Cyrus: God's Anointed

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Sometime around 700 BC, God inspired the prophet Isaiah to write a prophecy concerning "His anointed," His messiah. This person would act for God upon earth, conquering kingdoms, rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple, and shepherding His people. God would go before him—even hold his hand, Isaiah writes—giving him fame, riches and power as only God can.

Jesus Christ? Josiah? Ezra? Nehemiah? Judas Maccabaeus? Not even close! Through Isaiah, God prophesies His anointed to be none other than Cyrus, King of Persia!

How can that be? How could God call a pagan king, a man of bloody conquests and cut-throat politics, "messiah"? Would God dirty His hands by working through such a man to do His will?

Yes, indeed, He did!

God's Anointed

The answer to how this could be lies in our understanding of the term "His anointed" (Isaiah 44:28). Notice the entire context of this prophecy:

Thus says the LORD, your redeemer, . . . "I am the LORD, . . . who confirms the word of His servant, and performs the counsel of His messengers; who says to Jerusalem, ‘You shall be inhabited,’ to the cities of Judah, ‘You shall be built,’ and I will raise up her waste places; who says to the deep, ‘Be dry! And I will dry up your rivers’; who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, even saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built," and to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid."'

Thus says the LORD to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held—to subdue nations before him and loose the armor of kings, to open before him the double doors, so that the gates will not be shut: ‘I will go before you and make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze and cut the bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places. . . . I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; He shall build My city and let My exiles go free, not for price nor reward,' says the LORD of hosts. (Isaiah 44:24, 26-45:3, 13)

It should immediately be apparent that God's use of "His anointed" is not as restricted as commonly assumed. The Hebrew word is mashiah, which has come down to us as "messiah" and translated as christos in Greek. Because we now use this term exclusively for Jesus Christ, the Messiah, many have failed to realize the breadth of its meaning.

Mashiah simply means "anointed" or "anointed one." The Old Testament writers use it and its verb form, mashah, to describe kings (David, Saul, even Gentile kings like Hazael— II Samuel 1:14; 12:7; I Kings 19:15); priests, including the high priest (Leviticus 4:3, 5); and prophets (I Kings 19:16;
Isaiah 61:1). Normally, these people were anointed with oil in a ritual as a sign of being set apart for the office that they were about to fulfill. Thus, at its most basic, mashiah indicates a person God authorizes and sets apart for His service.

The type of service he renders can vary. Obviously, kings, priests and prophets fill very different roles, though some "anointed ones" have fulfilled more than one. David, for example, was both king and prophet, while Samuel and Jeremiah were priests and prophets. Jesus Christ is the only Anointed One to fulfill all three roles, as well as that of Apostle.

One aspect of these roles begins to stand out as God’s revelation unfolds throughout the Bible: deliverance. We can see this most clearly in the text Jesus recites to inaugurate His ministry, Isaiah 61:1-3:

    The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified. (see Luke 4:16-21)

Jesus explicitly confirms in Luke 4:21 that He fulfilled these verses, at least up to the first part of verse 2, for indeed He is the ultimate Messiah. He will fulfill the remainder of these deliverances upon His return as King of kings and Lord of lords. Even His name, Joshua or Jesus, means "savior" or "deliverer," and God frequently calls things and people what they are and/or do.

In short, then, mashiah has three primary facets:

1. It describes a person whom God sets apart for His service.
2. Such a person may fill one or more roles in His service.
3. His primary function is to cause deliverance.

We will see that, strange as it may seem, Cyrus, King of Persia, qualifies as a messiah!

Cyrus’ Career

By all accounts, even those of his enemies, Cyrus was a model—and to the Greeks, an ideal—king. Though Cyrus built his empire primarily by conquest, local peoples often greeted him as a savior after his impressive victories over their rulers. He is remembered as being even-handed, humane and respectful of indigenous cultures and religions. Modern scholars sometimes credit him as being the founder of multiculturalism and the first to publish a declaration of human rights (in the Cyrus Cylinder, c. 538 BC).

Cyrus (born c. 600 BC) was the son of Cambyses I, king of Anshan, the western part of Persia, which at the time was a vassal kingdom of Media. His maternal grandfather was Astyages, king of Media. Legend says that Astyages, warned in a dream that Cyrus would grow up to slay him, sought to kill
his grandson, but Harpagus, the official entrusted with the task, spared the boy's life and gave him to a shepherd and his wife to raise. This last point has an echo in Isaiah 44:28, where God calls him "My shepherd."

Herodotus, the Greek historian, writes that Cyrus next came to Astyages' attention at the age of 10 or 12, when he again tried to kill him. His councilors, who saw great potential in the child, stayed his hand. Soon, Astyages himself became enamored of Cyrus' temperament, deportment and abilities, keeping him at his court for about five years.

He returned to Cambyses in Anshan at 17. His father gradually associated Cyrus with him on the throne, especially as commander of his armies, which were always victorious, owing to his emphasis on discipline in the ranks and his easy grasp of strategy and tactics. Even as a young general, he was known throughout the region to be a generous and merciful conqueror and ruler.

This state of affairs remained static until he was 40, when his father died (c. 560 BC). Soon thereafter, he mounted a revolt against his grandfather's kingdom of Media, defeated and deposed Astyages, and proclaimed himself king of the Medes and the Persians. Because Cyrus respected Median culture, made its capital, Ecbatana, one of his residences, and appointed Medes to high positions, the Medes quickly accepted him as their king. With the conquest of Media also came its former provinces of Assyria, Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia and Cappadocia. In one grand stroke, Cyrus became master from the Mediterranean Sea to the Iranian plateau.

Conquest and Conciliation

To the west of his territory lay the wealthy and powerful kingdom of Lydia, which soon attempted to take some of these new Persian provinces for itself. In 547 BC, Cyrus launched a campaign against Lydia, forcing its king, Croesus, back to his capital, Sardis in Asia Minor. He swiftly besieged and captured Sardis, and Croesus committed suicide. All of Asia Minor quickly fell under Persian rule.

Cyrus then turned his attention to the Iranian tribes in the eastern part of his empire. Parthia soon became a Persian satrapy, as did Sogdia, Bactria and even western parts of India. By about 540 BC his empire stretched from the Aegean Sea to the Hindu Kush. Of all his ambitions, only the conquest of Babylon remained to be fulfilled.

Nabonidus and Belshazzar, the last of the Neo-Babylonian kings, had alienated their subjects in a number of ways, not the least of which was their neglect of Babylonian gods. Evidently, Belshazzar had the same disregard for Marduk, Bel and Nebo as he had for the true God of Israel (see Daniel 5:1-4, 23). Many in Babylon hoped Cyrus would send an army to liberate them.

In October 539 BC, it was clear nothing would stop the great Persian king and his army. Several smaller cities fell with barely any resistance, and by October 12, Cyrus' troops entered Babylon almost unopposed.1

Herodotus writes of Cyrus' ingenious stratagem to enter the city:

. . . drawing off the river [Euphrates] by a canal into the lake, which was till now a marsh, he made the stream to sink till its former channel could be forded. When this
happened, the Persians who were posted with this intent made their way into Babylon by
the channel of the Euphrates, which had now sunk to about the height of the middle of a
man's thigh.

These details fulfill Isaiah's prophecy to the letter! He writes that God would "dry up" the rivers for
Cyrus so that he could subdue nations (Isaiah 44:27). Fifth-column members, possibly closely
connected to the city's religious powers, "open[ed] before him the double doors, so that the gates will
not be shut" (Isaiah 45:1). Because Belshazzar and his court were celebrating a public festival that
night, they were unaware of the Persian assault on Babylon until Cyrus' troops were already in
control.

The Cyrus Cylinder reports, "All the inhabitants of Babylon . . . bowed to [Cyrus] and kissed his feet,
jubilant that he [had received] the kingship." The king, as was his policy, allowed his vassal states to
retain their cultural and religious identities. He advanced funds for the repair or restoration of public
buildings, particularly temples and shrines, and he reversed the Babylonian policy of forced
relocation of conquered peoples, allowing their descendants to return to their ancestral homelands.

Thus, Cyrus' decree in 538 BC, returning the Jews to Judea and authorizing the rebuilding of the
Temple, was nothing out of the ordinary for this unusual monarch (II Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-
11; 6:2-5). Since the Jews had no idols to restore to their Temple, he restored to them the Temple
articles that Nebuchadnezzar had removed to Babylon after Jerusalem's fall. These acts completely
fulfill Isaiah's prophecy that Cyrus, "not for price nor reward," would rebuild Jerusalem and the
Temple, as well as allow the exiles to return to their land (Isaiah 44:28; 45:13).²

After conquering Babylon, Cyrus continued his conquests, attempting to expand his empire beyond
the northeastern frontier. Here he met the nomadic Massagetae, led by their queen, Tomyris. At first
he was successful, but in 530 BC, he was defeated and killed in battle.³ His son Cambyses succeeded
him on the throne.

"You Have Not Known Me"

Why did God raise up a messiah like Cyrus? We find the answer within the Cyrus prophecy in Isaiah
45:

[God will work through you, Cyrus,] that you may know that I, the L ORD, who call you
by your name, am the God of Israel. For Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel My elect, I
have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me.
I am the L ORD, and there is no other; there is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though
you have not known Me. I am the L ORD, and there is no other; I form the light and create
darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the L ORD, do all these things. (verses 3-7)

God raised Cyrus up to do His bidding to prove to him and all the world who is the true God! God
went before Cyrus (verse 2), paving the way for his victories and policies so that His will and His
plan would move forward. We should be able to look back at history and see how God worked to
bring all the necessary elements into place for His purpose to be fulfilled.

After God used Nebuchadnezzar to punish His people, He raised Cyrus to deliver them from their
captivity in Babylon and return them to their land. For the real Christ to be born in Bethlehem as the
prophecy states, Jews had to be living in Judea. He also inspired Cyrus to institute his conciliatory
policy toward foreign religions so that a Temple could be built to which His Son could come. And among other points, Jerusalem had to be rebuilt so Jesus could die outside the city for our sins.

No other "god" can do these things! Only the Most High God, the Almighty Sovereign of the universe can work out events over such long periods of time. He can take sinful men who have never even desired a relationship with Him and cause them to do His will and bring about His purpose.

God is in control. Light, darkness, peace or calamity—none of these things happen without His permission. "I, the LORD, do all these things," He says.

What sort of reaction should this produce in those of us who understand? The next few verses provide the answer:

Rain down, you heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness; let the earth open, let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together. I, the LORD, have created it. Woe to him who strives with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him who forms it, "What are you making?" Or shall your handiwork say, "He has no hands"? Woe to him who says to his father, "What are you begetting?" Or to the woman, "What have you brought forth?"

(verses 8-10)

Since God has such control, we should respond by giving him the obedience and cooperation that He deserves as our Creator, God and Father! It is pointless to resist or rebel! Why incur His wrath by striving with Him? God will ultimately be victorious—why not join the winning side and reap the benefits?

Of all people, because we see the signs of the end time all around us, this lesson should stir us to zeal and overcoming. As momentous as the days of Cyrus were, they are nothing to be compared with the awesome acts God will soon visit upon this earth. The real Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, will return to conquer, to punish, to restore and to reconcile all nations to Himself. Then the deeds of an amazing human king, Cyrus of Persia, will pale beside the glories of the wonderful Kingdom of God.

Endnotes to "Cyrus: God's Anointed":

1Daniel's prophecy of the four beasts (Daniel 7) describes the Persian Empire as a bear. "It was raised up on one side, and had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. And they said thus to it: 'Arise, devour much flesh!'" (verse 5). Being "raised up on one side" indicates dominance of one part within it; the Persians were without doubt the primary kingdom. The three ribs signify three primary kingdoms that Cyrus conquered, out of which he carved his empire: Media, Lydia and Babylon. As for devouring "much flesh," Cyrus' long career of conquests makes this apparent.

2 Some might wonder if Cyrus actually fulfilled the prophecy, given twice (Isaiah 44:28 and 45:13), that Jerusalem would be rebuilt. It is true that Cyrus did not specifically decree that the city should be rebuilt, but it is assumed. Why would a temple be built in Jerusalem if no one lived there? Obviously, some housing and commerce would need to be built to sustain those who worked on the Temple. In addition, it is Cyrus' conciliatory policy that provided the basis for the more explicit decrees by Darius (520 BC; Ezra 6:6-12) and Artaxerxes I (444 BC; Nehemiah 2:1-8) to rebuild the city.
3 It is noteworthy that the Massagetae (literally "great Goths" in Greek), credited with stopping Cyrus, were part of the huge Scythian "nation" that inhabited the areas dominated by the classical Near Eastern empires. A good case can be made to show that the Massagetae were primarily the tribe of Manasseh. Two hundred years later, Scythian tribes turned back Alexander the Great as well.