

Evolution of Human Rights: From Cyrus to the Modern Times

Historical Perspective on Human Rights

World Parliament of Religions

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The historic World Parliament of Religions meets this week in Chicago, and here in the United States, it is apposite that we begin by quoting from the country's First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

This was the millennial legacy of Cyrus the Persian. Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, eulogized the man and is a timeless exposition of leadership. It was studied by Alexander of Macedon all the way to Caesar and Machiavelli. And here in the US, Thomas Jefferson, one of the Founding Fathers, owned two copies of *Cyropaedia*: a Greek and Latin version. It is acknowledged that Jefferson was influential in inserting the Religion Clauses in the First Amendment of the US Constitution.

So, to Cyrus the empire builder who appears to have had a clear-sighted vision: expansion of territorial boundaries and the maintenance of vast areas of conquered lands, coupled with respect of foreign peoples, their religions and cultures. The seminal event of October 29, 539 BC, marked the entry into Babylon by Cyrus, the triumphalism tempered by an acknowledgement of immense responsibility for the upholding of this ancient city's traditions; the encounter with a multiplicity of inhabitants – natives as well as captives – and the edict, what we today refer to as the 'Cyrus Cylinder', setting out the conquerors' world view.

The CC is a foundational document of mankind's acknowledgement of the vital need for human rights to underscore its social and political interactions. Indeed, the Cylinder itself is a modest mud clay tablet with 45 lines of cuneiform writing. But it packs a punch with its revolutionary message.

Cyrus, at the start of his career was a new, untested king who challenged the geopolitical status quo, intent to place his small kingdom at the center of a vast empire. So at the very outset we must acknowledge that this was empire building, or to put it in stark terms, imperialism.

His crowning achievement was the conquest of Babylon ostensibly to oust the capricious ruler Nabonidus and, from a Persian perspective, re-establish stability there. By this, Cyrus was extending his absolute imperial authority, yet it seems, according to extant documents including the Cylinder that his endeavor was both politically effective and societally beneficial. And this is

what we discern happened when his troops entered the ancient city. We are told that his forces did so “without much fighting” with Cyrus the self-proclaimed “bringer of peace”, while the king ensured “the safety of the city of Babylon.” Cyrus tended to the religious concerns of the Babylonians as well by restoring “shrines which had previously become dilapidated” and by “increasing the offerings to the divinities.” Particularly aware of strains generated by dislocation and refugee status, Cyrus says he “gathered together all the people and returned them to their original settlements.” Possibly the reason Babylonians did not rebel was that they indeed came to regard Cyrus’s reign as one during which they were “freed from their bonds.”

Arguably, there is a certain degree of textual hyperbole in the Cyrus Cylinder, indeed, it is what Professor Olmsted has described as “persuasive propaganda”, and what we 21st century denizens might call a slick PR campaign. Scholars continue to debate this, and it is only right that I point it out at this stage of our assessment.

Nevertheless, it appears that Cyrus’s approach succeeded because it removed the danger that Babylonians had previously felt. He rebuilt a failing administration, mitigated internal conflict, ensured welfare, and reintegrated people and resources while respecting and working within the mores of the society which he had occupied.

The same appears to have been the case for other socio religious groups in the former Babylonian Empire, including the Israelites who regained their own freedom and subsequently completed building the Second Temple in the year 515BC, financed by the Persian exchequer. Like the Babylonians they too probably were encouraged by Cyrus’s officials to regard the Persian king as chosen by their own divinity. So biblical authors such as Second (Pseudo) Isaiah and Ezra proclaimed that Cyrus was king by the will of their God:

Thus says Yahweh to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him... It is I, Yahweh, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
(Isaiah 45.1)

Ezra did the math. He confirms that the Persian monarch commanded that the

...cost [for the rebuilding of the Jewish temple at Jerusalem] be paid from the royal treasury... (6:3-5)

In the Jewish canon, Cyrus would also be the Lord God of Israel’s “shepherd” presumably chosen to facilitate that community’s liberation.

Not surprisingly, the Cyrus Cylinder continued to resonate down the centuries. The father of Israeli independence, Ben Gurion, openly cited Cyrus as a hero, while President Harry S Truman compared himself to Cyrus when, in 1948, the United States became the first nation to recognize the new state of Israel.

This ancient, mud clay tablet, with its 45 lines of cuneiform writing has passed into posterity as an iconic symbol of a great king. Today, individuals, leaders, states and disparate cultures each

see something in the Cylinder which continues to resonate. It is often referred to as the “First Bill of Human Rights”. The UN pinpoints the origin of human rights to 539 BC, Cyrus’s entry into Babylon, while the declarations on the CC inspired the first four Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We must acknowledge that the record of the Achaemenid dynasty, of which Cyrus was the founder, was undoubtedly not blemish free. There were occasional aberrations for tolerance and respect of foreign peoples. But overall, the balance sheet remains a worthy one. And this is in no small part the legacy of Cyrus, the father of his nation who set the tone for Iran on the international stage.

Equally, he was a man of flesh and blood: Herodotus suggests that the monarch could be hot-tempered and irascible.

Irascible, hot-tempered he may have been, but there appears to have been an innate modesty to the man. This conqueror of lands prepared his last resting place at Pasargadae. Like the fire temple, it rested on a platform, 48x44 feet at the base, and ascending in six uneven steps to a total of 17 feet. On the seventh step was placed the tomb proper. It bore a brief royal inscription: “Here I lie, Cyrus, king of kings.”

Almost 200 years later, when Alexander of Macedon defeated the last Achaemenid king (Darius III), the Macedonian general Aristobulus, visiting Cyrus’s tomb expanded the brief epitaph to fit Greek ideas as to what would be appropriate for a mighty ruler: “O man, I am Cyrus, who acquired the empire for the Persians and was king of Persia; grudge me not therefore my monument”. (Olmstead, p. 65, quoting Strabo). How much more modest was Cyrus’s initial inscription.

Had Cyrus been the one and only outstanding monarch of Zoroastrian Iran, he may have been overlooked by history. But the Achaemenid dynasty was fortunate when Darius ascended the throne:(522-486BC) a great administrator and law giver who continued the dynasty’s territorial expansion. Remember Cyrus’s promise to finance the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple at Jerusalem. En route to Egypt (newly conquered by Cambyses), when a question arose in this connection, we learn from the Prophet Ezra (5:6-7):

And now, if it seems good to the king, let a search be made in the royal archives which are there in Babylon to find out whether a decree was made by King Cyrus to build this house of God in Jerusalem, and let the king send us his pleasure regarding this matter.

Persian officials made a search in Babylon and Persepolis, and then remembered that Cyrus had returned to Ecbatana (capital of Media). It was here, in Ecbatana, that they found proof of Cyrus’s promise to the Jews; and now, Darius honored the promise made long ago. Thus, the Temple in Jerusalem was completed on 12 March 515BC as recorded in Ezra 6:15.

Despite Darius’s defeat at Marathon (490BC), a talismanic event in Western civilization, history would come to know this monarch as the great law giver, not least for having set out a new law

to be enforced upon the whole empire. His insistence on the importance of legal precepts would have far-reaching consequences for what was, after all, a relatively new dynasty. The Iranian term for law – *dat* – was now in common usage. Collectively they made up the Ordinance of Good Regulations: they were collected, revised, and incorporated in the new law book's creation which was supervised by Darius himself. He insisted on the incorruptibility of judges and special weight was given to the rules for evidence. Justice, in Iranian thought, could be expected, indeed demanded, of even the most evil king.

Respect for and adherence to the rule of law are vital institutional guardrails. Herodotus informs us that Persian kings had

...a praiseworthy law...which suffers not the king himself to slay any man for one offence, nor any other Persian for one offence to do incurable hurt to one of his servants. Not till reckoning shows that the offender's wrongful acts are more and greater than his services, may a man give vent to his anger.

A collective amnesia has meant that the Arsacid Parthian dynasty, that governed the empire for over four centuries – 247 BC – 224 AD - and continued the Iranian tradition of respect for and leniency towards the several religions within and beyond their borders, are not given their due.

Continuing the practice of their Achaemenid forebears, the Arsacid Parthians gave generous support to the Jewish communities in their realm. Professor Ghirshman suggests that the Jewish people would have regarded the Arsacids as true defenders of their faith, given the oppression they suffered under the Hellenist Seleucids as well as the Romans. The Jews came to look upon Parthia as the only great power capable of delivering them from the foreign yoke, which in times of extreme intolerance, would lead some among them to seek shelter in Parthian territory. Parthian assistance to the minority gave rise to the well-known saying:

When you see a Parthian charger tied up to a tomb-stone in Palestine, the hour of the Messiah will be near.

The last of the great Zoroastrian dynasties was the Sasanians (224-651 AD) and although it is impossible to mention the several remarkable monarchs, I would like to outline, very briefly, the career of Khosrow I (Anoshiravan). His nickname – Anoshiravan, meaning the Just – tells us all we need to know about this great man. Beyond Iran, his name, like that of Caesar in the history of Rome, came to be a designation of the Sasanian kings.

Libraries have been written on Anoshiravan and what has come to be known as Mirror Literature, written after the Arab conquest of Iran, continued to eulogize this great man. Al-Ghazali, the great Muslim theologian, jurist, thinker and mystic (11th/12th century), said that no king had left behind so good a name as he, and that Prophet Mohammad was proud to have been born in the reign of Anoshiravan the just. In his *Counsel for Kings*, Al-Ghazali notes:

God on High sent the Prophet to transform the Abode of Unbelief into the Abode of Islam through his benediction, and to bring development and prosperity to the world

through justice and equitable rule. The king of that epoch was Anushirvan, who surpassed the kings who had been before him in justice, equity and ability to enforce discipline...after the birth of Mohammad, Anushirvan continued living two years. Our Prophet was proud of his epoch, and said: 'I was born in the time of the Just King.' Such was his information about Anushirvan's justice...It was through justice that Anushirvan made the world prosperous.

This is a remarkable observation from a source beyond Iran.

My own favorite story about Anoshiravan is this:

A Roman ambassador, sent to Ctesiphon with rich presents, when admiring the noble prospect from the windows of the royal palace, remarked an uneven spot of ground, and asked the reason why it was not rendered uniform. 'It is the property of an aged woman', said a Persian noble, 'who has objections to sell it, though often requested to do so by our king; and he is more willing to have his prospect spoiled than to commit violence.' 'That irregular spot', replied the Roman, 'consecrated as it is by justice, appears more beautiful than all the surrounding scenery.'

Khosrow I's nickname – Anoshiravan – was justly deserved.

Humane government is a hallmark of astute statecraft. The overall balance sheet of Iran's Zoroastrian monarchs suggests this to be so. It is indeed, a precious cultural inheritance.

Ancient history can be a persuasive teacher, and so it came to pass in the story of the Zoroastrian peoples in the modern era. The Arab conquest of Iran in the 7th century AD, reshaped Iran. However, before we discuss the modern era, it is useful to note that Zoroastrians in Muslim Iran were marginalized and labored under severe religious, economic and social restrictions which prohibited them from participating in national life.

A very few Zoroastrians sought refuge in India where they came to be known as the Parsis. The benign environment in their new home in Hindu India, and the later establishment of British rule transformed the future of this tiny minority, as the community flourished to become the mercantile elite of Asia. Their universal philanthropies became a byword at home and abroad. Here in the USA there is particular resonance to Parsi charity, recounted by a certain Alfred Martin in connection with the American Civil War. This is what it says:

As for the generosity of the Parsees, it is unrivalled, extending far beyond the limits of Bombay. It went to Russia in the time of the Crimean War, when Florence Nightingale described the Parsee community as 'the salt of the Bombay community'. It went to France in 1859, when the terrible inundations necessitated the supplementing of local aid by foreign help, and the Parsees were among the first to respond and among the most liberal of the contributors. It went to the United States at the time of the Civil War, our Sanitary Commission receiving a handsome remembrance from the followers of

Zoroaster in India, sent, they said, because of their sympathy with the suffering soldiers and the Cause of Freedom and union.

(Alfred W. Martin, *Great Religious Leaders of the East*, p. 101)

While they never forgot Iran, the Paris felt an immense gratitude to India. They established the Society for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Zoroastrians in Persia in 1854; dispatched the remarkable Parsi, Manekji Limji Hataria to Iran, where he worked tirelessly on behalf of Iran's minuscule Zoroastrian population, who labored under the many institutional restrictions that had confined them to the margins of society.

This work was continued in the early 20th century by the great Iranian patriot, Keikhosrow Shahrokh. He was the Zoroastrian representative in the *majlis*; a confidante to the late Qajar shahs and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who worked tirelessly on behalf of his depressed co-religionists, and helped them enter the mainstream.

A great Indian patriot was the Parsi Dadabhai Naoroji, who used his platform as the first ever non-white Member of Parliament (1892-1895) to argue for India's independence in Britain's legislature.

Not just one of the world's outstanding industrialists, but a pioneering social reformer, the immensely respected Parsi Jamsetji Tata founded his company over 150 years ago. Two things stand out when assessing his career: his far-sightedness and his social conscience. In India he is remembered as the father of the iron and steel industry, but even before this ground-breaking endeavor, Jamsetji understood that under British rule, although India produced and exported cotton, it did not produce cloth. So he established his Empress Mills in Nagpur (central India), and devised a retirement fund and insurance policy to cover medical costs for injuries incurred at work. This was arguably the earliest known example of employee welfare in India.

Cyrus the Great was an exemplar for the ages. I would suggest that his career was underpinned by the Zoroastrian ethos. And while the world at large may have suffered collective amnesia as to the Zoroastrians, those of his tradition who came many millennia after him, demonstrated the longevity of Cyrus's example.