

Kurosh, Cyrus the Great

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translated by Morteza and Omid Honari

I who am the author of *Hezar-estan*¹ ('Abode of Thousands'), will begin my talk with *a thousand* thanks to thousands of my fellow countrypeople who, in the Fifth Continent, Australia, chose a secluded corner and invited me from thousands of *farsakhs*² away to come here and pay my respects in the Persian language; the language that Ferdowsi, the creator of words, who spoke a thousand years ago in the same language, and spoke in his book with a language in the name of "the God of Sun and Moon;³ In the name of God of the soul and of wisdom"

Today my talk is about Cyrus the Great. Over two thousand five hundred years ago - five times longer than the total new history of America - he ruled over the whole Middle East and over a country the size of the United States of America. He reigned over 40 million people; possibly half of the total population of the world at that time. All these figures that I mentioned exceed a thousand.

Now I have to qualify that by asking how it was possible to rule over such a vast land with so many droughts and so many natural obstacles? How it was possible to govern, and with what doctrine, over such a country? The simplest answer to this question is to say that Cyrus' rule was well adjusted to the nature of human beings. Let us quote some narratives from great ancient historians about Cyrus; it may clarify my intention. Xenophon writes in the *Cyropaedia*, "Cyrus believed that the defeated nations must be treated and attracted with special considerations. That was why he and many of dignitaries chose the traditions of Medians". Plutarch says: "Every morning a servant went to the Shah (Cyrus) and told him:

Shahan-shaha (O King of Kings)
Get up
and for your people and your country
work and struggle
That you are ordered by Ahura-Mazda as such.

Possibly the most natural and simplest characteristics of governments is that they can cover a major population. About one hundred years before the time of Cyrus, in the south-west of Persia, in today's Khuzestan, near where the Parsumash and Pasargad tribes were located, an important event occurred. Assurbanipal, the king of Assyria, conquered the city of Susa, the capital city of Elam, in 645 BCE, 2640 years ago. Assyrians entered Susa and did whatever they wanted there. The treasury of the Shahs of Elam, which had been built up from previous wars, was taken over by the Assyrians. All the gold and silver, which were presented to Elam by Babylon during their time of unity, with the statues and treasures of Elam and shrines and the gems and precious jewellery in Elamite homes

¹ Dr Bastani-Pariz here is referring to one of his books titled *Hezar-estan*, meaning Abode of Thousands, which is a collection of four articles. These are 1. The Introduction, which is about the influence of numbers in human life. 2. From Zero to Eternity, about the events of 400 years ago, when, at the Islamic millennium's turn, we entered into the year 1000 Hijra. 3. In memory of Zabih-Ollah Mansuri, a well respected Persian contemporary writer, as 'the man of 1000 books'. 4. A Stone of Tabari's House-Gate, about Tabari, the great Persian historian; and about the historians who wrote the history of their time. [Trans.].

² *Farsakh* or *farsang* is a Persian unit of distance equal to six kilometres. The distance between Sydney and Tehran is about two thousand *farsakhs*.

³ Bastani is here referring to the beginning of *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi, finished in Hij. 990 in the name of "God of lighting the Moon and Venus and Sun" (*proem*) [Trans.].

were all transferred to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. The Assyrians did not stop at robbery and massacre, but even unearthed the bones and corpses of Elamite Shahs and dignitaries and sent them to Nineveh.

There is a mention of this in the Book of Ezekiel of the Old Testament.

There are graves of people everywhere. They were all killed by sword and buried under the ground. Their graves are around them. They are killed by sword. They are uncircumcised. They were inheritors of grace on the Earth (32:25).

Even clearer than this religious narrative of the Old Testament as a lesson and example for future generations is a declaration from the victorious King of Assyria himself, and one with a comparable literary tone.

This declaration was announced after the capture of the King of Elam, who had temporarily escaped. He and Taramari, the former king, were captured. The king of Assyria tied them both to his cart and ordered them to carry his royal cart to the shrine of Assur and Ishtar, Assyrian deities. The declaration runs:

I dragged the soil of cities of Susa and Madacto and other cities to Ashur, and during the time of one month and one day swept the country of Elam in its totality. I deprived this country from the wondering herds and sheep and also from the melody of music. I allowed snakes and creatures of deserts and gazelles to take it over. I spread salt and thorns everywhere. I brought the royal family and the king's sisters and their household, old and young, and also chiefs and dignitaries and craftsmen as captives to Ashur.

It was after this conquest that the chopped head of the king of Ilam was brought to the palace that he had built for himself, before the king of Assyria. He ordered the head to be put at the top of a pillar, before his people, and it was then hanged from the gate of Nineveh until it disintegrated. Nanu, the Elamite commander, was skinned alive.

I have a purpose from these narratives; it is a comparison that I am going to make. Destroying an advanced government, with an old and strong civilization by a neighbour, did not go, of course, without reactions. As we know, fourteen years after the death of Assurbanipal, Babylon and Media united in Hamadan⁴ over 2600 years ago. They joined forces and attacked Assyria, destroyed Nineveh in their first attack, and the government of Assyria was whipped out of the world arena. This possibly happened around 612 BCE. The palaces of Assyrian kings were buried under sand. It took well over two thousand years until the library of Assurbanipal was unearthed.

The king of Babylon was aware of the danger of Assyrians, and joined forces with Median chiefs, who had gatherings in Hamadan and had a kind of tribal government, and attacked Assyria and destroyed them. But neither Babylon, because of its internal difficulties, nor the Medians, because of continuous assaults from Sakas in the north, made any attempt to deal with the problems of their southern and eastern neighbour, Elam. It seems that it was the destiny and the fate and the determination of history that provided an opportunity for Elam's eastern neighbour, Anzan, or Anshan, to take over that role.

If we accept Arnold Toynbee's saying that "the rise of any great historical change is caused by the insult on honour and cultural identity of a nation", we then have to wait for such a rise from Anshan. Especially as people of Anshan had close economic and social ties with Elamis, and many of their tribes spent their winter around the city of Susa. They were suddenly faced with a land about

⁴ Hamadan is the new name for the ancient city of Hagmataneh, or Ecbatana/Ekbatana, meaning the gathering place. It is located in the west of Iran at the top of the Alvand mountain. It was the capital city of Median Empire. It is now the provincial capital of the Hamadan province.

which the king of Assyria himself says that "I captured to ransom people of this land, men and women, with their horses and mules and donkeys and animals, great and small, which were more than herds of grasshoppers".⁵

There was an influential family in the east of Elam which governed over the land of Parsumash semi-independently; it was the Pasargad family. Hakhmanesh (Achaemens) was one of the most famous members of this family. Six generations after him, a young man named Kurosh (Cyrus),⁶ who was the third Kurosh in this family and later was called Kurosh-e Bozorg (Cyrus the Great), occupied a prominent social and political position in Pars.

Kambujiah II, the ancient form of Qabus that is transliterated by Greeks as Cambyses, the father of Kurosh, announced himself as the Shah of Anshan. The group apparently found an opportunity to reach the eastern plain of Khuzestan from the mountains after the downfall of Elam. The narratives of Herodotus tell us that Kambujiah had reached such a social status that the Shah of Media Azhidehak (Astyages) could marry his daughter to him. She was the mother of Kurosh. Even if this story is fictitious, it still indicates the close relationship between Media and Pars. It seems that this also provided an opportunity for Kurosh to reach Susa,⁷ the destroyed capital city of Elam, to restructure the city and announce it as his capital city, his winter capital.

Our ancient Shahs, especially during the Persian empires - the Achaemenian, Parthian and Sassanian empires, and after Islam during the strong dynasties - had two or more capital cities. It was to facilitate moving between cold and hot places. Of course such regular moving is unusual today. This is of course the best kind of governing over a country with an area as large as the Persian Empire's, with a variety of climates and environments and with different economies, in which the tribal economy played an important role. Achaemenian royals spent their winters in Susa; and summers in Bisetun, near Kermanshah, or in Persepolis.⁸ After Islam the Saljuqs also had two capital cities. Saljuqs of Kerman spent five-to-six months of winter in Jiroft, and summer in Kerman. This is worth researching.

The unique situation that Kurosh created in Susa caused jealousy and alarm in the court of the Medians. Harpagus, the Vazir of Azhydehak, who was not committed to his king, encouraged Kurosh, and what was to happen, happened. Azhydehak, the king of Media, who was the grandfather of Kurosh, was defeated, surrounded and captured. The downfall of Hamadan, the Medians' capital city, was in 550 BCE, exactly 2544 years ago. This is an example of the proverb "politics is infertile", politics does not have father and mother; this is possibly the first proof of this saying: "he was his grandfather, let it be".⁹

All historians give detailed accounts of the good behaviour and respect that Kurosh had towards Azhidehak. Although Kambujiah, Kurosh's father, had been injured in war, and died as the result of this injury, Kurosh behaved with the outmost lenity. Kurosh chose Hamadan as his summer capital city. We have a narrative that he told Azhidehak that: "One of the Assyrian palaces is at your disposal, you may stay there." The destiny of Azhidehak is not well known, and different sources of history say different things about it. The strangest narrative that I cannot resist to tell is one Dr Mohamad Javad Mashkur mentioned in his *History of Ancient Iran*; narrated from ancient texts. He says that the war between Kurosh and Medians was not in Hamadan, but in Pasargad. The Shah of

⁵ Cf. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, London, 1935 edn., vol. 2.

⁶ Kurosh (*koo-rosh*) is the original name. The transliteration of this name in Greek is Cyrus (k=c, oo=y, r=r, o=u, sh=s). It is also pronounced Sirus (see-roo-s). Possibly related to the river "Kor" near the city of Shiraz.

⁷ Susa or as pronounced in Persian Shoosh, is one of the most ancient cities in the world. It is located at centre of Khuzestan Plain, in southwest. Iran. Shoosh has a very mild and moderate climate in winter. Summers are hot. It has been destroyed a rebuilt many times during the past few years. It was destroyed during 1980s by Iraqi bombardments.

⁸ Bisetun or Behsetun, near Kermanshah in the mountainous area of western Iran, has a cold climate with lots of snowfalls in winter, yet nice mild weather in summer. Persepolis is called Takht-e Jamshid, meaning the 'Thrown of Jamshid', the first mythological king of Iran. It is located in the North of the city of Shiraz.

⁹ This is a Persian saying to indicate that politician have no respect for anyone but themselves.

Media was captured there and was sent to exile in Kerman. I cannot let this go, as it is about Kerman, even if it is a weak narrative.

My emphasis upon this narrative is because it has other examples, too. An Armenian historian, Marapaskati, writes that Azhidehak was killed in a fight with Tigran, the Shah of Armenia, who was a friend and ally of Kurosh. The end of Azhidehak's life, however, is unclear.

The star of Kurosh's fortune was rising. "He was one of those people", Will Durant writes, "that was created to rule". "Everyone is happy at their coronation", Ralph Waldo Emerson has it. Four years after his victory over Hamadan, Kurosh turned his attention towards Asian Minor and Sardis. As you know he won a war with Lydia. Croesus, the king of Lydia fell captive. Croesus became an adviser to Kurosh; this means he was not mistreated at all.

Now we have to point out some of Kurosh's conquests in the west of Iran and the fall of Babylon, which is the core of this paper. Why did Kurosh attack Babylon? There is no need to say that Kurosh was not after the extension of his country; this is self-evident. The greatest credit that can be given to Kurosh for his conquests is that, as Will Durant says "Kurosh was an emperor, that more than any other emperor, people liked him". He strengthened the foundation of his government on grace and good behaviour. His enemies were aware of his humane manners and compassions. They were not like someone who fights hopelessly and has no other option but to kill or get killed. This has a determining impact on the destiny of cities under siege.

In the case of the triumph over Babylon, in addition to his overpowering mentality, a king like Kurosh could simply not tolerate a strong country like Babylon in his neighbourhood. But there was another determining factor here. It has been suggested from many sources that there were correspondences and relationships between the people of Babylon, especially its Jewish inhabitants, and Kurosh.

The story goes back to some years before, to the year 586 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar II, the wild and blood-drinking king of Babylon attacked the coasts of the Mediterranean, conquered Jerusalem, demolished the Solomonic House of Worship, and inflicted a great deal of atrocities on the king of Jews and his family. Then he displaced thousands of Jewish men and women from Jerusalem to Babylon, and distributed the captives among the people of Babylon. The Old Testament gives a detailed account of various tribes who were taken as prisoners, and the numbers of them. The total number of these captives has been estimated at around 40,000; which is based on this narrative: such tribe 1200, another tribe 2000 and so on (Ezr. 2). The Holy Book names them all and it is one of the most important parts of the Holy Book that cannot be ignored.

The most natural condition of such religious groups of people is that they wish and hope for *one* who would come *one* day to save them. There appeared many prophets and priests among the Jews who were promising salvation for the Jewish people. There had been some additions to the Holy Book, such as the book of Isaiah, giving 'good news' that God would send someone soon to save the Jewish people from captivity and bring them to their previous grace. The Lord tells the 'Jesus Cyrus' that I have taken his right hand to defeat nations with his presence, and untie the belt of kings (Isa. 45:1-5).

If we do consider prophecies as the *receipts and expenditures* of history, the most natural explanation of these events is that the Jews in slavery in Babylon, and especially those who were working in farms outside the city, began corresponding with Kurosh. They heard that a strong government appeared in the east and north of Babylon, its soldiers dominating the highway between Susa and Sardis, and gaining victory every day. They developed hope in those leading this government and started corresponding with them, and invited them to attack the Babylon. They also may have mentioned that they would help. We are completely in the dark about such approaches. There is a letter from one of the residents of outer Babylon who wrote to the Kurosh, the Shahan-shah of Iran. Will Durant narrated some parts of this letter.

The Late Mowlana Abol-Kalam Azad has written a very important book in this regard. Abol-Kalam Azad was the Vazir (Minister) of Culture and was from a prominent family in India.¹⁰ He was an impartial intellectual. He wrote a Commentaries of Qor'an in Urdu. In this book, when he reaches to the sura of Kahf (The Cave) and verses on *Zolqarneyn* ('The One of Two *Qarns*'¹¹), through something like a revelation he realizes that *Zolqarneyn* in the Qor'an is Kurosh the Great (not, as usually supposed, Alexander of Macedonia).

This can be found out from a stone carving that is in Pasargad, and we know it as Kurosh's *Faravahar* (bas-relief). Those who have not seen it in Pasargad have also seen it in Olympic Park in Sydney,¹² sculptured by our great artist Denis Petrus. This is so natural that everyone thinks that it has been brought from Pasargad to Sydney.

At the top of Kurosh's stone carving, there are two horn-like appendices. Not hidden from you, one of the meanings of *qarn* is 'horn'. All those who are nick-named *Zolqarneyn*, tied their hair to look like a horn. I have done some research myself about *Zolqarneyns*. This is narrated in the Introduction of the translation of Mowlana Azad's book: *Kurosh: Cyrus the Great, Zolqarneyn*. Alexander has also a sheep's horn on his head from his hair, on the three coins remained from him. This is conveniently printed in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Cutting the story short, Mowlana Azad believes that *Zolqarneyn* in the Qor'an cannot be anyone else but Kurosh. This is based on the following reasons. One reason is this very statue of Kurosh in Pasargad. Another is the narratives of the Holy Book (Dan. 8:6-7). The other reason is commentaries on the Qur'an interpreting it verse by verse, and most of them match up with the achievements of Kurosh. The final reason is the name *Luqeranim* that is used in Hebrew for Kurosh. This word is exactly *Zolqarneyn*. These reasons are strong, not simple and primary reasons.

Parts of Mowlana Azad's Interpretation of Qur'an was translated and published in Arabic. I saw it and translated in into Persian at the beginning of my career, and it has been reprinted a few times. Some of our spiritual scholars have accepted commentaries of Mowlana Azad, including the late and great Sage Tabatabaei, who wrote *Mizan Commentaries on the Qur'an*. He wrote a detailed letter to me that: "I have heard that you translated this book, I do not have it, could you please send me a copy". He wanted to express his attention to me. He has mentioned all *Zolqarneyns*, and says that: "the view of Mowlana Abol-Kalam Azad is more acceptable than the others".

Now, to reflect on all this with an evocation:

You;
The heirs of the knowledge of
Cambridge and Oxford and Columbia and Sorbonne;
My dear Professors;
You the authorities of governments and the Commonwealth countries;
You, The United Nations, you Petrus-Petrus Ghali;
You the eminent person of the era of Human Rights;

¹⁰ Mowlana Abol-Kalam Azad was a close colleague of Mahatma Gandhi, although he had disagreements with him over assisting the English in the World War I. After the independence of India, he remained there and became the Speaker of Parliament and Minister for Education.

¹¹ *Qarn* in contemporary literary Persian and Arabic terms means 'century'. *Zolqarneyn* therefore has been taken as a word which means 'the one who lived or ruled for two centuries'. It should be noted that 'century' itself has not always meant a hundred years, but at times meant '30 years'. Dr Bastani and Mowlana Azad believed that *qarn*, possibly the origin of the English 'crown', means 'horn' and 'hood'. The hoods of some tribes, even in modern Iran, have two horns [Trans.].

¹² As a part of the Persian Mehregan Festival and Seminars, a Bas-Relief of Kurosh was erected in the Sydney's Olympic Park.

You tell me:
A king, with people,
Who bridged the Stone Age to the era of Writing;
and wrote on stone tablets,
and lived in a land,
from which all the great prophets of the World arose;
and created the Seventy Two Nations of the World;
and lived in a land,
larger than the United States of America, today;
With people, living and working on a soil,
that does not have more than ten-to-twenty centimetres of rain a year,
from the grace of God;
their Kings, always praying:
"O Ahura-Mazda,
Save my country from droughts and lies and wars!"

Yes! You, who are sitting in Sydney,
where waves of two great oceans,
every morning and evening
put forehead before you,

You tell me:
Is there any other way,
for governing over such a land,
other than
they way Kurosh governed his people,
Two Thousand Five Hundred Years ago?

I am waiting for your answers.

I wonder, thirsty for a drink of response;
You people of the world, give me water.

Translators' Special Notes:

Professor Bastani-Parizi was born in 1925 in Pariz, in the Kerman province. Professor Bastani has published 47 books and about 1000 articles; most about the history of Iran, and especially the history of Kerman. One of his most important publications is *The Epic of Kavir*, which is an attribute to the role and place of villages in the Persian civilization, history and geography from a holistic approach of integrated economics, social and cultural. Professor Bastani has a collection of books which are related to the holy number of Seven: a significant number in the global culture: 1. *The Seven Castled Lady*; 2. *The Seven Wheeled Mill*; 3. *The Seven Knuckled Reed*; 4. *The Seven Headed Dragon*; 5. *The Seven Bended Alley*; 6. *Under These Seven Skies*; 7. *The Seven Penned Stone*; 8. *Sevenish-Eight*.