

29. Defining Cyrus as a Type of the Servant (Ezra 1, 3–7; Nehemiah 2, 4–6, 8)

The figure of Cyrus king of Persia looms large in Israel's history on account of the great reversal of circumstances he set in motion for the displaced Jews in Babylon. After the seventy years of exile Jeremiah had prophesied (Jeremiah 25:11–12), Cyrus decreed their return and encouraged them and other captive peoples to return to their homelands. In his great vision of the end from the beginning, Isaiah had seen these events two hundred years before they occurred and mentions Cyrus by name. Many scholars, therefore, assume that another person wrote that part of Isaiah's prophecy, not discerning that Isaiah uses the name Cyrus solely as a *type*. Combining it with two other types—Moses and David—Isaiah portrays the different of roles the servant performs as he restores God's people of the house of Israel.

We observe the righteousness of Cyrus in his decree to the people of the empire he had newly conquered from the Babylonians: “In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia—that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled—the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem. And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:1–4).

Cyrus' decree had an immediate effect on the Jewish exiles in Babylon: “Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered. Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods; Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah” (Ezra 1:5–8).

It was the descendants of these Jewish returnees to their Promised Land—later conquered by the Greeks and Romans—who resided there at the time of Christ.

Isaiah prefaces the name Cyrus in his prophecy by setting the stage for the sort of circumstances under which God's end-time servant appears: “Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: I am the Lord, the Maker of all things, who alone suspends the heavens, who himself gives form to the earth, who annuls the predictions of impostors and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men about and makes nonsense of their knowledge” (Isaiah 44:24–25). The Lord customarily uses such language when he anticipates opposition to his purposes from the unrighteous people of that day.

He then goes on to say, “who fulfills the word of his servant, accomplishes the aims of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, It shall be reinhabited, and of the cities of Judah, They shall be rebuilt, their ruins I will restore, who says to the deep, Become dry; I am drying up your currents, who says of Cyrus, He is my shepherd; he will do whatever I will. He will say of Jerusalem that it must be rebuilt, its temple foundations relaid” (Isaiah 44:26–28).

Here we clearly see Isaiah’s combining the persona of Moses—God’s “shepherd” who dried up the deep (Isaiah 63:11–14)—with the persona of Cyrus, who decrees that Jerusalem, its temple, and the cities of Judea be rebuilt. These events repeat themselves in the end-time and are initiated by God’s servant.

In his second mention of Cyrus, Isaiah combines the persona of King David—the Lord’s “anointed” (1 Samuel 16:13) with that of Cyrus: “Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whom I grasp by the right hand, to subdue nations before him, to ungird the loins of rulers, opening doors ahead of him, letting no gates remain shut: I will go before you and level all obstacles; I will break in pieces brazen doors and cut through iron bars. I will give you hidden treasures and secret hoards of wealth—that you may know that it is I Jehovah, the God of Israel, who calls you by name” (Isaiah 45:1–3). As world conqueror in his David and Cyrus personas, God’s end-time servant recaptures the nations’ lands that were overrun by end-time “Assyria” and its evil alliance.

Isaiah sums up the two main historical precedents Cyrus set, again using them as types of God’s end-time servant: “It is I who rightfully raise him up, who facilitate his every step; he will rebuild my city and set free my exiles without price or bribe, says the Lord of Hosts” (Isaiah 45:13). Using the verb “raise up” as a word link to other parts of his prophecy, Isaiah further identifies the subject of this verse as God’s servant who initiates Israel’s end-time return from exile in a new exodus from the four directions of the earth (Isaiah 11:10–16).

Lastly, when alluding to Cyrus’ world conquests, Isaiah refers to God’s end-time servant as one who personifies or embodies God’s attribute of righteousness: “Who has raised up Righteousness from the east, calling him to [the place of] his foot? Who has delivered nations to him, toppled their rulers, rendering them as dust to his sword, as driven stubble to his bow? He puts them to flight, passing on unhindered by paths his feet have never trod” (Isaiah 41:2–3). “I have raised up one from the north who calls on my name, who shall come from the direction of sunrise. He shall come upon dignitaries as on mud, tread them as clay like a potter” (Isaiah 41:25).

Inferring that God’s end-time people are no longer righteous, Isaiah again depicts God’s servant as a Cyrus type who exemplifies righteousness and sets in motion their end-time reversal of circumstances: “I summon a bird of prey from the east, from a distant land the man who performs my counsel. What I have spoken, I bring to pass; what I have planned, I do. Hear me, you stubborn-hearted, who are far from righteousness: I have brought near my righteousness; it is not now far off—my salvation shall no longer be delayed. I will grant deliverance in Zion, and to Israel my glory” (Isaiah 46:11–13).