



Religion supporting empire: The Cyrus Cylinder (c. 539 BCE)

Throughout history, people have used religious resources to both support and resist imperialism. The Cyrus Cylinder is an example, from the ancient world, of religion **legitimizing** an empire.

In 539 BCE, the Persian emperor Cyrus II, a.k.a. Cyrus the Great, took over the neighboring neo-Babylonian empire. Historical evidence suggests that Cyrus's invading forces crushed the Babylonian army sent to repel them; Cyrus then occupied the capital city, Babylon, without meeting further resistance. The Cyrus Cylinder recounts Cyrus's conquest of Babylon from the point of view of Babylonians who have accepted Cyrus's rule as legitimate. The text portrays Nabonidus, the Babylonian emperor whom Cyrus overthrew, as a bad ruler, who oppressed his people and failed to properly maintain the worship of the Babylonian deities. These actions are said to have outraged Babylon's patron god, Marduk, who therefore raised up Cyrus to depose Nabonidus. The second half of the text is written in the voice of Cyrus, acknowledging Marduk as his benefactor. Cyrus touts his own benevolent rule, his construction projects on behalf of Babylon's people, and his respect for the Babylonian deities as well as the deities of other peoples who are now part of his empire.

This text is known as the Cyrus Cylinder because it was inscribed in cuneiform script on a clay cylinder, about 9 inches long. The cylinder would have been deposited in the foundation or wall of one of Cyrus's construction projects as a memorial; the cylinder's message would have been broadcast among Cyrus's Babylonian subjects by other means as well. The cylinder was unearthed in the late 1800s CE and is now held by the British Museum. In this English translation, ellipses indicate where the cylinder is damaged and portions of the text are therefore lost.

[“Nabonidus did evil to Marduk's city”]

. . . Nabonidus appointed his firstborn son, a weakling, as ruler over the land^a . . . he set a mere imitation over them. He built an imitation of the Esagila^b . . . established improper rituals in Ur and the other sacred cities . . . Daily he babbled improper prayers, and out of hostility he halted the daily offerings. He disrupted the rituals and established . . . in the sacred cities. He thought to put an end to the worship of Marduk, king of the gods. He did evil to Marduk's city daily. . . . He yoked its inhabitants with constant draft labor, without rest; he brought them all to ruin.

^a For mysterious reasons, Nabonidus absented himself from Babylon for a decade, during which time he lived in Tayma, a city in Arabia. Nabonidus's son Belshazzar governed in Babylon, as regent, in Nabonidus's absence.

^b The Esagila was the temple of Marduk in Babylon. The charge that Nabonidus built an imitation, or counterfeit, of the Esagila may refer to a temple that he constructed for the moon god Sin in Harran, a city in the northwestern reaches of the neo-Babylonian empire. Babylon's religious establishment evidently felt threatened by Nabonidus's devotion to Sin. In other surviving documents from this era, Nabonidus is accused of trying to suppress worship of Marduk in favor of Sin, an accusation echoed in the Cyrus Cylinder.

Because of the people's complaints, Marduk, lord of the gods, became furiously angry and departed from the land. The other gods who were dwelling there departed also from their shrines, in anger over Nabonidus's having brought them to Babylon. But when exalted Marduk, lord of the gods, saw all the dwellings that were in ruins and saw that the people of Sumer and Akkad^c had become like corpses, he turned aside his anger and was moved with compassion for them. He searched everywhere, he looked through all the lands, seeking a righteous prince, after his own heart, to take by the hand.

[“Marduk delivered Nabonidus into Cyrus's hand”]

He called by name Cyrus, king of Anshan; he proclaimed Cyrus king over the whole world. Marduk made the entire land of the Guti and all the Median hordes lie prostrate at Cyrus's feet.^d Marduk placed also in Cyrus's hands people of Sumer and Akkad, whom Cyrus treated justly and rightly.^e Marduk, the great lord, who cares for his people, looked with joy on Cyrus's pious deeds and his righteous heart. He caused Cyrus to march on Babylon, to take the road to Babylon, going alongside him like a friend and companion. Cyrus's numerous troops—uncountable, like the waters of a river—marched fully armed at his side.

Marduk brought Cyrus into Babylon without battle or conflict, thus sparing his city calamity. Nabonidus the king, who did not revere Marduk, Marduk delivered into Cyrus's hand. All the people of Babylon, and all the people of Sumer and Akkad, with their princes and governors, fell down before Cyrus and kissed his feet. They rejoiced in his kingship with beaming faces. Joyously they blessed him and praised his name—the lord who by his power had saved them from death, who had protected them from destruction and injury.

[“Marduk rejoiced in my pious deeds”]

I am Cyrus, king of the world, the great king, the powerful king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the world; son of Cambyses, the great king, king of Anshan; grandson of Cyrus, the great king, king of Anshan; great-grandson of Teispes, the great king, king of Anshan; scion of a line of kings from time immemorial. My rule is loved by Marduk and Nabu;^f my kingship makes their hearts rejoice.

^c “Sumer and Akkad” is an epithet for southern Mesopotamia, the Babylonian heartland. The epithet recalls two very ancient societies who controlled the region during the 2000s BCE.

^d This sentence refers to Cyrus's conquest of the Median empire (centered in what is now northwestern Iran), the event that marked the beginning of Cyrus's empire. Before he conquered the Median empire, Cyrus's rule had been confined to Anshan, a minor kingdom at the time, albeit with an ancient heritage.

^e This sentence appears to refer to early conquests of Babylonian territory by Cyrus, prior to his conquering the city of Babylon (and thereby the entire neo-Babylonian empire).

^f Nabu was the Babylonian god of writing; by this era, Babylonians had come to identify him as Marduk's son. The naming of Marduk and Nabu together as Babylon's divine rulers, father and son, is paralleled later in the text, when Cyrus and his son Cambyses II are named together as Babylon's human rulers.

When I peacefully entered Babylon, I took up my lordly residence in the royal palace amid joy and rejoicing. Marduk, the great lord, who loves Babylon, conferred my destiny upon me by his grace, and I sought him in worship daily. My numerous troops moved about Babylon peacefully. Throughout Sumer and Akkad, I permitted no violence. I attended to the peace and safety of Babylon and all its shrines. As for the inhabitants of Babylon . . . who had borne a degrading yoke, not by the will of the gods, I gave them relief from their weariness and brought their grievances to an end.

Marduk, the great lord, rejoiced in my pious deeds. He bestowed gracious blessings on me, Cyrus, the king, who reveres him; on Cambyses, the son of my loins; and on all my troops—we were joyous before him. By his exalted divine command, all the kings who sit enthroned in every quarter of the earth, from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea,^g those who live in distant lands and the kings of Amurru, who live in tents—all came laden with tribute, and in Babylon they kissed my feet.

[“I returned the gods to their cities”]

From Babylon all the way to Assur and Susa, Agade, Eshnunna, Zamban, Meturnu, Der, and the land of the Gutu—to all of these cities beyond the Tigris, whose ancient shrines had been reduced to ruins, I returned the gods who used to dwell there, and I built for them new shrines, to house them for all time. The people, also, who formerly inhabited those places, I gathered and restored to their homes.^h As for the gods of Sumer and Akkad, whom Nabonidus had brought into Babylon, thereby angering the lord of the godsⁱ—at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I restored them safely to their homes, to the shrines that gladden their hearts. May all the gods whom I returned to their cities pray daily for me to Marduk and Nabu, that I may have long life. May they speak a gracious word for me to Marduk, my lord, saying: “May Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses, his son, provision our shrines for years to come.”

The inhabitants of Babylon, who bless my kingship, and the inhabitants of all lands, I have

^g That is, from the Mediterranean Sea (“the Upper Sea”) to the Persian Gulf (“the Lower Sea”), the outer limits of the neo-Babylonian empire.

^h The people referred to here are captives who were taken to Babylonia from the places named in the previous sentence after those places were subjected to Babylonian rule. Cyrus has allowed those captives to return to their homelands, along with the captured images of their deities. He is thereby cultivating the good will of those peoples, who, as a result of Cyrus’s takeover of the neo-Babylonian empire, are now part of his empire. Jews are not among the captives listed here, but the Hebrew Bible recounts that Cyrus likewise allowed Jewish captives in Babylon to return home and rebuild their deity’s temple in Jerusalem, which the Babylonian army had destroyed.

ⁱ The gods referred to in this sentence are not those of foreign peoples subjected by the Babylonians, but rather deities of the Babylonian pantheon who had shrines in cities of the Babylonian heartland other than Babylon. Although the author of the Cyrus Cylinder portrays Nabonidus’s action as sacrilegious, Nabonidus’s likely motive for relocating those deities’ images to Babylon would have been to protect them from the invading Persian army.

caused to live in peace. I have increased the daily temple offerings of geese, ducks, and doves by . . . geese, two ducks, and ten doves. I have worked to strengthen the fortifications of Imgur-Enlil, the great wall of Babylon. I completed the quay of baked bricks on the bank of the city's moat, which a former king began but left unfinished. I . . . which did not fully encircle the city and which no former king had drafted laborers to complete, the levee . . . into Babylon. . . . I rebuilt with bitumen and baked bricks and completed the work. . . . large doors of cedar with bronze . . . doors, thresholds, and door frames with copper . . . Inside I saw an inscription left by Ashurbanipal, a king who came before me . . . in its place.

May Marduk, the great lord, grant me long life and a ripe age . . . May I . . . in your heart forever.

Source: Robert William Rogers, trans. and ed., *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1926), 380-384, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ia.ark:/13960/s2j3gp455g6>. Public domain.

Compared to these three subsequent translations of the Cyrus Cylinder:

- James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 315-316.
- Piotr Michalowski, "The Cyrus Cylinder," in *The Ancient Near East: Historical Sources in Translation*, ed. Mark W. Chavalas (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 426-430.
- Irving Finkel, ed., *The Cyrus Cylinder: The King of Persia's Proclamation from Ancient Babylon* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., in assoc. with Iran Heritage Foundation, 2013), 4-7.

Edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Rogers's translation has been extensively emended by Duffy in consultation with the three other translations listed above, especially those by Michalowski and Finkel, who used fragments discovered after 1970 to fill in some of the gaps in the damaged text. The first two lines of the cylinder inscription, which are very damaged (though partly reconstructed by Finkel), are entirely omitted here. Italicized section headings added by Duffy. Additional paragraph breaks inserted for readability. Obscure names or epithets replaced with hopefully more familiar, or at least consistently used, ones (e.g., *Marduk* instead of *Bel*; *Babylon* instead of *Shuanna* and *Tintir*; *the Median hordes* instead of *Umman Manda*; *people of Sumer and Akkad* instead of *black-headed people*). Some pronouns replaced with names for clarity.

This adaptation of Rogers's translation of the Cyrus Cylinder is intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite one of the source publications listed above.



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