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CYRUS THE "FATHER", AND BABYLONIA

Precisely 2,510 years ago the very week of the Celebration—exactly on October 12 of our calendar, but in the year 539 B.C.—the army of Cyrus the Great entered the captured city of Babylon. There is solid confirmation of this signal victory in many sources, but the most reliable for our purpose is the so called "Nabonidus-Cyrus Chronicle" published almost a century ago and relating events which occurred between 556 and 539 B.C. Once this source is fully utilized and compared, first with a story of the same event written by the Greek Herodotus, and then, second, with recent archaeological data, we are confronted with some significant insights into the mind and deeds of this remarkable sovereign whose notable achievements were in part responsible for bringing us together on this memorable occasion.

Listen, first of all, to what the "Father of History", Herodotus, has to say. (I have called him a Greek; in reality he was officially born a Persian subject, and it was because of the peace imposed by Persia that he was able to travel so extensively throughout the Empire, just as it must have been many Persian friends who made his sources so remarkably accurate.) Here is what he tells us about the events leading up to the fall of Babylon:

When Cyrus, on his way to Babylon, came to the River Gyndes (the modern Diyala) and attempted to cross it, one of his sacred white horses dashed recklessly into the stream; but the river current overwhelmed it, swept it under, and drowned it in its depth. At this violent deed of the river Cyrus was enraged, and threatened so to break its strength that, in future, women should be able to cross it easily without wetting their knees. Having so threatened, he put off for a time his march on Babylon and, dividing his army into two parts, he marked out by cords the plan of 180 canals on each bank of the river; then he set his army along the lines and bade them dig. Since a great multitude was at work the task was accomplished with all speed; yet they wasted the whole summer season there before it was finished. (Herodotus i. 189)

Here we note that Cyrus is in some way associated with a diversion of the waters of the Diyala River in the early (Spring) months of the year, and we should pay particular attention not to what may have been an "allegorical interpretation" dealing with the loss of a white royal horse,

but to the alleged fact that the work on the diversion of the river into many channels caused the king to "waste the whole summer before it was finished". Bear that in mind.

Now we turn to the Chronicle, and to some sadly fragmented lines (Reverse, Col. III: 1-5) relating incidents in the sixteenth year of Nabonidus. Here we find reference to the Tigris River, and then, in the month Addaru, to what has hitherto been read as "troops of the Sealands" (KUR *Tam-[tim]*). But the document has been misread, and a University of Michigan doctoral dissertation completed in 1963 by Mrs. Elizabeth von Voigtländer corrected the misreading to "troops of the Persians" (KUR *Par-[su]*: Rev. III: 3; cf. also Obverse, Col. II: 15 for identical reading).

So: *In the month of Addaru* of 539 we have Persian troops performing some act hostile to Nabonidus; and Addaru began, in that year, on our 5th day of March, in the spring of the year. It is only several months later that Cyrus fought a battle at Opis, and not until October 12—as previously noted—that his army entered Babylon. In other words, also according to the Chronicle—but in Herodotus' own words—the Persian army "wasted the whole summer" carrying out some hitherto unexplainable activity connected with the Diyala River area in which lay the city of Opis! A delay from March almost into October! Is there any additional evidence which would enable us to infer, if not to state positively, what occasioned this delay on the part of the Great King? I believe that there is, and that it has already been presented by Robert McCormick Adams of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago in his book, *Land Behind Baghdad* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1965).

Land Behind Baghdad is the result of an epoch-making archaeological survey of the Diyala River basin—a survey which bore the following fruits. Throughout several centuries—through Middle Babylonian times and down at least to the days of Nabopolassar—there had been at work in this region forces which did not encourage its internal economy, and traces of settled life almost disappeared. A little later, however, a slow regeneration began: there is some evidence that the Tigris River changed a part of its course toward the southwest—in just that portion of the riverine area where subsequently Seleucia and Ctesiphon were located and where, consequently, the city of Opis should be found. Simultaneously, there was some increase in both the number of settlements and the total population of the area: a gain from 33 to 53 known sites and from 53 to 75 hectares of built-up settlements.

This regeneration process continued throughout Achaemenian times, with a further increase from 53 to 57 known sites and from 75 to 100 hectares of built-up settlement—figures which demonstrate that settlement, during the Achaemenian period, was at least double what it had been during the Middle Babylonian period. Obviously, such gains required extensive irrigational facilities. When, then, we take into account the statements of both the Chronicle and Herodotus that Cyrus delayed his departure from this very area for several months, and the assertion of Herodotus that the delay was the result of the diversion of a river into several canals—all this, I believe, may safely lead to the conclusion that the sovereign was already putting into effect measures which would lead to greater fertility in this area, applying to the task his army and the army's corps of engineers; in other words, a substantial irrigation project had been initiated.

Admittedly, Dr. Adams found no *dense* grouping of new Achaemenid sites such as might be expected if large scale irrigation work had been attempted. Also, he discounts somewhat the notion that Herodotus' description might be, as he says, "an allegorical description of the reconstitution or enlargement of an irrigation network" (*Land Behind Baghdad*, p. 60). He does this on the assumption, however, that Cyrus cannot have been assured that Babylon would safely fall into his hands, and that, without its capture, control of the Diyala region might be lost at any time. On this score, however, we may be sure that Cyrus had no such worries. Already we have more than one hint that there was unhappiness among native Babylonians, fearing famine, and that they were complaining loudly about temples abandoned by their divinities and lying in ruins. Already, disaffected Babylonians may secretly have been in communication with the Persians, just as Jews, captive since the days of Nebuchadnezzar, were declaring that their deity had

"stirred up one from the East,
Whom victory meets at every step,
Who makes nations give up before him
So that he tramples kings under his feet"

and

"I (God) am the one who says of Cyrus,
He is my shepherd, who shall fulfill all my purpose".
(Isaiah 44:27-45: 1 ff.)

No, Cyrus can have had no doubt of his success—and the very speed of his conquest speaks volumes for his confidence: Sippar gave up without a battle on October 10, Persian troops entered the capital city on October 12, again without a battle, and on November 29 Cyrus himself entered the city in festive style, treading on green twigs, in an atmosphere of peace. Not much later, according to his famed Cylinder, Cyrus restored the divine images of gods to Ashur, Susa, Akkad, and—significantly—to Me-Turnu and Eshnunna. Why “significantly”? Because these two communities lay specifically within the Diyala River basin where Cyrus is reputed to “have wasted a whole Summer season”.

So it is that all our sources—the Nabonidus-Cyrus Chronicle, the Cyrus Cylinder, Herodotus, and an archaeological survey—combine to lead to the conclusion that the first Persian monarch, even prior to his entry into the Babylonian capital, had undertaken a project which would bring untold benefit to the land itself.

Is the thesis here proposed proven beyond all doubt? No, emphatically not, and it may never be. Is it possible that it happened? Certainly. Is it plausible? In my judgment the documentation makes it so. Clearly, if it be correct, this will have been but one of many such acts, and all are well summed up by a statement of Herodotus: “The Persians have a saying that Cyrus was a father because, in the kindness of his heart, he was always occupied with plans for their well being» (iii.89).