The Character and Writings of Cyrus the Great

George Rawlinson (1812-1902)

Writings of Cyrus! the reader may exclaim; do such exist? Have we really anything authentic from the hand of this great conquering chief, whose history reads like a myth in Herodotus, and like a romance in Xenophon? Was the “Warrior King,” who nearly two thousand five-hundred years ago, overran Asia from the Sulaiman Mountains to the Aegean Sea, everywhere beating down opposition, and welding one-half of the eastern continent into an empire, an author no less than a soldier, a “learned clerk” no less than a “Hammer of Nations”? Kings in the olden time were more apt to write their histories in blood than ink—the sword was more familiar to their hand than the pen or stylus—not often did they drop the one to assume the other, or pause in their career of havoc and slaughter to cultivate the arts of peace and the graces of literary composition. Still, there were exceptions to the general rule. David, the “man of blood,” who built up an empire which extended from the Euphrates to the borders of Egypt by a long series of successful wars, wielded nevertheless “the pen of a ready writer,” and was known to his contemporaries as “the sweet psalmist of Israel.” Three early Egyptian kings are said by Manetho to have composed treatises. The literary tastes of Orodes, the conqueror of Canaan, and of Cheopsis Ammonibas are well known. Cyrus the Great cannot, let it be at once confessed, compete with such monarchs as these. It is not literature, in the proper sense of the word, with which he stands connected. But still, he has left writings. There exist, on clay or stone, three inscriptions or pieces of writing belonging to his time, of which he is in our opinion to be considered the author; and there exist two documents, embodied in the literature of the Jews, which we believe to be also faithful translation of decrees, or proclamations, put

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There are, however, one or two preliminary objections, to which we must address ourselves, before adducing the documents themselves. It may be said that the writings are not really the composition of Cyrus, but of his ministers, and that consequently they throw no light at all on the personal character or disposition of the king. And it may be held, as indeed it has been held of some of them, that their language has been so coloured by passing through the medium of a foreign tongue as to render them an unsafe basis for speculations such as those on which we propose to enter.

We meet the first objection by remarking that, though royal proclamations would not now-a-days, and among ourselves, be much evidence of the disposition of a monarch, yet in the despotic East, where kings “govern” as well as “reign,” and with a king possessing the originality and vigour of mind which all agree in assigning to Cyrus the Great, the case would be different. Even modern Turkish hatts are some evidence of the disposition of an Abdul-Aziz or an Abdul-Hamid. Decrees of such energetic Persian monarchs as Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius Hystaspes, are, a fortiori, of weight, and must be regarded as really emanating from themselves. They run in the first person and no subject, whatever his rank, would dare to put into his royal master’s mouth any words or phrases which did not express his known mind on the subject matter of the proclamation. To make the great king say to his subjects that which he had not wished to say, would, if discovered, be a capital offence; and men were too anxious about keeping their heads upon their shoulders to run such a risk.

Much the same may be said with respect to the supposed “colouring” of a decree in the process of translation. The translation of state documents was a regular part of the Persian governmental system, and there must have been a class of officials trained to the duty, who no doubt knew their business. The documents which we possess in two or three languages (e.g. the Behistun Inscription) are translated very carefully indeed. An interpreter would know that he might have to answer with his head for any important mistake that he made, and would be vigilant accordingly. It is in the highest degree improbable that the tone and spirit of any royal decree or proclamation would have been seriously affected by translation under any of the early Persian monarchs.

So much by way of preface. We proceed now to aduce the documents. And, first of all, we will bring forward the shortest. This is a bilingual legend, in the Persian cuneiform writing, and the (so-called) Median, still remaining in
term Hakhámanishiya intended merely to designate the sept or clan to which he belonged.

A legend of Cyrus, somewhat longer than this, but still sufficiently brief, and unfortunately mutilated, occurs on a brick found at Senkareh, in Lower Babylonia, by the late Mr. Loftus, which is now in the British Museum. In its present condition it is almost illegible; but when first brought to England, in 1850, it was carefully examined by Sir Henry Rawlinson, who stated the contents to be as follows:

Adam Kurush, Khsháya thiya, Hakhámanishiya.

Or “I (am) Cyrus, the King, the Achaemenian.” Underneath is a winged figure, robed, and crowned with an Egyptian head-dress, which can scarcely be intended to represent the monarch, but may possibly be his protecting genius. The inscription is remarkable chiefly for its extreme simplicity. Whereas other Persian monarchs delight in multiplying their titles, calling themselves “the Great King, the King of Kings, the King of Persia, and the King of the provinces,” or “the King, the Great King, the King of Kings, the King of the many peopled countries, and the supporter also of this great world,” Cyrus, the conqueror, the founder of the empire, is content with the bare title of “King” (Khsháyathiya, whence, by curtailment, comes the modern shah). Again, whereas others commonly give their pedigree, tracing themselves up through several steps to Achaemenes, Arsames, or Hystaspes, Cyrus here names no ancestor, but simply boasts himself an “Achaemenian.” Whether he understood by this, as Darius did, actual descent from a man named Achaemenes (Hakhámanish), is uncertain. There is, perhaps, some reason to think that the personification had not as yet been made, and that Cyrus when he used the

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2The inscription is repeated several times on jambs and pilasters without any variations except slight ones in the form of the letters. See Rich’s “Journey to Persepolis,” pl. xii.

3“Exp. Alex.,” vi. 29

4“Behist. Ins.,” Col. i. par. 1.

5“Elwand Ins.,” par. 2.

and supposed to show that Cyrus “rebuilt” or “restored” these temples, are taken by Dr. Oppert, to form the word nibil, which is explained to mean “priest.” Still, in either case, the fact noted is remarkable, and has a bearing on the character of Cyrus, which will appear in the sequel.

The documents, professedly emanating from Cyrus, preserved to us in the literature of the Jews, are well known to biblical students, but have scarcely attracted so much attention as they deserve from historians. Ewald, indeed, has some remarks upon them, which are not without value, and distinctly notes the preservation in the Hebrew Scriptures of more Cyreian documents than one, which has not been seen generally. But he deprives the documents of almost their whole importance by denying that they are correct translations of the originals and maintaining that they have been abbreviated and “coloured” by the Jewish writer through whom they have come down to us. This is a view which it is alike impossible to prove and to refute. To us it appears—on the grounds already stated—to be improbable. We shall therefore venture to assume that the “Decrees of Cyrus,” preserved in Ezra, represent with sufficient fidelity the original Persian documents, which, if not the composition of Cyrus, must at any rate have been submitted to him, and have received his sanction, before they were circulated through the length and breadth of the Persian Empire under his name.

The first “decree,” or rather proclamation, of Cyrus is given partially at the end of the Second Book of Chronicles, completely in the first chapter of the book of Ezra. It runs as follows:

Thus saith Cyrus, King of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth hath Jehovah, the God of heaven, given unto me, and He hath charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judrea. Who is there among you of all his people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem,
which is in Judrea, and build the house of Jehovah, the God of Israel (He is the God), which is in Jerusalem. And whosoever is still remaining in any place of his sojourning, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, besides the freewill offering to the house of God in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1: 2–4)

The second, or supplementary, decree is in these terms:
In the first year of Cyrus the King, Cyrus the King made a decree concerning the house of God in Jerusalem: Let the house be built, the place where they may offer sacrifice; and let its foundations be strongly laid; the height of it sixty cubits, and the breadth of it sixty cubits; three courses of great stones, and one course of new timber; and let the cost be given from the King’s palace; and moreover, let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar brought forth out of the Temple which was in Jerusalem, and carried to Babylon, be restored and brought again to the Temple, which is in Jerusalem, to their own place, and be set in the house of God.

Of these two documents, the first is on every account the most remarkable. It contains the name of Jehovah twice, and exhibits Cyrus to us as acknowledging not merely a divine character in the God of the Jews but either an exclusive divinity, or, at any rate, a supreme divinity, a divinity transcending that of any other god. The words “He is the God” (hu ha-Elohim) can mean no less than this. Again, it presents him to us as claiming to have received from Jehovah at once the gift of universal dominion and also a particular command or “charge.” This charge is the restoration of the Temple at Jerusalem, which Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed some fifty years previously, and it is in consequence of this “charge” apparently that he both invites the Israelites generally to return to their own land and set about the rebuilding of the Temple, and also (in the second decree) gives orders with respect to the dimensions of the structure, its materials, and even the mode of its construction. Cyrus has always been considered by the Jews as one of their greatest benefactors—as their Deliverer from captivity, their Restorer to their own land, and in a certain sense the Builder of their second Temple; and in this document (the first decree) we are given the reasons which he himself assigns for his conduct towards them. It will be important, in any estimate of his character that may be hereafter made, to recollect that he represents himself as actuated, in a matter of considerable political moment, not by political but by religious motives—by gratitude to the God to whom he ascribed his successes, and by an express order received from a divine source.

The last, the lengthiest, and in some respects the most surprising of the writings of Cyrus is one which has only very recently been recovered. In the summer of the present year some Arabs, working under directions received from Mr. Hormuzd Rassam, once the assistant of Mr. Layard in his Assyrian explorations, obtained from one of the Babylonian ruins, during the absence of their principal, a broken clay cylinder, which, on its arrival in England in the course of the autumn, was almost immediately seen to possess unusual interest. The cylinder is barrel-shaped, as are most cylinders of the time to which it (apparently) belongs, especially those of Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus. It is about nine inches long, with a diameter of three and a quarter inches at the ends, and four and one-eighth inches in the middle. The inscription upon it is written from end to end of the cylinder, and
consisted originally of forty-five very long lines, the number of characters in a line being from forty to fifty, and the number of words, on an average, about twenty. Thus the document originally contained nearly a thousand words, or nearly eight times as many as all the other extant writings of the great Persian monarch put together. The language employed is the Babylonian cuneiform, and in general style the composition bears a nearer resemblance to the state documents of the native monarchs nearest to the time—Nabonidus, Neriglissar, and Nebuchadnezzar—than to the Babylonian transcripts of the trilingual inscriptions of Darius Hystaspis.

Unfortunately, the cylinder is imperfect. Besides minor lacunae, there is a large gap in one side, which extends in parts almost across the whole document, and causes the loss of several entire lines, and the mutilation of a still larger number. The beginning and end of the inscription are in this way lost; but still about two-thirds of the characters remain, and the central part of the document, extending to twenty-five lines out of the original forty-five, has scarcely received any injury and may be said to be, on the whole, in fine condition. It is in this part of the inscription that Cyrus once more comes before us as an author, once more puts forth a “proclamation” to his subjects, or a portion of them, using throughout the first person and relating his actions and his feelings. The following is the general purport of what he says:

“I am Cyrus,” he begins, “the supreme King, the Great King, the powerful King, King of Dintir (Babylon), King of the Sumir and Akkad, King of the four races; son of Cambyses, the Great King, King of the City of Ansan; grandson of Cyrus, the Great King, King of the City of Ansan; great grandson of Teispes, the great King, King of the City of Ansan. The ancient royal family, of which Bel and Nebo had sustained the rule in the goodness of their hearts, faded away when I entered victoriously into Dintir. With joy and gladness in the royal palace I established the seat of sovereignty. Merodach, the great lord, the ancient guardian of the sons of Dintir, and . . . . My wide spreading rule was peacefully established throughout Dintir and the many districts of Sumir and Akkad. Their good order was not disturbed. The high places of Babylon, and all its fortresses, I maintained in good preservation. The sons of Dintir had neglected to repair their dilapidations; their fissures gaped, their walls bulged out. To the work of repairing the shrine of Merodach, the great lord, I addressed myself. To me (Cyrus the King) and to Cambyses, my son, the offspring of my heart, and to my faithful army [the God] auspiciously granted his favour, so that we succeeded in restoring the shrine to its former perfect state. . . . Many of the kings dwelling in high places, who belonged to the various races inhabiting the country between the Upper Sea (i.e., the Mediterranean) and the Lower Sea (the Persian Gulf), together with the Kings of Syria and the unknown regions beyond, brought to me their full tribute at Kal-anna (the central part of Babylon), and kissed my feet. They came from . . . as far as the cities of Asshur and Ishtar, from Agathe, Isunak, the cities of Zamban, Mie-Turun, and Duran, as far as the skirts of Guti and the fortresses along the banks of the Tigris, where they had been settled from ancient times. The Gods who dwelt among them to their places I restored, and I assigned them a permanent habitation. All their people I assembled, and I increased their property; and the gods of Sumir and
Before the late discovery, those who had the widest and firmest grasp of all the ascertained facts, while admitting that “little” comparatively was known “of the individual character of Cyrus,”11 were inclined to believe—first, that in him alone, among early Oriental conquerors, was shown forth an example of something more than mere destructive vigour and despotic authority—that, if not the model prince of Xenophon, he was at any rate distinguished for justice and gentleness, for simplicity and kindness of disposition. Secondly, they saw in him a “great Monotheist,” and iconoclast, one to whom the idolatry of the Semitic races was hateful, and in whose conquest of Babylon “the knell of Polytheism sounded throughout the world.” There is undoubtedly a certain amount of agreement between the religion of the ancient Persians and that of the Jews; and the conjecture was natural that Cyrus, when he took Babylon, and found Daniel in the lofty position in which the circumstances of Belshazzar’s Feast had placed him, was led to inquire into the religious system of the Jews, and finding it in many points to resemble his own, was drawn towards the Jews by a true sympathy, while he was revolted by the coarse and sensuous polytheism of the Babylonians, their oppressors, and inclined to use his rights as conqueror to crush a creed so antagonistic to that of Zoroaster. The terms of the “first decree” in Ezra entirely harmonized with this theory, and lent it considerable support, while the glorious epithets lavished upon Cyrus by the Jewish Prophets—notably Isaiah—seemed in this way only to become thoroughly intelligible and appropriate.

Akkad, whom Nabonidus had introduced at the festivals (or processions) of the Lord of the Gods at Kal-anna, by the command of Merodach, the Great Lord, I assigned them an honourable seat in their sanctuaries, as was enjoyed by all the other gods in their own cities. And daily I prayed to Bel and Nebo, that they would lengthen my days and increase my good fortune, and would repeat to Merodach, my lord, that “Thy worshipper, Cyrus the king, and his son Cambyses.”

There were ten more lines of inscription, which seem to have contained prayers; but the writing is too mutilated to admit of any connected sense being extracted from it. Of the last six lines, each is more nearly obliterated than the preceding, until, finally, all is lost, save some four or five characters at the extreme right hand end of the cylinder.

Such are the “writings” of Cyrus at present in our possession. After the remarkable discovery of the present year, we feel that we may venture to hope—almost to expect—that further research in Mesopotamia and the adjacent regions may in the end considerably add to their number. But at present this is the sum total of the Cyreian documents. What may we gather from them? What light do they throw on the true character of that marvellous conqueror, whose rise “marks an epoch in universal history,”9 with whose coming “the movement of history begins, and humanity throws itself into that restless march of progress, which henceforth is never to cease? A vague instinct pushes them forward to the conquest of all around them. They throw themselves headlong on the Semitic races. They are not contented with Asia. The East under them seems to migrate towards the West. They do not halt even at the Hellespont, nor till they have reached the shores of Salamis.”10

11Stanley, “Lectures on the Jewish Church,” Third Series, p. 53,
Hence Cyrus was supposed to have treated Babylon as Cambyses treated Egypt.

“Yet more significant,” it was said,\(^\text{12}\) “even than the fall of the monarchy and the ruin of the city, was the overthrow of the religion of the Chaldwan world by the zeal of the Persian monotheists. The huge golden image of Bel, the Sun-God (?)—from which Babylon, ‘the Gate of Bel,’ derived its name—on the summit of his lofty temple; Nebo, the Thoth, the Hermes, the God of the Chaldwan learning, to whom at least three of the Babylonian kings were consecrated by name, in his sanctuary at Borsippa, of which the ruins still remain; Merodach, the tutelary God of the city, the favourite deity of Nebuchadnezzar, the eldest, the most ancient of the divinities, trembled, as the Israelites believed, from head to foot as the great Iconoclast approached: ‘Bel bowed down; Nebo stooped; Merodach was broken in pieces.’ The High Priest might stand out long against the conquerors, and defend the venerated images at the cost of his life; they could not resist the destroyer’s shock; their vast size did but increase the horror, it may be said the grotesqueness, of their fall; the beasts of burthen on which the broken fragments would have to be piled groaned under the expectation of the weight; the wagons which bore them creaked under the prospect of the unwieldy freight. With the fall of these greater divinities the lesser fell also.”

With the discovery of the present year this view ceases to be tenable. A wholly new light is shed by it on the character of the great Persian monarch, who, instead of being inspired, as was supposed, by zeal for monotheism and an almost fanatical hatred of idolatry, appears to have been a politic prince, cool and cautious, somewhat of an Indifferentist in religion, and, if not a renegade from the faith of his fathers, at any rate so “broad” in his views as to be willing to identify his own Ahura-Mazda, the Maker of Earth and Heaven, the All-Wise, All-Bounteous spirit, alike with the One God of the Jews, and with the CHIEF god of any and every religious system with which he came into contact. Born and bred a Zoroastrian, he would naturally, and almost necessarily, recognise in the Jehovah of the Jews, the Self-Existent One, his own Deity; and we seem to trace in the tone of Ezra’s first decree something of a warmer feeling, of a heartier acquiescence and approval, than in the newly-recovered proclamation. There is also in that decree a peculiar feature, not reproduced in the newly-found document—the recognition of a real authority in Jehovah to direct and rule nations. The “charge” which Cyrus regards as laid upon him by Jehovah, to rebuild his “house” at Jerusalem, has nothing parallel to it in the Babylonian proclamation, where the repair of Merodach’s shrine at Babylon is represented as a purely voluntary and spontaneous act on the part of the king. It would seem that Cyrus, finding the Jews to be, like his own nation, “people of a Book”—professors, that is, of a religion based upon a sacred volume—had the curiosity to inquire concerning this Book, and finding in it the well-known words, “That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform my pleasure; even saying to Jerusalem, ‘Thou shalt be built,’ and to the temple, ‘Thy foundations shall be laid’” (Is.: 44: 28) accepted them as a “charge” to himself, and acknowledged their obligation. Hence there was

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\(^{12}\) Stanley, “Lectures on the Jewish Church,” Third Series, p. 60.
nothing peculiar in the relations which he accepted towards the religion of the Jews, though nothing nearly so peculiar as has generally been imagined. His tolerance of the religion was not peculiar, but part of a general system of tolerance; his sympathy with it may have been to a certain extent peculiar, but was not wholly so. He was a Syncretist of the broadest kind, and saw in “Jehovah, Jove, or Lord;” in Ahura-Mazda, Merodach, Asshur, Melkarth, Rimmon,—would have seen in Ammoll, Indra, Woden, Tina, Mumbo-jumbo, had he known of them—merely different presentations of one and the same reality, embodiments, modified by ethnic diversities and perhaps by local associations, of one and the same notion of a Supreme Being, one and the same thought of a Divine Person, the Head of all things, the First, Best, Wisest. He may not have placed all the presentations upon a par, or have thought them all equally to be encouraged. He may have preferred his own Zoroastrian conception, his own “good, holy, pure, true God, the Holiest, the Essence of Truth, the father of all truth, the best being of all, the master of purity,” to the conceptions of other peoples and nations; but he cannot have recognised any essential contrariety, any irreconcilable antagonism, between his own God and theirs, between Ahura-Mazda, Merodach, Jehovab, Asshur, Rimmon.

Nor was he averse to Polytheism, in the form in which it has usually existed, where it has existed. The Zoroastrian system allowed the existence of many gods. In it Ahura-Mazda was only “the greatest of the gods” (mathista baganam, Persep. Ins. 3, line 1). “May Ahura-Mazda bring help to me,” said Darius, “with the deities who guard my house” (hada vithaibish bagaibish, ibid., line 14). Mithra especially was worshipped as a great god, coupled with Ahura-Mazda, and invoked to protect and save.14 Cyrus, when brought into contact with polytheistic systems, found no difficulty in assigning to the gods whom he was

13See the writer’s “Ancient Monarchies,” vol. iii. p. 96.
pleased to regard as secondary a position similar to that which, in his own religion, was occupied by Mithra, Vohu-manoo, Asha, Armaiti, Serosh, and others—secondary Zoroastrian deities, inferior to Ahura-Mazda, but still possessing great power, and the proper objects of worship. So, as he tells us in the newly-recovered inscription, though he accepted Merodach alone as “the great lord,” and as “his own lord,” and yet he prayed daily to Bel and Nebo,” beseeching them “to lengthen his days and increase his good fortune.” He even placed them between himself and Merodach as intercessors, just as Roman Catholics place the saints between themselves and Christ, requesting them to convey to Merodach the petitions which he probably thought himself unworthy to prefer directly.

Even in the matter of idolatry, though, as a Zoroastrian, he ought not only to have abstained from all employment of images in religion himself, but to have considered the use of them by others “as a sign of folly,” yet his tolerance was so great, his syncretism so pronounced, that, on the contrary, he countenanced, supported, patronised idolatry of the most open and avowed character. Far from “utterly abolishing” the idols, which had trembled at his approach, he assigned to all the gods of the Babylonians—that is, to their images—“honourable seats in their sanctuaries.” The colossal statue of Bel, made of pure gold, according to Herodotus, and twelve cubits or eighteen feet high, was allowed to remain unharmed in the great temple of Babylon, and to continue the object of the people’s veneration. The old worship remained unaltered in the Babylonian temples. Merodach and Nebo, Nergal and Ishtar, Adrammelech and Anammelech, still stood upright in their ancient shrines, and received the devout worship of their votaries. Nor was this all. Neighbouring cities, recently at war with Babylon, and reduced to subjection, received back, by the generosity of the new conqueror, the images of their gods which the Babylonian monarchs had carried off as tokens of victory, and were enabled to restore them to the temples from which they had been taken, where they obtained “permanent habitations.” Loved and long lost idols, welcomed home by admiring crowds, provoked no doubt an access of religious fervour; and many perishing idolatries obtained a new lease of life through the spurious liberalism of a monarch, whose professed creed pledged him to oppose idolatry to the uttermost of his power.

It is not perhaps to be expected that this view of the character and policy of Cyrus the Great will be at once and universally admitted. Is a single mutilated inscription, it will be said, even supposing it to be correctly rendered, of such authority that on account of it we must entirely change our whole conception of one of the greatest characters and one of the greatest eras of history? Are the Babylonian priests, who were beyond all question the authors of the entire document, to be absolutely depended upon? May not the “proclamation” of Cyrus, which they quote, be a forgery?

Different answers to these questions will no doubt approve themselves to different minds. We are far from contending that

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15It does not appear that in the general Babylonian system, Merodach really occupied the highest place; but he had been the favourite god of Nebuchadnezzar, and his son Evil-Merodach, and slighted by Nabonidus. These circumstances seem to have led Cyrus to accept him as the Babylonian equivalent of Ahura-Mazda.

16Herod. i. 131

17Ibid. i. 183.
clearly indicative of the friendly attitude which it pleased him to assume towards the religion of Babylon. Finally, his syncretic leanings are shown in the details of that angelic figure already mentioned, which still exists on the building, near his tomb, inscribed with his name—a figure modelled generally on an Assyrian type, but with a head-dress borrowed from Egypt, and symbolizing well that union of different and really conflicting creeds which he seems to have wished to bring about.

One further difficulty may be raised. Do not the Jewish Prophets, it may be said, represent Cyrus as an Iconoclast, a “Hammer of the Nations,” who, smiting furiously on all sides, broke in pieces the idols, or tore them from their shrines and carried them off “upon the beasts,” to be exhibited in his triumph at his capital? What else is the meaning of the phrases,19 “Bel bowed down; Nebo stooped. Their idols ‘were upon the beasts, and upon the cattle; your carriages were heavy laden; they are a burden to the weary beast. They stoop, they bow down together; they could not deliver the burden, but themselves are gone into captivity’”? Why else does Jeremiah exclaim,20 “Babylon is taken; Bel is confounded; Merodach is broken in pieces; her idols are confounded; her images are broken in pieces”? What else is intended, when it is said, “I will punish Bel in Babylon; I will do judgment upon her graven images”?21 To us it seems that these expressions have been stretched beyond their natural meaning when they have been taken to indicate a violent iconoclastic fury, and that they are

Moreover, we think that, independently of the document in question, there is evidence that Cyrus was not the Iconoclast which he has been often described as being, but the Syncretist which we have here represented him. We have already remarked that he left untouched the golden image of Bel, which was the pride and glory of the Great Temple of Babylon, and which stood unharmed until Xerxes, after his return from Greece, removed the image and slew the priest who resisted him.18 He also, it is certain, left untouched the temple of Cybele at Sardis, which was burnt accidentally at the time of the Ionian revolt, as well as those belonging to the Greek cities upon the western coast of Asia Minor, as that of Apollo at Branchidae and that of Artemis near Ephesus. Further, in the short brick legend quoted above (p. 88), he distinctly states himself to have been either the “restorer” or the “priest” of the two principal Babylonian temples—a statement in complete harmony with the newly-recovered proclamation, and one

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18 Herod. l.s.c.
19 Is. xlvi. 1, 2.
20 Jer. 1.2.
21 Jer. H. 44, 52.
sufficiently appropriate to the occasion, if no more occurred upon the capture of Babylon by Cyrus than was certain to occur, and no more change of the religious position was effected by the event than what it is absolutely certain was effected. When Cyrus conquered Babylon, it would, as a matter of course, be felt throughout western Asia that the religion of the Semitic nations, the Babylonians, Assyrians, Syrians, Phoenicians, and the like, had received a great blow. Zoroastrianism was triumphant, was supreme. In this sense, “Bel bowed down; Nebo stooped.” The old Babylonian and Assyrian creed sank from a dominant to a subject religion, became one of many tolerated beliefs. This was the great fall, the great change; and it is this on which Isaiah and Jeremiah mean especially to dwell. “But there was also something more. It was usual in the East for each conqueror to carry off from each conquered city trophies of his victory, and among these trophies the foremost and the most valued were the images of the city’s gods. We see in the Assyrian sculptures triumphal processions, wherein the idols are being exhibited, supported on the shoulders of men, or carried in their hands. There is no reason to believe that Cyrus would forego this practice, which was so apt to display the reality of victory in the eyes of the nations under his rule, and to bring it home to their hearts. Thus “the idols” would be “upon the beasts and upon the cattle”—the “carriages” would be “heavy laden”—the gods who “could not deliver” would themselves “be gone into captivity.” Nay, further—in the hour of capture, in the first furious rush of an almost undisciplined mob of soldiers into a conquered town, when lust for plunder was in the ascendant, and the temples were known to be the places where most wealth was stored, there would be, whether the commander desired it or no, something of that general destruction by the soldiers of such idols as they fell in with, which Dean Stanley so graphically describes (supra, p. 93). Bel would be “confounded”—Merodach would be “broken in pieces”—the gold and silver plating would be stripped off the images of wood or of the baser metals, and the temples would be scenes of havoc and horror. But, when the horrors of the sack were over—when the method of ruling conquered peoples had to be determined, a different policy prevailed—general iconoclasm would have caused general discontent, and have provoked continual rebellion—such iconoclasm was never practiced by the Persian kings at all generally, or, indeed, otherwise than quite exceptionally: and least of all was it practised by Cyrus. Even Cambyses was an iconoclast, so far as we know, only in Egypt, where he was exasperated against the people by their disposition to rebel, and disgusted by the low fetishism of the animal worship, and the hideosity of the images of Phthah, Bes, Tauris, Savak, and the like. And there is evidence in the inscription on the Pastophorus of the Vatican that even he relented, and became after a time a votary and patron of Neith, the goddess of Sais.23 Cyrus, having to arrange for the pacification and permanent government of Babylonia, adopted the system of toleration—repaired the temples—restored, where he could, the images to their shrines—allowed the people the full and free exercise of their religion. Nay, he even went further. Anxious to conciliate those under his rule, he accepted Merodach as the Babylonian equivalent of Ahura. Mazda, as he had (with better reason) accepted Jehovah

22Layard, “Monuments of Nineveh,” 2nd series, pls. 30, 50.
as his Jewish equivalent, and declared himself “his worshipper.” He did not even deny a certain quasi-divinity to Bel, Nebo, and the other secondary Babylonian gods; but, paralleling them with his own izeds and amshashpands, let them preserve their old position in the regards of the people, let their images rest undisturbed in their temples, and professed that he himself “daily addressed to them his prayers.” How much of this was policy, how much conviction that under various forms all men everywhere were really worshipping the same Celestial Power, may, perhaps, be doubtful; but that iconoclasm was no principle of his general government is certain.

On the moral disposition of Cyrus—on his supposed justice, gentleness, kindness of heart, and simplicity—his writings throw but little light. They belong to him as a ruler, not as an individual. We may, perhaps, trace in them some slight deterioration of character, more especially in the matter of simplicity and absence of ostentation; but otherwise they scarcely reveal. Ἱθοῦς. Content, at first, in his Persian home, to call himself simply “king,” he becomes after his conquests, first, “the powerful king,” and then, finally, “the supreme king, the great king, the powerful king, the king of Babylon, the king of Sumir and Akkad, the king of the four races,” accumulating title upon title, with all the pride and vanity of his predecessors in the lordship of Asia. In common with other Persian monarchs, he acknowledges himself to have derived his Royal dignity from God (Ezra 1: 2); but his inscriptions are, on the whole, less religious than those of his successors. A certain amount of tenderness is shown in the way in which he speaks of his son Cambyses, of whom he has no unworthy jealousy, and whom he terms “the offspring of his heart.” Something more of kindliness and good-will towards his subjects than commonly appears in the official utterances of Oriental monarchs may also be traced in more than one of his proclamations or edicts, which enable us in some degree to understand why it was that the Persians characterized his rule as that of “a father.” 24 Altogether, however, the evidence on this point furnished by his writings is negative rather than positive; and the moral character of Cyrus, as distinct from his policy and his religious views, must still be judged of rather from the statements of historians than from the literary remains which he has left behind him.

24Herod. iii. 89.