

THE CYRUS CYLINDER, CA. 539 BCE

Founder of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, Cyrus (Kurosh) the Great rose to the throne of a small kingdom in 559 BCE; by the time of his death in 529, he had brought virtually the entire Near East under his control. In 539, he conquered Babylon and drove out Nabonidus, the last of the Neo-Babylonian kings. However, he was hailed as a liberator by the priests of the Babylonian god Marduk, and he issued a remarkable document in which he praised himself for the restoration of all temples, priesthods, and cults in his vast empire. The text, which was publicized in Akkadian, an ancient Mesopotamian language, is preserved on a clay cylinder, today called the Cyrus Cylinder, and housed in the British Museum.



On account of their complaints, the lords of the gods became furiously angry and left their [the Babylonians') land; the gods, who dwelt among them, left their homes. . . . In all lands everywhere [the god Marduk] searched; he looked through them and sought a righteous prince after his own heart, whom he took by the hand. He called Cyrus, king of Anshan, by name; he appointed him to lordship over the whole world.

The land of Qutu, all the Umman-manda, he cast down at his feet. The black-headed people, whom he gave his hands to conquer, he took them in justice and righteousness. Marduk, the great lord, looked joyously on at caring for his people, on his pious works, and his righteous heart. To his city, Babylon, he caused [Cyrus] to go; he made him take the road to Babylon, going as a friend and companion at his side. His numerous troops, in unknown numbers, like the waters of a river, marched armed at his side. Without battle and conflict, he permitted him to enter Baby-lon. He spared his city, Babylon, a calamity. Naboni-dus, the king, who did not fear him, he delivered into his hand.

When I [Cyrus] made my triumphal entrance into Babylon, I took up my lordly residence in the royal palace with joy and rejoicing; Marduk, the great lord, moved the noble heart of the residents of Babylon to me while I gave daily attention to his worship. My numerous troops marched peacefully into Babylon. In all Sumer and Akkad, I permitted no enemy to enter. I gladly attended to the needs of Babylon and of all its cities. The people of Babylon [and ...], and the shameful yoke was removed from them. Their dwell-ings, which had fallen, I restored. I cleared out their ruins. Marduk, the great lord, rejoiced in my pious deeds and graciously blessed me, Cyrus, the king who worships him, and Cambyses, my own son, and all my troops, while we, before him, joyously praised his exalted godhead.

And the gods of Sumer and Akkad-whom Nabonidus, to the anger of the lord of the gods, had brought into Babylon-by the command of Marduk, the great lord, I caused them to take up their dwell-ing in residences that gladdened the heart. May all the gods, whom I brought into their cities, pray daily before Bel and Nabu for a long life for me, and may they speak a gracious word for me and say to Marduk, my lord, "May Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses his son, their [...] I permitted all to dwell in peace [...]. "

Document Questions:

1. How and why did Cyrus incorporate local deities into his public image after subjugating Babylon?
2. How does this document compare with other texts on peace and justice in Mesopotamia?