

## CHAPTER 4 | LESSON 3 Persia Controls Southwest Asia

## Cyrus: King of Persia

*Cyrus (?–529 B.C.) united the people of the Medes and Persia to create the Persian Empire. In the process, he freed the Jews from captivity in Babylon. Cyrus left an inscription known as the First Declaration of the Rights of Man.*

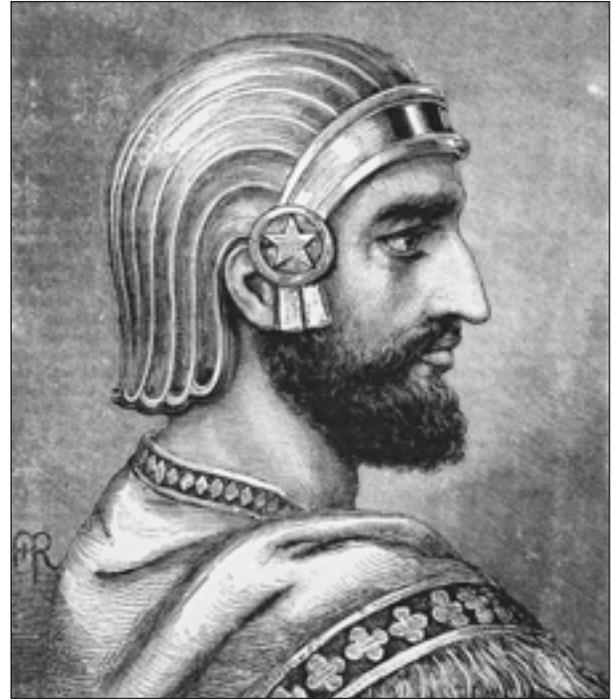
Cyrus thought to have been the son of Cambyses (kam•BY•seez) and Mandane (man•DAY•nee). Cambyses was a Persian nobleman and Mandane was the daughter of the king of the Medes. Although the Persians and the Medes were closely related, their customs were different. Cyrus had the good fortune to learn from both cultures.

**Early Training** At first, Cyrus went to school with other Persian boys. Learning moral values was a big part of education in Persia. Cyrus learned about justice and how to apply it. He also learned self-control and to be self-reliant—to have confidence and use good judgment.

When Cyrus was about 12, his mother's father, King Astyages (uh•STY•uh•JEEZ), king of the Medes, asked to meet his grandson. Cyrus traveled with his mother to his grandfather's royal court. According to one story, his mother, Mandane, asked Cyrus who was more handsome, his father or his grandfather. Cyrus answered that his father was the most handsome Persian man and his grandfather the most handsome Median. He was already showing signs of diplomacy!

**Establishing an Empire** After becoming king of Persia, Cyrus conquered the Median Empire and acquired Assyria in 550 B.C.. Hoping to control the Mediterranean coast and Anatolia, Cyrus pushed on.

Lydia was one of Cyrus's many conquests. Croesus (KREE•suhs), Lydia's king was famous for his great wealth. There is a legend that when Croesus heard that Cyrus would soon threaten his kingdom, he asked advice from the oracle—one who sees the future—at Delphi, in Greece. The oracle replied that if Croesus went to war, he “would destroy a great empire.” Thinking that he would be victorious,



Croesus sent his soldiers out to meet Cyrus's army. Instead of victory, his army met defeat. By conquering Lydia, Cyrus gained control of a number of coastal cities.

One of Cyrus's greatest victories was bloodless. It was the capture of the mighty city of Babylon. Located on the Euphrates River, Babylon was the capital of the Chaldean Empire. Cyrus had his army build a bridge across the Euphrates River so that he could enter the city. The bridge was the first pontoon bridge—a floating bridge. Inflated animal skins supported the bridge. Babylon chose to surrender rather than fight such a clever enemy.

**The First Declaration of Human Rights** As emperor, he became known as Cyrus the Great. Cyrus had great respect for the customs and religions of others. Instead of death and destruction, he offered peace and liberty to those within his expanding empire. Cyrus encouraged the rebuilding of sanctuaries, or sacred places, where people might worship the gods of their choosing.

## HISTORY MAKERS: CYRUS CONTINUED

In 1879, a man named Hormuzd Rassam (hahr•MUZD rahs•SAHM) discovered a clay cylinder. On it is written a statement made by Cyrus in 539 B.C.. It tells how he “strove for peace in Babylon and in all his sacred cities.” He describes his efforts to return sacred objects to their religious homes and to fortify the city of Babylon. Its message of tolerance and peace has led many to call this statement the First Declaration of Human Rights.

**A Liberator Frees the Jews** Cyrus was often welcomed as a liberator. In Babylon, Cyrus freed all captive peoples. It is said that the people spread green twigs in his path. This custom was meant to honor him and was also a sign of peace. Some in the welcoming crowd had been enslaved for generations. Among those enslaved were 50,000 Jewish people. Cyrus allowed them to return to Palestine, their homeland.

In the Book of Ezra, in the Bible’s Old Testament, Cyrus is said to have issued a proclamation to free the Jews. In it he says, “Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him! Let everyone who has survived, in whatever place he may have dwelt, be assisted by the people of the place with silver, gold, and goods, together with free will offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.” (Ezra 1:3)

**Old Testament Prophecy** In freeing the Jews, Cyrus fulfilled a prophecy, or prediction, that appears in the Bible. The Book of Isaiah in the Old Testament was written before Cyrus was born. Yet it says that Cyrus would enable Jerusalem to be rebuilt. Some scholars believe this part of Isaiah was added after Babylon surrendered to Cyrus. However, one Jewish historian, Josephus, claims that Jewish captives showed Cyrus the parts of the Bible that foretold of their release. Having learned of the prophecy, Cyrus may have decided to fulfill it.

**Cyrus’s Tomb** Although Cyrus was an enlightened ruler, he continued to use his army to expand and protect his empire. In 529 B.C. he was killed while fighting nomads from the east. His tomb is at Pasargade, a city in the southeastern part of the empire.

In 330 B.C., about 200 years after Cyrus’s death, the Macedonian king Alexander happened upon Cyrus’s grave. Alexander had dreams of glory and would eventually conquer Greece, most of southwestern Asia, and parts of India. He admired Cyrus and stopped to pay his respects. One of Alexander’s comrades described the tomb as being a modest-sized tower with a roof and a shrine. Inside were drinking cups and a coffin and couch of gold. There was also an inscription, which read, “I am Cyrus, who founded the empire of the Persians and was king of Asia. Grudge me not therefore this monument.”

### Review Questions

1. What was unusual about the conquest of Babylon?
2. What was the First Declaration of Human Rights?
3. What was the prophecy that Cyrus fulfilled?

### Critical Thinking

4. **Making Inferences** How might Cyrus’s education have shaped his character?
5. **Recognizing Effects** How did Cyrus show his concern for human rights?
6. **Finding Review Questions** In Cyrus’s proclamation, he frees the Jews. What help does he ask of others in rebuilding the temple (“God’s house”)?