

Isaiah 41:1-7, 25-27; 43:14-15; 44:24-45:8; 45:13; 46:10-11; 48:14-15

Cyrus - instrument in God's hand

1. Introduction

God uses a heathen king to bring his people back from exile. Isaiah mentions the name of this king, Cyrus, twice in his book.

This has raised many questions. How is it possible that Isaiah can mention the name of a king who will reign about 150 years later? For many commentators this is definite proof that Isaiah could not possibly have written the second half of this book himself. Even for those who want to maintain that Isaiah is the author of the entire book, this is at least remarkable.

This chapter deals particularly with the two longer sections concerning Cyrus, Isaiah 41:1-7 and 44:24-45:8.

We will also pay attention to some shorter passages that are commonly accepted as referring to Cyrus.

From the fact that God employs a king like Cyrus, we conclude that God can use everything to reach his goal with his people. Today, at least in our Western civilization, God's people have become a minority; they are more and more pushed back by an increasingly aggressive world. Can we still be confident that God governs the world in such a way that all will be well with his people as his church?

2. General Remarks

1. Who was Cyrus?

During Isaiah's life, the kingdom of Assyria is strong. But Assyria is surpassed by Babylon. However, Babylon does not remain in power for very long. After the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 BC, Babylon rapidly deteriorates.

In the empire of the Medes, Cyrus is king of a vassal state. He rebels against the king of the Medes and conquers the capital of the kingdom, Ecbatana, in 550 BC. He unites the Persians and the Medes under his rule. Cyrus proves to be an able general, and in the following years he conquers parts of Asia-Minor and pushes to the east, as far as the Ganges.

In 539 BC Cyrus conquers the city of Babylon where Nabonidus is in power at the time. This king, who is better known as a scholar than as a ruler, leaves the governing of Babylon to his son, Belshazzar (Daniel 5).

In Babylon Cyrus is regarded as a liberator rather than an enemy, because the people were unhappy with the policies of Nabonidus, who tried to introduce a new religion. The downfall of Babylon by the Medes is already predicted in Isaiah 13:17-22.

Cyrus and his successors as well, want to maintain peace and stability among the conquered nations. They try to achieve this by not violating the particular, significant values of these nations. The people are allowed freedom of religion. Cyrus himself even helps to restore the religions of the various nations to their original glory. Under his reign the worship of Marduk in Babylon is allowed to continue. Several nations who are living in exile in Babylon are allowed to return to their own country.

In the first year of his Babylonian reign, 538 BC, Cyrus issues the decree that the temple in Jerusalem has to be rebuilt, and the temple treasures that were plundered by Nebuchadnezzar, are to be returned. This is the so-called *decree of Cyrus* (Ezra 6:3-5). During that time several groups of exiles return from Babylon to Judah. Even though Cyrus allowed other nations to return to their countries, he appears to be extra generous with the Judeans. He does not levy any taxes on the temple service in Jerusalem, but even supports the restoration of the temple financially.

It is possible that Cyrus had selfish motives. Palestine was situated along the route from Babylon to hostile Egypt. It was undoubtedly important for Cyrus to have a friendly nation as a buffer zone. Whatever may have motivated Cyrus, God used him to carry out his will. Cyrus was instrumental in bringing God's people back to Israel and in re-establishing the temple service.

The great Persian Empire, established by Cyrus¹, remained a long time. It ended when the Macedonian king Alexander the Great, went to battle against them in approximately 330 BC.

2. Fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies

The events, which Isaiah prophesies, begin to happen in 538 BC. We can read that in the Bible, in the last chapter of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 36) that describes the deportation, and also mentions already that Cyrus gives permission to the Judeans to return. The book of Ezra also tells us how Cyrus rouses the Judeans to go back. A first group of exiles returns under the leadership of Sheshbazzar (see Ezra 1; *the first year of Cyrus* means the first year in which he reigned over Babylon, the year 538 BC). These exiles also carry with them the temple treasures. A beginning is made to rebuild the temple. Ezra repeatedly records that this happened in accordance with the decree of Cyrus. Because of opposition, the building of the temple is interrupted for many years. When king Darius orders an investigation into the building of the temple, they find the decree of Cyrus. Darius forbids further opposition and orders that the building of the temple as well as the temple service shall be paid out of the royal revenues (Ezra 6). Finally the temple is completed in the sixth year of Darius (516 BC) under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 6:14-15).

3. How could Isaiah mention Cyrus already?

How is it possible that the name of Cyrus is mentioned already in the book of Isaiah (see 44:28 and 45:1)?

The prophet Isaiah prophesied about 150 years before Cyrus rose to fame. Is it likely that God himself revealed his identity to Isaiah so far in advance?

¹ Some prefer the name *Kores*, because it corresponds better to his original name than the Latin form *Cyrus*, which is more widely used.

Those who are of the opinion that the second main section of Isaiah was not written by Isaiah himself, but rather by a certain “Deutero-Isaiah” (see Outline 1 Section 1) have little difficulty here. This Deutero-Isaiah could then have prophesied in the time that Cyrus became successful. Consequently, he could have named this man as the future liberator of the Jews.

For those who believe that Isaiah himself wrote the entire book, the question remains. Two possible solutions are often given. The first one assumes that God indeed revealed the name Cyrus to Isaiah.² God is the origin of prophecy. God can certainly reveal his plan for the future in great detail through his prophets.

If God indeed revealed the name of Cyrus to Isaiah so far in advance, it is certainly a very remarkable fact. The second solution given suggests that Isaiah wrote it himself, but that someone else inserted the name Cyrus at a later date.

It certainly is possible that the disciples of Isaiah added to the prophecies of their teacher with a view to the actual situation in their days. It is, however, remarkable that this was done only in these two places while there are more passages that allude to Cyrus.

In any case, it is clear that especially in the passages about Cyrus, the emphasis is on the fact that the LORD reveals the actions of Cyrus in advance. The idols do not control history. They cannot foretell the future. God confronts them with the fact that God is the only God. He rules the entire world ever since creation. He makes known what is going to happen, and when the time comes, it happens exactly as he has said it would (41:4, 26; 44:25-26; 46:10-11; 48:14-16). Long ago God chose Cyrus as his instrument to deliver his people. He is the man according to God’s counsel (46:11). How amazing is this plan of God who in this way orders all things in advance. He causes a king to arise to deliver his people at the right time and at the right place. God takes this mighty one among the people to serve him, and through him the way to the future is opened up again for God’s people.

3. Annotations to the text

1. Isaiah 41:1 -7

Isaiah 40 and 41 belong together. Jacob is asking himself if his way is hidden from the LORD, if God is passing over his just claim. Does God still care about his people? In answer to these despairing questions, there is the assurance that those who trust in God will not be put to shame. Chapter 41 announces how God will bring about deliverance. He will raise up a deliverer. In the course of the following chapters it becomes more and more clear that the deliverer will be Cyrus.

There are a number of earlier commentators, for instance John Calvin, who say that these verses refer to Abraham, who came from the east.

Verse 1

The Lord summons the opposing nations to defend themselves in court, but first they had better “be

² To support this opinion other texts are pointed out, in which similar things have happened. In 1 Kings 13:2 the man of God from Judah mentions king Josiah to Jeroboam, about 250 years before Josiah began to reign. The prophet Micah mentions Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah, centuries before that event (Mic 5:2).

silent before me”: in God’s presence they have no say in anything. They will do well to gather all their strength before they approach God.

Verse 2-4a

God raises a few questions and challenges the nations: the answer is already predetermined. Who has stirred up” Cyrus? The word used for “stirred up” is also found elsewhere regarding Cyrus (45:13). From this as well as from other words, “send” (43:14) and “summon” (46:11) it is clear that the LORD takes the initiative. He is the one who calls Cyrus into being. God has predestined him to carry out his plan.

These verses foretell the victories of Cyrus. He will begin his advance in the east, coming from Persia, and will subdue one king after another: the king of the Medes; Croesus, king of the Lydians; he conquers territories as far as India; he dethrones the king of Babylon. “He pursues them and moves on unscathed, by a path his feet have not traveled before.” This may mean that he continually conquers new territory, but also that he conquers at top speed, which was indeed the case: his feet hardly touch the road as it were.

Let the nations explain this: who has brought this about?

Verse 4b

The LORD God has accomplished this. From the beginning of time he has called men into existence. He also rules those who will be “last”, the people who are still to come as well. This is also true for Cyrus who is enlisted by God into his service.

Although the people of that time usually attributed superior power to the god of a powerful nation, it does not mean that the gods of Persia made Cyrus powerful. God asserts himself as the sovereign ruler of this world.

Verse 5-7

The verses 2-4 are spoken *to* the nations; the verses 5-7 speak *about* them. They see Cyrus advancing and are afraid. “They approach and come forward” probably means: *they are coming closer; they are on the way!* This refers to the advance of Cyrus and his armies. The nations are panicking. They encourage each other like friends who want to reassure each other. They also seek refuge with their gods. Verse 7 suggests that they frantically raise the production the production of images. New idols have to offer protection from the advancing enemy. The craftsman hands over his product to the goldsmith and is encouraged with the words: “It is good”. Knowing that it is God who sends Cyrus, this verse is meant as irony: the idol worship is ridiculed (see also chapter 4 of these outlines).

2. Isaiah 41:25-27

These verses follow a passage in which it is made clear how powerless the gods really are. The idols are nothing, they are an abomination. They cannot predict the future; they are unable to do anything at all. Verse 25-27 forms a contrast to that. God announces in advance what he is going to do. He sends to Jerusalem a messenger who brings glad tidings (see 40:9); possibly this messenger is Isaiah himself. God causes Cyrus to come “from the north”. That does not contradict 41:2, where it says that he is coming from the east. Considering the geographical location of Judah, Cyrus actually came from the northeast.

When it says that Cyrus called upon the name of God, this does not necessarily mean that he really worshipped the God of Israel. Cyrus was tolerant with respect to the different religions of the nations he conquered and he also respected Israel's religion. However, he did take the name of Israel's God on his lips (e.g. 2 Chronicles 36:23).

3. Isaiah 43:14-15

God sends Cyrus to Babylon in order to put the Chaldeans to flight (the inhabitants of Babylon are often called by the name of this particular nation which played an important role in this empire). Verse 14 is very difficult to explain. It probably means that the Chaldeans were forced to flee in the ships that were usually used for festive religious processions; therefore, "in the ships in which they took pride" (literally the "ships of their jubilation"). Also these verses present a contrast between the almighty power of God and the impotence of the nations and their gods.

4. Isaiah 44:24-45:8

God does not forget his people. He will redeem them (44:21-24). Cyrus is the man who brings about God's good pleasure. In 44:24-28 Isaiah speaks about God's power, the climax being that God appoints Cyrus as his shepherd. Cyrus himself is addressed primarily in 45:1-8

Verse 24

God presents himself emphatically as the Creator and Redeemer of his people. It is he who has made the heavens and the earth, no one else did. God uses this introduction to instil awe and confidence in his people beforehand. He is certainly able to deliver his people.

Verse 25-26

God exposes the wisdom of the "false prophets" (literally "those who speak nonsense"), "diviners" and so-called "wise" men to public scorn. Whatever they imagine and predict does not come true. But what God foretells through his servant (the prophet) will certainly come to pass. Jerusalem will be inhabited again and the cities of Judah will be rebuilt. It is very striking to read in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that all these prophecies indeed have come to pass.

Verse 27

We cannot say with certainty what this verse refers to. It may be that the drying of the deep and the drying up of the rivers refer to God's miracles of long ago: the passing through the Red Sea and the Jordan River. It is also possible that God caused the rivers in Babylon to dry up. Either way, God's power to work miracles in the past, is a guarantee that he will deliver his people from Babylon

Verse 28

In this verse the name of Cyrus is mentioned for the first time in Isaiah. God appoints him as a "shepherd". He will perform God's good pleasure, the plan God has made. In the so-called "decree of Cyrus" (see Outline 5 Section 2) we see how Cyrus carries out God's plan: he orders the return to Judah, and the rebuilding of the temple. In the line of Cyrus' successors God's good pleasure will be accomplished.

Isaiah 45:1

The LORD speaks "his anointed, to Cyrus". This does not necessarily mean that the LORD actually

spoke to Cyrus. He can issue his commands without speaking to him.

This “speaking” to Cyrus is meant to be heard by Israel also. Cyrus is God’s “anointed”, God’s “messiah”: God appoints him and strengthens him to carry out his task. It is not his own doing that he is such an able general and politician. It is God who leads him by the hand.

This is how nation after nation is subdued and one king after the other is disarmed. It is God who opens all doors for Cyrus.

Verse 2-3

God himself fights in the front line of the armies of Cyrus and clears the way. All barricades are removed. He gives him the wealth of faraway nations. Cyrus should draw the conclusion that it is the God of Israel who gives him all this power.

Verse 4

The LORD, however, does not do this for Cyrus’ sake. He does it for Jacob’s sake. Israel is God’s chosen nation and God will not let go of them. He musters a foreign king; he calls Cyrus by name, in order to enlist him to deliver his people. Cyrus himself has not come up with this. All these conquests are not because of his initiative. Even though Cyrus does not know God and is not aware of God’s plan, nevertheless he carries out God’s counsel.

God gives Cyrus “a title of honor”. This may refer to the words “shepherd” and “anointed one” (see 44:28 and 45:1).

Verse 5-7

It is the LORD God who does all these things. While kings are stripped of their armour (v.1), God equips Cyrus for his task, again without him being aware of it. God glorifies himself in the appearance of Cyrus. All over the world, people will be forced to recognize that this is the work of the almighty God. He governs all things. His judgements come as he wills, and deliverance also when he wills.

Verse 8

God’s work of deliverance is abundantly praised here. This verse should probably be included in the passage about Cyrus. God has *created* the time of salvation, which commences with the appearance of Cyrus. The earth is refreshed by the salvation of God.

5. Isaiah 45:13

Again the words “raise up” show that the LORD has taken the initiative in Cyrus’ appearance. For the first time it is explicitly mentioned that Cyrus will be instrumental in the return of the exiles. He will do this not for bribe or ransom but he acts according to the command of God. By using these words God wants to vanquish the doubt and unbelief of his people, who still question the work of their Maker (vv. 9-11).

6. Isaiah 46:10-11

Again the LORD confronts the images when he points to himself as the one who announces beforehand

the outcome of things. He compares Cyrus to a bird of prey. This may portray the speed with which Cyrus advances but could also refer to the booty he will carry off.

7. *Isaiah 48:14-15*

God calls the attention of his people to his work of deliverance. Cyrus is the man after God's heart. God will use him to carry out his purpose against Babylon. God will prosper his way.

4. Application for us today

From the fact that God uses Cyrus as his instrument, it becomes evident that he can mobilize anything to accomplish the plan he has for his people. God's people live in exile in Babylon. They will never be able to free themselves from their oppressors, but it is not necessary for God's people to deliver themselves. They have a God in heaven, who governs all things and who in everything carries out his purpose. God calls an unknown and insignificant king and makes him the most powerful man in all the earth. Yet with all his power he is no more than an instrument in God's hand. Thus God uses Cyrus to further his plan for his people. He allows his people to return, and makes it possible for the temple service to be restored. This is necessary, because there are still promises waiting to be fulfilled. God's ways are unsearchable, but he fulfils his promises. The Messiah will be born in Israel and the throne of David will be restored.

It is remarkable how often in the passages about Cyrus, it is stressed that God keeps his word. And the prophecies concerning Cyrus did come true! That gives great perspective for the future. God has fulfilled so many prophecies already. Will he then not also fulfil all his other promises?

We may be confident. Regardless of the crooked paths of his people, God kept his magnificent promise: his Son Jesus Christ came to earth as our Redeemer. In many places the church of Jesus Christ is an insignificant minority, or so it appears, and she also has powerful enemies. If we only consider people and numbers, we soon lose heart. But since when does the church of the Lord depend on herself? God still controls the history of the world, does he not? He is not surprised by the developments of our world. There is no king or super power in the world, no matter how arrogant, who can successfully oppose God's plans (cf. Psalm 2). God, who is the Alpha and the Omega, has not changed since the days of Cyrus. All creatures are still in his hand, and without his will they cannot so much as move (HC, Q&A 28).

He who believes all this, may be strong in his faith. God's people are not faced with enemies who are free to do what they want. They are dealing with a God who calls to life and causes life to cease. In his plan everything fits together in such a way that the end of all world history is that *God will be all and in all*. God is King and his kingdom is coming.

God governs the world and the entire world history as he planned, also the lives of our enemies who seem so powerful at times.

All the elect of God may live in the assurance that they shall be glorified in the end (cf. Romans 8:28-30). There is every reason for complete confidence!

5. Suggestions for the introduction and preparatory study

1. Using a concordance, find out where Cyrus is mentioned. Try to get a picture of what this king has done.
2. Cyrus is not the only king used as God's instrument. God used the king of Assyria in order to punish his people (see Isaiah 10:5-19). Compare the way in which God's Word speaks about both these kings. How are they both evaluated? What are the differences?
3. Use Article 13 of the Belgic Confession and Lord's Day 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which deal with God's providence, to come to a deeper understanding of God's government in history. Pay special attention to the position of God's people in world events.

6. Questions for the discussion

1. Is it important for us to know if Isaiah himself used the name *Cyrus* in his prophecies?
2. What was God's purpose in bringing his people back to Jerusalem? In your discussion pay attention to the decree to rebuild the temple and to give back the temple treasures.
3. Can you think of others besides Cyrus, who were more or less unaware of being used as God's instruments?
4. Is there a parallel between the actions of Cyrus and the return of the people, and the work of Jesus Christ who delivers us from sin and promises us a future in the New Jerusalem? May we see Cyrus as a type of Christ? Why or why not?
5. Which promises of God are yet unfulfilled for us? What is our position, in light of what we have learned in this chapter?
6. Is it correct to say that God's people are central in world history?
7. How can you see whether or not God's hand in history today is for the good of his people? Are we sufficiently aware of this? Does God still govern history in the same way as he did in the time of Cyrus? Are you strengthened by that fact?

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