

Who was Cyrus in the Bible?

Cyrus is a king mentioned more than 30 times in the Bible and is identified as Cyrus the Great (also Cyrus II or Cyrus the Elder) who reigned over Persia between 539–530 BC. This pagan king is important in Jewish history because it was under his rule that Jews were first allowed to return to Israel after 70 years of captivity.

In one of the most amazing prophecies of the Bible, the Lord revealed Cyrus's decree to free the Jews to Isaiah. One hundred fifty years before Cyrus lived, the prophet calls him by name and gives details of Cyrus' benevolence to the Jews: "This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him . . . 'I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me'" (Isaiah 45:1, 4; see also 41:2-25; 42:6). Evincing His sovereignty over all nations, God says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please" (Isaiah 44:28).

Cyrus's decree releasing the Jewish people, in fulfillment of prophecy, is recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23: "Now 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, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: 'Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.'"¹ Other Old Testament books that mention Cyrus include Ezra and Daniel.

King Cyrus actively assisted the Jews in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem under

Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest. Cyrus restored the temple treasures to Jerusalem and allowed building expenses to be paid from the royal treasury (Ezra 1:4-11; 6:4-5). Cyrus's beneficence helped to restart the temple worship practices that had languished during the 70 years of the Jews' captivity. Some commentators point to Cyrus's decree to rebuild Jerusalem as the official beginning of Judaism.

Among the Jews deported from Judah and later placed under the rule of Cyrus include the prophet Daniel. In fact, we are told Daniel served until at least the third year of King Cyrus, approximately 536 BC (Daniel 10:1). That being the case, Daniel likely had some personal involvement in the decree that was made in support of the Jews. The historian Josephus says that Cyrus was informed of the biblical prophecies written about him (Antiquities of the Jews, XI.1.2). The natural person to have shown Cyrus the scrolls was Daniel, a high-ranking official in Persia (Daniel 6:28).

Besides his dealings with the Jews, Cyrus is known for his advancement of human rights, his brilliant military strategy, and his bridging of Eastern and Western cultures. He was a king of tremendous influence and a person God used to help fulfill an important Old Testament prophecy. God's use of Cyrus as a "shepherd" for His people illustrates the truth of Proverbs 21:1, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases."