conquers Jerusalem. He levels the city, destroys the Temple, and carries much of the population off to exile in Babylon.

The Jewish people are in despair. Jerusalem, the city of God has been destroyed, The Temple, God sacred home, is no more. They are strangers in a strange land, far from home with no hope of returning. They no doubt remember that the people of the northern kingdom disappeared forever when they were taken into exile. They feel abandoned by God—but all is not lost.

Isaiah 54 recounts God speaking to the people: *7 For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. 8 In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer.*

God is about to rescue God's people, to bring them home from exile. A new king named Cyrus is rising in the east, in Persia, what is modern day Iran. In 540 BC, Cyrus conquers Babylon, having previously conquered the Median and Lydian Empires in Asia Minor. Cyrus earned his title "the Great." He was not only a brilliant military strategist; he was exceptionally enlightened for his day. He issued the first Charter of Human Rights in human history, and perhaps as a part of that, made a practice of respecting the customs and religions of the lands he conquered. Two years after conquering Babylon, Cyrus decrees that the Jews can return to their homeland, and even offers to help fund the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple.

This is the context for today's scripture:

1 Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before

him— and the gates shall not be closed: 2 I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. 4 For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. 5 I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, 6 so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. 7 I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.... 12 I made the earth, and created humankind upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. 13 I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness, and I will make all his paths straight; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the Lord of hosts.

It is extraordinary that God uses the title of “anointed” to describe Cyrus. This is the name given to King David, the greatest of Israel’s kings. It is the name given to Jesus the Christ. And my favorite part of this is that God admits that he is using Cyrus, God’s Anointed One, ***even though Cyrus has no idea who God is.***

The deliverer of God’s people will not be one of the Chosen People, but a Gentile and a pagan; someone is, in fact, oblivious to God’s existence. It’s as if God says to the Israelites, “I’ve got good news and I’ve got bad news. The good news is you’re going home from exile. The bad news is the pagan King Cyrus will be the hero of the story.” Though God is ostensibly speaking to Cyrus in this passage, the real audience is Israel. Though Cyrus doesn’t even know the God of Israel, nevertheless God can and will use him to bring the exiles home. Now God has to get Israel to understand and accept what God is doing on its behalf through Cyrus, that this man who does not know Yahweh himself, will become an instrument by which many come to know him. So God says to his people, “Look I made the whole world—I made light and dark, the earth and all that is in it—

including all of humankind. What makes you think that the only people I can use are Israelites? What makes you think that Jews, though my chosen people, are the only people who please me? What makes you think you are the only people on the face of the earth that I love?"

I am sometimes asked, "Do only Christians go to Heaven? How about Jews, or Buddhists, or Muslims? Or people, who don't believe in God at all, but live good, moral, upright lives? Will they be saved?" I have an opinion about that, of course—most of us do. But I don't sit in on the heavenly meetings that decide who gets in and who doesn't. Those decisions are well above my pay grade. I have all I can do to work out my own salvation in fear and trembling, and to support and counsel you all as you seek to do the same. So I don't know for sure who's going to spend eternity in the smoking section.

But I think the story of Cyrus suggests that God's circle of inclusion may be considerably larger, more inclusive, more flexible, more welcoming than many of God's own followers. Many Christians--like the Israelites addressed in today's scriptureⁱ--like to draw the circle of inclusion very small. Only OUR kind of people will be welcome in heaven. Only folks who believe EXACTLY like us will be saved. Theological purity will be strictly enforced—no deviations allowed. So there are Protestants who say that Catholics will not be saved—which means Mother Teresa and Francis of Assisi are in hell. There are Baptists who say those who aren't baptized by immersion won't be saved—which means your Lutheran neighbors and Methodist family members will be joining Mother Teresa and Francis as Satan's guests.

When I was in the eighth grade, my best friend Debbie was a member of the Church of Christ—not the United Church of Christ, but the non-instrumental

Church of Christ which forbids the use of organs or pianos in worship. Disciples of Christ share common roots with the Church of Christ, but split with them over this issue more than 100 years ago. One Saturday I spent the night with Debbie, and went to church with her the next morning. It was a tiny little church—there were less than 40 in attendance. The lay preacher looked around at the little group and said, “You know, the folks in this room are the only ones in town who aren’t going to Hell.” He was absolutely sure about this because they were the only folks in town who didn’t use organs or pianos in their worship services.

Unlike that lay preacher who was so sure about God’s plan of salvation, I don’t pretend to speak with confidence about who will be saved and who won’t. But this I do know, and believe with all my heart and soul. Everyone (no matter their religion or lack of religion) who stands for the poor and the outcast pleases God. Everyone, no matter their religion, who works for justice pleases God. Everyone, no matter their religion, who works for peace pleases God. Everyone, no matter their religion, who welcomes the stranger or visits the sick or feeds the poor, pleases God. Indeed I believe no human act of kindness happens apart from God. I believe there can be no truth or beauty apart from God. I believe that all authentic human love, everywhere in every one, comes from God, and draws us closer to God because God is love itself. So wherever there is love God is there. And wherever there is goodness and kindness and beauty and goodness and generosity and a striving for justice, God is there.

This, for me, is the lesson of Cyrus, the pagan king who was God’s anointed one, whose actions pleased and delighted God.

ⁱ *Interpreter’s Bible Vol VI*, p. 394.