The Cyrus Cylinder in Biblical Scholarship

LENA-SOFIA TIEMEYER
ALT School of Theology
lena-sofia.tiemeyer@altutbildning.se

INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL REMARKS

The Cyrus Cylinder is a Neo-Babylonian building inscription, written by the Marduk priests of the Esagila temple in Babylon around 538 BCE. It was found in 1879 by Hormuzd Rassam in the foundation of the temple.[1] It has been used in two main ways in biblical research: (1) to evaluate the historicity of the material in Ezra 1–6 and (2) to shed light on the message of Isa 40–48. This article offers a critical survey of scholarship in these two areas and reassesses the textual relationship between the biblical Cyrus texts and the Cyrus Cylinder. In many ways, this article constitutes a continuation of and deepening of many of the arguments that I voiced earlier in my monograph *For the Comfort of Zion*.[2]

The Cyrus Cylinder is a unique document yet is it also the product of the Babylonian scribal tradition, and scholars have highlighted both

---

[1] See further Jonathan Taylor, "The Cyrus Cylinder: Discovery," in *The Cyrus Cylinder: The King of Persia's Proclamation from Ancient Babylon*, ed. Irving L. Finkel (London: Tauris & Co, 2013), 35–68; Sebastian Grätz, "Kyroszylinder, Kyrosedikt und Kyrosorakel: Der König als Medium göttlicher Geschichtsmächtigkeit," in *Geschichte und Gott*, ed. M. Meyer-Blanck (VWGTh, 44; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 339–353 (341).

[2] Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, *For the Comfort of Zion: The Geographical and Theological Location of Isaiah 40–55* (VTSup, 139; Leiden: Brill, 2011), esp. 86, 88, 96–98.

its traditional and novel aspects.[3] On the one hand, as Amelie Kuhrt's seminal work on the Cylinder shows, the content of the Cyrus Cylinder is modelled after earlier Assyrian prototypes, among them royal building inscriptions and foundation texts. Kuhrt has demonstrated that material relating to Assurbanipal's rebuilding of Babylon and the re-establishment of the cult of Marduk constitutes close stylistic parallels to the Cyrus Cylinder. It follows that, rather than reflecting Cyrus's own religious and political convictions, the Cyrus Cylinder shows how Cyrus adopted local traditions and procedures, as befitting anyone claiming to be a legitimate ruler of Babylon.[4] Speaking more specifically about Cyrus's decision to allow deported populations to return to their homeland, Cyrus may have followed a policy akin to that of earlier Assyrian rulers, who supported the reinstatement of the privileges of cities that occupied key positions in areas where conflict was likely to take place.[5] On the other hand, Sebastian Grätz emphasises the innovative aspects of the cylinder. In the Cyrus Cylinder, unlike in other Mesopotamian inscriptions, the ruler refers to himself not only in the first person but also in the third (that is, as the object of Marduk's actions). Furthermore, although the king is presented as God's representative on earth, he remains fallible: Marduk can at any point search for a more fitting monarch, even if that would mean founding a new dynasty.[6]

---

[3] See further János Harmatta, "Les modèles littéraires de l'édit babylonien de Cyrus," in *Hommage Universel* (3 vols.; Acta Iranica 1: Commémoration Cyrus; Téhéran/Liège: Bibliothèque Pahlavi, 1971), 1:29–48; Beate Pongratz-Leisten, "'Ich bin ein Babylonier': The Political-Religious Message of the Cyrus Cylinder," in *Cyrus the Great: Life and Lore*, ed. Rahim M. Shayegan (Ilex Series 21; Boston: Harvard University Press, 2019), 92–105 (93–94).

[4] Cf. my summary of Kuhrt's work in Tiemeyer, *Comfort*, 97.

[5] Cf. Amelie Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *JSOT* 25 (1983): 83–97. See also Robartus J. van der Spek, "Did Cyrus the Great Introduce a New Policy towards Subdued Nations?" *Persica* 10 (1982): 278–283; Mordechai Cogan, "Cyrus Cylinder," *COS* 2, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 314–316; Grätz, "Kyroszylinder," 342–344, Tiemeyer, *Comfort*, 97.

[6] Grätz, "Kyroszylinder," 344.

The Content of the Cyrus Cylinder and the Text of Ezra 1:2–4; 6:3–5

The Cyrus Cylinder has played a significant role in the scholarly evaluation of the source material about Cyrus in Ezra 1–6. The scholarly discussion has been centred on whether, and to what extent, the Cylinder confirms the authenticity of any or both versions of the so-called "Cyrus Edict" currently attested in Ezra 1:2–4 and 6:2–5. In short, does the Cyrus Cylinder prove the historicity of the historical events that are mentioned in Ezra 1 and 6? Four texts in Ezra 1–6 refer to Cyrus by name:

(1) The Hebrew version of the Cyrus Edict in Ezra 1:2–4 speaks of the rebuilding of the temple and the permission of the exiles to return. As a result of this edict, Sheshbazzar brought exiles and temple vessels (Ezra 1:7–11) back from Babylon to Judah.

(2) The Aramaic version of the Cyrus Edict in Ezra 6:2–5 mentions the rebuilding of the temple and the return of the temple vessels.

(3) In Ezra 4:3, Zerubbabel and Joshua refer to Cyrus's command to rebuild the temple.

(4) Ezra 5:13–15, 17 tells of Cyrus's command to Sheshbazzar to rebuild the temple and Cyrus's act of supplying Sheshbazzar with vessels from the temple of Babylon to furnish the new temple in Jerusalem.

As evidenced by this material, two areas stand in focus: repatriation and rebuilding, with a strong emphasis on the latter. All four texts have Cyrus authorising the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. To this description, another two add the return of temple vessels, presumably those taken by Nebuchadnezzar and brought to Babylon prior to the destruction in 586 BCE. In contrast, only one text, Ezra 1:2–4, claims that Cyrus gave permission for the Judean exiles to return to Judah.

The relevant lines for comparison in the Cyrus Cylinder are lines 30b–32 (translation by Schaudig):

From [the city of Nineveh?] to the city of Aššur and Susa, (to) Akkad, the land of Ešnunna, the towns Zabbān, Meturnu, Dēr, and as far as the region to the

land of the Gutians, the sacred cities on the [ot]her side (= east) of the Tigris, which had been laying in ruins since days of old, I returned (the statues of) the gods who used to dwell therein and had them live there for evermore. I (also) gathered their (former) people and brought them back to their habitations.[7]

Many recent scholars have highlighted the inherent difficulty in applying these lines to the description of the situation in Yehud as found in Ezra 1–6. Put succinctly by Beate Pongratz-Leisten, there are three problems. First, Jerusalem is not mentioned. Second, the extant reference to "people" probably includes not only ethnic groups but also prisoners of war and temple personnel. Third, another text, the Babylonian Chronicles, refers to the return of deities under Cyrus but does not mention any return of "people."[8]

Repatriation

At a first glance, the biblical text and the Cyrus Cylinder appear to speak about the same historical event: Ezra 1:2–4 speaks of how Cyrus allowed the exiles in Babylon to return to Judah, and the Cyrus Cylinder speaks of how Cyrus allowed the displaced people in the Persian Empire to return to their homeland. Scholars have accordingly explored whether the Cyrus Cylinder has any bearing on our understanding of the claim of repatriation in Ezra 1:2–4, a letter that allegedly stems from Cyrus. Many scholars, predominantly earlier ones, assumed that the descriptions in Ezra 1–6 of the situation in Yehud reflected the historical reality of the sixth century BCE. In their view, the Cyrus Cylinder constituted evidence of Cyrus's policy of repatriation of the Judahite exiles and, by extension, as proof of the authenticity of the letter. Elias Bicker-

---

[7] Hanspeter Schaudig, "The Text of the Cyrus Cylinder," in *Cyrus the Great: Life and Lore*, ed. M. Rahim Shayegan (Ilex Series, 21; Boston: Harvard University Press, 2019), 16–25 (24); cf. also idem, "The Restoration of Temples in the Neo- and Late-Babylonian Periods: A Royal Prerogative as the Setting for Political Argument," in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie R. Novotny (AOAT, 366; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 141–164.

[8] Pongratz-Leisten, "Ich bin ein Babylonier," 102.

man, for example, in his attempt to demonstrate that Ezra 1:2–4 preserves a genuine edict of Cyrus, used the Cyrus Cylinder to claim that Cyrus worshipped the local Babylonian deity Marduk. Based on the Cylinder (and other texts), Bickerman then argued that the claim that Cyrus worshipped YHWH in Ezra 1:2 is in line with the ancient Near Eastern policy of new rulers respecting local deities and supporting their temples.[9]

Gradually, however, scholars became more hesitant to draw such positivistic conclusions. In parallel, they also became aware of the difficulties involved in deriving historical information from Ezra 1–6. The Cylinder focuses on Marduk and the heartland of Babylon and, as such, appears to reflect mostly inner-Babylonian conditions (lines 28–36). Thus, given the lack of explicit references to either Judah or Jerusalem, as well as to other areas beyond the Euphrates, there is no reason to assume that the Cyrus Cylinder had the Jewish population in Babylon in mind. It follows that the cylinder lacks immediate bearing on the situation in Judah.[10] Rainer Albertz, for example, states that the Cyrus Edict "does not seem to have much effect for the Judean minority in Babylon," as Cyrus's interests for rebuilding and repopulating were focused on the eastern and north-eastern areas of the Persian Empire. Although Cyrus may have given back some cult objects, which had been taken from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, when he put the Babylonian tem-

---

[9] Elias T. Bickerman, "The Edict of Cyrus in Ezra 1," *JBL* 65 (1946): 249–275. Bickerman explains the similarity, as well as the distinct "Jewish colouring" of the version in Ezra 1:2–4, with the possibility that the biblical version was drafted by a Jewish secretary at the Persian court or, alternatively, that vv. 3b–4 form a Jewish addition to an original Persian document. Cf. Roland de Vaux, "The Decrees of Cyrus and Darius on the Rebuilding of the Temple," in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. idem (trans. Damian McHugh; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), 63–96 (95).

[10] Lester L. Grabbe, "The 'Persian Documents' in the Book of Ezra: Are They Authentic?" in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 531–570 (542).

ples in order (cf. Ezra 1:7–8), there is little evidence of any resettlement in Yehud.[11]

Other scholars more readily appeal to the Cyrus Cylinder in their discussion of Cyrus's promise of repatriation in Ezra 1:2–4. H. G. M. Williamson acknowledges that the Cyrus Cylinder is compatible with the view, expressed in Ezra 1:2–4, that Cyrus supported the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the return of the exiles.[12] Along similar lines, Lester Grabbe admits that the Cyrus Cylinder, as well as the Babylonian Chronicles, supports the general historical notion that some Jews were allowed to return from Babylon to Judah and that the temple was allowed to be rebuilt.[13] Sebastian Grätz likewise concedes that although the edict in Ezra 1:2–4 does not stem from Cyrus himself, the similarities between it and the Cyrus Cylinder should not be overlooked. In more detail, he suggests that the formulation פקד על in verse 2b is reminiscent of the Cyl. 1:12 *iš-te-'e-e-ma* (*še'um* = "to seek"), yet the nuance of "appointed" or even "commanded" of פקד על does not fit the tone of the Cyrus Cylinder; rather it stands closer to the notion of העיר in Isa 40–48.[14]

Return of the Exiles

Most scholars assume, in line with the biblical testimony of Ezra 1, that the exiles began returning to Judah during the reign of Cyrus. These discussions are sometimes opaque, because no clear distinction is drawn between, on the one hand, the description of Yehud in Ezra and, on the

---

[11] Rainer Albertz, "Darius in Place of Cyrus: The First Edition of Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40.1–52.12 in 521 BCE," *JSOT* 27 (2003): 371–383 (374); see also idem, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E. Vol. 2. From the Exiles to the Maccabees* (trans. John Bowden; London: CSM, 1994), 413–426, for Albertz's views of the identity of the author responsible for Isa 40–55.

[12] H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC, 16; Waco: Word, 1985), 11–14.

[13] Grabbe, "Persian Documents," 542.

[14] Grätz, "Kyroszylinder," 349.

other hand, the historical reality in the sixth century. Notably, "the decree of Cyrus" is mentioned without clarifying whether it denotes (1) *the historical cylinder*, (2) the literary decree(s) in Ezra (Ezra 1:2–4), (3) the reference to Cyrus's command to rebuild the temple in Ezra 4:3, (4) the reference to the decree to rebuild the temple in Ezra 5:13–15, 17, or (5) the cited decree of the rebuilding of the temple in Ezra 6:2–5. Steven Bryant, for example, refers to the "decree of Cyrus" as he speaks of the return of the exiles in the sixth century, yet it is unclear whether this phrase refers to the Cylinder or Ezra 1:2–4.[15] The same lack of clarity characterises Othniel Margalith's discussion. Margalith opens with a reference to Cyrus's edict in Ezra 1, only to then state that "the edict of Cyrus" was granted soon after 538 BCE. The reader remains uncertain whether this latter edict is the same as the one referred to earlier, that is, the edict in Ezra 1, or whether Margalith now refers to the physical Cyrus Cylinder.[16]

Building of the Temple

Turning to the rebuilding of the temple, the situation is similar. At a first glance, there is yet again a superficial affinity between the biblical text where Cyrus allows the Jews to rebuild the Jerusalem temple and the Cyrus Cylinder where Cyrus allows the restoration of local cults. Again, however, the situation turns out to be less clear-cut. Can it readily be said that the reference to the restoration of local cults in the Cyrus Cylinder (lines 30b–32) supports the authenticity of the claims made by material in Ezra 1–6 concerning Cyrus's support of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple?

The answer is probably no. Beginning with the matter of literary content, a close look at the two sets of texts shows that they differ in

---

[15] Steven M. Bryan, "The End of Exile: The Reception of Jeremiah's Prediction of a Seventy-Year Exile," *JBL* 137 (2018): 107–126 (107).

[16] Othniel Margalith, "The Political Background of Zerubbabel's Mission and the Samaritan Schism," *VT* 41 (1991): 312–323 (317–318).

their focus. In the Cyrus Cylinder, the deities take priority over the people: the key issue in lines 30b–32 is the return of the *gods*. The same focus continues in lines 33–36: the *gods* are supposed to dwell in peace "in their beloved sanctuaries," and the *gods*, in gratefulness for having been restored to their sacred cities, will ask Bēl and Nabû daily to grant Cyrus long life and bless him before Marduk. The motif of the gods' return, those who had been forced to leave their shrines, to their rightful place, stands in a long tradition of Babylonian inscriptions. As Schaudig highlights, Marduk is described in *Enūma elîš*, VII: 53, as the one "who restored all the gods, who had taken flight, to their shrines" (*ša napḫar ilānī munnabtī ušēribu ešressun*).[17] This focus on the gods raises the question of what their parallel would be in the material in Ezra 1–6. Is it the rebuilding of the temple (as often assumed) or is it rather the return of the temple vessels? It may be argued, if we assume any form of direct influence, that Cyrus's return of the deities mentioned in the cylinder has been transformed and reduced in the documents in Ezra 1–6 to refer to lifeless temple vessels. In either case, the Cyrus Cylinder does not speak of any rebuilding of sanctuaries, in contrast to Ezra 1–6 which has the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem at the very top of its agenda.

Turning to matters of history, does the literary content of the Cyrus Cylinder support the historicity of the account in Ezra 1–6? In my view, it does but, as I shall demonstrate, below, only indirectly. On the one hand, the Cyrus Cylinder never states that Cyrus supported the rebuilding of sanctuaries. On the other hand, no evidence suggests that the exiles who returned in 539 BCE (assuming that such a group actually existed, cf. Ezra 1:7–11) prioritised the restoration of the temple. In other words, *neither* the Cyrus Cylinder *nor* the textual evidence outside Ezra 1–6 (especially Ezra 5:13–15, 17) maintain that the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple was a priority in 539 BCE. As James Trotter has high-

---

[17] Hanspeter Schaudig, "The Magnanimous Heart of Cyrus: The Cyrus Cylinder and its Literary Models," in *Cyrus the Great: Life and Lore*, ed. M. Rahim Shayegan (Ilex Series, 21; Boston: Harvard University Press, 2019), 67–91 (76).

lighted, Haggai and Zech 1–8 do not portray any building activity prior to 520 BCE and they attribute the entire temple building process to Zerubbabel (Hag 2:18; Zech 4:8–9; 6:9–15; 8:9). In other words, neither the Cyrus Cylinder nor the relatively early textual evidence in Haggai and Zech 1–8 maintain that the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple was a priority in 539 BCE.

Only Ezra 1–6 speaks of earlier building plans around 539 BCE (Ezra 1).[18] According to Trotter, the "author of Ezra-Nehemiah wanted (needed?) to correlate the beginning of the construction of the second temple with the beginning of Persian rule and the first Persian appointed ruler of the province."[19] The lack of building endeavour in 539 BCE further raises the question of a Jerusalem without a temple. Trotter asks whether the scholarly acceptance of the claims of Ezra 1–6, *contra* those of Haggai and Zechariah, reflects "a belief that the religion of Yahweh could not continue to function without a temple in Jerusalem?" Trotter responds to his own questions that "It is also quite obvious that the temple was not an absolute necessity to the survival of the religion of Yahweh."[20]

In sum, if no building activity took place in Judah around 539 BCE, then the whole idea of a Cyrus edict in Ezra 1:2–4 and Ezra 6:2–5 respectively, with its strong focus on temple rebuilding, is likely to be fictitious. This insight, in turn, shifts the discussion from the historical to the literary realm. The question is rather where this idea originated? Did it come from the Cyrus Cylinder? This is unlikely given its distinct lack of reference to any temple building endeavour. Did it come from Isa

---

[18] James M. Trotter, "Was the Second Jerusalem Temple a Primarily Persian Project?" *SJOT* 15 (2001): 276–293 (284–285).

[19] Trotter, "Second Jerusalem Temple," 283.

[20] Trotter, "Second Jerusalem Temple," 286. See also Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, "Continuity of Worship: The Portrayal of the Temple and its Cult in Isaiah 40–55," in *Writing and Re-Writing History by Destruction: Proceedings of the Annual Minerva Center RIAB Conference, Leipzig, 2018*, ed. Angelica Berlejung, Aren M. Maeir, and Takayoshi M. Oshima (RIAB, 3 / ORA; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 169–188.

40–48? This is also unlikely given its marginal character there as well (see below). In my view, it is the innovation of the redactors of Ezra 1–6 and, as such, reflects their ideology rather than historical reality.

Imperial Role in Temple Building

This discussion ties in with a series of historical questions. First, what was the role of the Persian Empire in the building of the temple? Peter Bedford, without mentioning the Cyrus Cylinder, argues that while the rebuilding of the temple was not instigated by the Persian Empire, it was officially sanctioned by them:

> The temple was a government-sanctioned public work for local good, much of whose costs (for rebuilding and ongoing maintenance, and for its personnel) the government expected the local community to meet. The local community had responsibility for organizing how these costs were to be met. In short, the government was either financially unable or unwilling to fund these local projects, either instigated by them or desired by the local community, and so sought payments in support of the project.[21]

Regarding the question of the economy—who paid for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple and who met its ongoing expenses—Bedford argues that was funded by "informal taxation," yet the social expectation for contributing was not always strong enough to ensure payments were made. The Jerusalem priesthood lacked the political authority to demand payments, and they also lacked the authority to implement formal taxes.[22]

Religious Tolerance

Second, biblical scholarship has also appealed to the Cyrus Cylinder to determine the issue of whether and to what extent the Persians tolerated

---

[21] See further Peter R. Bedford, *Temple Restoration in Early Achaemenid Judah* (SJSJ, 65; Leiden: Brill, 2001); idem, "Temple Funding and Priestly Authority in Achaemenid Judah," in *Exile and Return*, ed. Jonathan Stökl and Caroline Waerzeggers (BZAW, 478; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 336–344 (348).

[22] Bedford, "Temple Funding," 348.

and/or even supported local cults. On the one hand, Grabbe argues that the Persians were neither more nor less tolerant than their Assyrian and Babylonian predecessors.[23] Rather, the Persian tolerance towards foreign cults is (1) in line with that of their predecessors, (2) exaggerated in their propaganda, and (3) contingent upon the loyalty and taxes of the local cults to the Empire. The claim that the Persian Empire supported local cults economically in general, or the minority ethnic group of the Jews in particular, is thus unfounded.[24] On the other hand, Pongratz-Leisten claims that the expressed tolerance of foreign cults expressed in the Cyrus Cylinder is not all empty rhetoric. The focus of her investigation is whether the "tolerance towards the Babylonian gods and people, which has been defined as a particularly characteristic feature of Cyrus, is indeed unique, or whether it should rather be considered a typical trait of polytheistic systems in the ancient Near East."[25] In her view, the Cyrus Cylinder rather "provides us with the portrayal of a statesman, who strategically responded to the manifold socio-historical conditions of the Babylonian capital."[26]

The Cyrus Cylinder and Isaiah 40–48

Returning to the realm of literature, the Bible mentions Persian ruler Cyrus not only in Ezra 1–6 but also in Isa 40–48. Consequently, the Cyrus Cylinder has also been used to explain the references to Cyrus in Isa 40–48. The parallels between the material about Cyrus in Isa 40–48 and the Cyrus Cylinder have been long noted, beginning as early as 1898 with Rudolf Kittel's influential article,[27] and later substantiated by Morton Smith's equally influential study.[28]

---

[23] Grabbe, "Persian Documents," 534–535.
[24] Grabbe, "Persian Documents," 540–542.
[25] Pongratz-Leisten, "Ich bin ein Babylonier," 94.
[26] Pongratz-Leisten, "Ich bin ein Babylonier," 102.
[27] Rudolf Kittel, "Cyrus und Deuterojesaja," *ZAW* 18 (1898): 149–162.
[28] Morton Smith, "II Isaiah and the Persians," *JAOS* 83 (1963): 415–421.

Cyrus in Isaiah 40–48

Cyrus is mentioned by name in one passage in Isaiah, namely in Isa 44:24–45:7.[29] These verses speak predominantly about YHWH's creation and care of his people (v. 24), they laud YHWH's incomparability (v. 25), steadfastness, and accountability: he will carry out what he has promised (v. 26a). The oracle further depicts Cyrus as YHWH's shepherd who fulfils his will (v. 28). Cyrus is YHWH's anointed who will subdue the nations (v. 1). YHWH will walk before Cyrus and destroy all obstacles (v. 2), give him hidden treasures (v. 3), and strengthen him (v. 4), so that everybody will know YHWH (v. 5). What deserves pointing out is that Isa 44:28 does not attribute the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple to Cyrus; YHWH is responsible for these actions. Furthermore, and equally seldom noted, no verse in 44:24–45:7 mentions the return of the exiles (see further below).

In addition, four other passages in Isa 40–48 seem likely to implicate Cyrus. These texts are linked to one another through shared vocabulary.[30] Together, they also form a concentric pattern around the central piece in Isa 45:1–5 (7) that mentions Cyrus by name. This structure, according to Martin Leuenberger, illustrates the theo-political view of Isa 40–52, that is, the core of Isa 40–55.[31]

---

[29] For the delimitations of the oracles, see, for example, Graham S. Ogden, "Moses and Cyrus: Literary Affinities between the Priestly Presentation of Moses in Exodus vi–viii and the Cyrus Song in Isaiah xliv 24–xlv 13," *VT* 28 (1978): 195–203 (196); Jan P. Fokkelman, "The Cyrus Oracles (Isaiah 44,24–45,7) from the Perspective of Syntax, Versification and Structure," in *Studies in the Book of Isaiah: FS W. A. M. Beuken*, ed. J. van Ruiten and M. Vervenne (BEThL, 132; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 303–323.

[30] See further Antti Laato, *The Servant of Yhwh and Cyrus: Reinterpretation of the Exilic Messianic Programme in Isaiah 40–55* (ConBib, 35; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1992), 36–37.

[31] Martin Leuenberger, "Messias im Übergang: Die Kyrostexte im literarischen und historischen Kontexts des (Deutero-)Jesajabuchs," in *"Überall und immer" – "Nur hier und jetzt": Theologische Perspektiven auf das Spannungsverhältnis von Partikularität und*

Isa 41:2–3 (v. 2a, מי העיר ממזרח צדק יקראהו לרגלו), as well as Isa
41:25 (העירותי מצפון ויאת ממזרח־שמש יקרא בשמי ויבא סגנים כמו־חמר
וכמו יוצר ירמס־טיט), speaks of a man whom God has aroused from the
east. Much favours identifying this "man" with Cyrus.[32] If this identifi-
cation is correct, then Cyrus's "job description," according to these vers-
es, is to defeat the nations and hand them over to YHWH. The focus is
thus on Cyrus's military power over the nations; no word refers to either
rebuilding of the temple or the repatriation of the exiles. It follows that I
disagree with Leuenberger, who understands the expression ירדפם יעבור
שלום (Jes 41:3a) to mean that Cyrus's task was to defeat and to bring
peace to the nations ("seine Aufgabe der Völkerbesiegung und -be-
friedung").[33] Cyrus's God-ordained task was not, as argued by Leuen-
berger, to rule peacefully over the nations. Rather, it was to allow Cyrus
to progress unhindered on his path and to exert military power over the
nations.

Isa 43:14 may also speak about Cyrus. This verse tells how Yhwh will
"send to Babylon" someone for "your sake" (v. 14bα, למענכם שלחתי
בבלה). This action will bring destruction to the Babylonians. Although
the Hebrew is difficult to translate, the general outcome appears to be
that the Babylonians will flee in their ships (v. 14bβ, והורדתי בריחים כלם
וכשדים באניות רנתם). There is again no word about the rebuilding of the
temple and the repatriation of the Judean exiles.

Universalität; Ökumenische Beiträge aus dem Theologischen Studienjahr, ed. Thomas
Fornet-Ponse (JThF, 29; Münster: Aschendorff, 2016), 39–65 (47–48, 58).

[32] On this verse and the possible identification of this man, see further Gwilym H.
Jones, "Abraham and Cyrus: Type and Anti-Type?" *VT* 22 (1972): 304–319. Jones
argues that the Isaianic author is here making a double reference to Cyrus and to
Abraham. Both men are called by God from "the east." What we have here in Isaiah is
thus a typological reading and application of a biblical tradition which serves to
comment on Cyrus.

[33] Martin Leuenberger, "Die geschichtstheologische Begründung der Einzigkeit
Jhwhs im Kyros-Orakel Jes 45, 1–7," *ThZ* 4/64 (2008): 343–357 (351–352).

Isa 46:11 (v. 11a, [עצתו] (עצתו) איש מרחק מארץ עיט ממזרח קרא)
probably also refers to Cyrus as it, like Isa 41:2–3, 25, speaks of YHWH
calling a "ravenous bird from the east," a man who will carry out
YHWH's counsel.[34] In the ensuing verse 13, YHWH declares that he
will bring his salvation to Zion. Although this action may, of course, be
understood as a veiled reference to the repatriation of the exiles and the
rebuilding of the temple, nothing forces the reader to do so.

Finally, Isa 48:14–15 (v. 14b, כשדים וזרעו בבבל חפצו יעשה אהבו ה')
continues in the same vein as Isa 41:2–3, 25, and 46:11. YHWH's
"beloved" (אהבו), again presumably identified with Cyrus, will carry out
YHWH's purposes against Babylon. Running the risk of sounding
repetitive, nothing in this verse and its immediate context speaks of the
rebuilding of the temple and the repatriation of the Judahite exiles.

A few scholars have also argued that Cyrus is referred to in addition-
al places, such as Isa 40:9–11,[35] but these readings remain ultimately
unconvincing.

Parallels between Isaiah 40–48 and the Cyrus Cylinder

Many scholars have highlighted the affinity—as well as the differ-
ences—between the literary description of Cyrus in Isa 40–48 with that
in the Cyrus Cylinder in terms of structure, images, and theology. On a
very general level, both texts share the notion that a deity has called
Cyrus to do his will. This idea is, however, not unique to these two texts
and need not point to any direct influence. Equally obvious is that the

---

[34] For a discussion of the identification of Cyrus with the "bird of prey," see Michael
Jay Chan, "Cyrus, Yhwh's Bird of Prey (Isa. 46.11): Echoes of an Ancient Near Eastern
Metaphor," *JSOT* 35 (2010): 113–127. For other scholars who also identify the bird
with Cyrus, see the substantial footnote 1. Chan argues that the author of Isa 46:11 was
familiar with how kings represented themselves in official literature (127).

[35] Erasmus Gass, "Jahwe oder der Perserkönig? Intertextuelle und semantische
Studien zu Jes 40,10," *Biblica* 92 (2011): 503–527, for example, has argued that Cyrus
is the "shepherd" and the "warrior" also in Isa 40:10 and 11, due to the shared
vocabulary between Isa 40:9–11 and Isa 44:28.

deity—Marduk in the Cyrus Cylinder and YHWH in Isa 40–48—differs in the two texts.[36] More specifically, the affinity between the two sets of texts has raised the question of whether the material in Isa 40–48 is (1) directly dependent upon and (2) reacts to the Cyrus Cylinder.

The Relative Dating of Isaiah 40–55 and the Cyrus Cylinder

The question of influence depends on the relative date of composition of Isa 40–55 and the Cyrus Cylinder. In short, given the nearly certain dating of the Cyrus Cylinder to 538 BCE, is Isa 40–55 mainly the earlier work of the Neo-Babylonian era that has yet to see the fall of Babylon in 539 BCE, or is it the later text that looks back on these events? There are three main scholarly views:

(1) *Isa 40–55 originated in the Neo-Babylonian era prior to Cyrus's conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE.* This view is supported by Isa 46:1–2; 47:1–15, where the fall of Babylon is predicted but not described as having already happened. The fact that the details of these predictions disagree with historical reality also speaks in its favour: rather than destroying the city and its population, as predicted, Cyrus spared the city.[37] Several scholars, therefore, argue for the priority of the Isaianic material. Among earlier scholars, Smith ruled out that Isa 40–48 depended on the Cyrus Cylinder, based on his view that Isa 40–48 was written in the late Neo-Babylonian era whereas the Cylinder was composed in the early Persian era.[38] Among more recent scholars, Tina Dykesteen Nilsen likewise dates Isa 40–55 shortly prior to the Cyrus Cylinder.[39]

(2) *Isa 40–55 stems from the sixth century but is written after 539 BCE.* This dating allows for Isa 40–55 to be familiar with and even react to the Cyrus

---

[36] Cf. Leuenberger, "Begründung," 351.

[37] See, e.g., Carroll E. Simcox, "The Rôle of Cyrus in Deutero-Isaiah," JAOS 57 (1937): 158–171.

[38] Smith, "II Isaiah," 417–418. See also Christopher R. North, *The Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Commentary to Chapters 40–55* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), 149.

[39] Tina Dykesteen Nilsen, "Creation in Collision? Isaiah 40–48 and Zoroastrianism, Babylonian Religion, and Genesis 1," *JHS* 13 (2013): article 8.

Cylinder. Lisbeth Fried, for instance, suggests that the author of Isa 40–55 was a contemporary of Cyrus, who wrote after the return under Sheshbazzar and thus after the foundation of the temple had been laid, yet before its completion in the sixth year of Darius I, that is, sometime during the reign of Cyrus and Cambyses.[40] From a different perspective, Erich Gruen maintains that the oracles against Cyrus in Isa 40–55 read "very much like the clarity of hindsight."[41]

(3) *Most, if not all, of Isa 40–55 is a product of the fifth century BCE.* Klaus Baltzer, for example, maintains that the references to Cyrus in Isa 40–55 are not contemporary with Cyrus; rather the name Cyrus functions as a symbol of an ideal ruler who is depicted as a "new David."[42] Along similar lines, Rainer Albertz argues that Darius I, rather than Cyrus, is YHWH's anointed in the first edition of Isa 40–55.[43]

The Character of the Influence

Those scholars who pre-date Isa 40–48 obviously cannot argue for any form of direct influence of the Cylinder upon Isaiah. Rather, they explain the similarities in other ways. A few scholars have understood the influence to be historical rather than literary. Smith, for example, regarded the information in Isa 40–55 to be dependent on "the propaganda put out in Babylonia by Cyrus' agents, shortly before Cyrus' conquest, to prepare the way of their lord."[44] Other scholars have rejected the notion of any direct, literary influence of one text upon the other, and choose instead to speak of a shared literary style. Kittel, for instance, accounts for the affinity between the two texts as a matter of shared "Babylonian court style,"[45] while Christopher R. North main-

──────────────

[40] Lisbeth S. Fried, "Cyrus the Messiah? The Historical Background to Isaiah 45:1," *HTR* 95 (2002): 373–393 (374, 378–379).

[41] Erich S. Gruen, *The Construct of Identity in Hellenistic Judaism: Essays on Early Jewish Literature and History* (DCLS, 29; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 230.

[42] Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55* (trans. M. Kohl; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 30–32, 225.

[43] Albertz, "Darius in Place of Cyrus," 383.

[44] Smith, "II Isaiah," 417.

tains that the similarities can be explained by "general Semitic idiom."[46]
Dykesteen Nilsen likewise sees the following parallels as examples of familiarity with Babylonian traditions:

- Marduk's anger because of cultic distortion (Cyl. 1:2–3, 9–10a) resembles YHWH's anger at Jerusalem in Isa 54:7–8.

- Marduk's search for someone to grasp by the hand to be king over the entire world (Cyl. 1:12) is reminiscent of, yet also different from Isa 45:1 where YHWH takes Cyrus by the hand to subdue the nations.

- As the Cyrus Cylinder claims that Marduk deals with Cyrus, so Isa 40–55 claims that YHWH calls Cyrus (Isa 44:28–45:1), names him (Isa 45:3–4), declares him to be a ruler (Isa 44:28–45:1), makes countries subject to him (Isa 41:2–3, 25; 45:1–2), orders him to march against Babylon (Isa 43:14), is his friend (Cyl. 1:19 / Isa 45:2–3), and finally delivers Babylon into his hands (Isa 48:14–15).

- Cyrus resettles the gods to their proper places and allows people to return to their homelands (Cyl. 1:31–32 / Isa 44:26, 28; 45:13).[47]

In her view, though, the use in Isa 40–48 of the shared idioms is polemic: they refute and ridicule aspects of Babylonian religion.[48]

Those scholars who regard Isa 40–48 as a Persian rather than a Neo-Babylonian endeavour are (naturally) more prone to explore the significance of the Cyrus Cylinder for interpreting Isa 40–48/52/55. Stéphanie Anthonioz, for instance, argues for the direct literary dependency of Isa 40–55 upon the cylinder, in view of the similar theological outlook, poetic structure, and focus on the exclusivity of one deity. In her view, the Cyrus Cylinder is particularly important for understanding the idol polemic of Isa 40–48 (Isa 40:12–31; 41:1–10; 44:6–22; 46:1–13).[49] She highlights that the Cylinder denounces Nabonidus's worship

---

[45] Kittel, "Cyrus und Deuterojesaja," 160 ("babylonischer Hofstil").

[46] North, *Second Isaiah*, 149.

[47] Nilsen, "Creation in Collision," 8–10.

[48] Nilsen, "Creation in Collision," 10.

[49] Stéphanie Anthonioz, "La polémique contre l'idolâtrie (Is. 40–48) à la lumière du

of Sin as "idolatry" (lines 5–6) because it fails to align with the official cult of Marduk in Babylon. In her view, this polemic concerning the theological exclusivity of Marduk in the Cylinder can be compared with the similar polemic in Isa 40–55.[50] In more detail, Anthonioz compares the statements about YHWH's incomparability in Isa 40:18, 25 with those about Marduk in the Cyrus Cylinder. She also emphasises the affinity between Isa 41 and the Cyrus Cylinder: Cyrus is described as "just" (Isa 41:2; Cyl. 1:12, 14), the nations are delivered to him (Isa 41:2; Cyl. 1:12–13), and he is being led on a path (Isa 41:3; Cyl. 1:15).[51] Furthermore, Cyrus is described as the deity's instrument before whom the nations are bowing down (Isa 45:1; Cyl. 1:13).[52]

Other scholars have stressed other, more specific, parallels. Jan Dietrich, in his discussion of friendship in ancient Near Eastern texts, notes the shared use of the term "friend." The cylinder (Cyl. 1:15) describes Marduk as Cyrus's "friend and companion" who walks alongside him, using the Akkadian expression *kīma ibri u tappê*. Isa 48:14bα likewise states that God helps his "friend" [Cyrus] (ה' אהבו יעשה חפצו בבבל).[53]

Although I do not deny the existence of literary parallels between the Cyrus Cylinder and Isa 44:28–45:8, they are in my view often overstated.[54] In particular, as I have argued earlier, the alleged parallels between Cyl. 1:12 ("whose right hand I have grasped" and "he called his name") and Isa 45:1 and 3 are in my view not compelling. First, the Cyrus cylinder does not use the phrase *qāta ṣabātu* or the related *qāta aḫāzu*,

---

cylindre de Cyrus," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 84 (2010): 19–42; eadem, *"A qui me comparerez-vous?" La polémique contre l'idolâtrie dans le Deutéro-Isaïe* (Lectio divina, 241; Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2011).

[50] Anthonioz, "Polémique," 27.

[51] Anthonioz, "Polémique," 34.

[52] Anthonioz, "Polémique," 38.

[53] Jan Dietrich, "Friendship with God: Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Perspectives," *SJOT* 28 (2014): 157–171 (165); cf. Leuenberger, "Begründung," 53 n. 45.

[54] See further Tiemeyer, *Comfort*, 96–98.

which are cognate expressions of the Hebrew expression החזיק יד attest-
ed in Isa 45:1. Rather, it contains the phrase *it-ta-ma-ah qa-tu-uš-šu*, de-
rived from the verb *tamāhu + qātu* = "to give in the hand" ("in die Hand
geben").[55] Second, the subject and the object differ in the two texts. In
the biblical text, the hand belongs to Cyrus, while in the Cyrus cylinder
the hand belongs to Marduk. It is therefore far from obvious that the
Hebrew and the Akkadian expressions convey the same meaning. In
fact, a better way of translating the Akkadian expression is "whom he
could support" as reflected in Cogan's translation[56] or "dear to his heart"
as reflected in Schaudig's translation.[57] It is thus unlikely that this gener-
al affinity between Isa 45:1 and the Cyrus cylinder reflects a situation in
which the Isaianic author borrowed directly from the Akkadian text. In-
stead, it is preferable to explain the similarity as arising from a shared
ideology within the ancient Near East, where the specific relationship
between a king and his deity is expressed in terms of the deity support-
ing and strengthening the ruler (cf. also Jer 31:32 and Ps 110:5).[58]

It should, in this context, also be mentioned that scholars have de-
tected parallels in Isa 44:24–45:7 to inner-biblical texts. Ogden, for
example, argues that the depiction of Cyrus draws predominantly from
the Priestly presentation of Moses in Exod 6–8.[59] Even though these
parallels do not in themselves annul those to the Cyrus Cylinder, it is
methodologically preferable to give preference to inner-biblical parallels,
especially given the uncertainty to what extent the author(s) of Isa 40–
55 understood Akkadian.

———————————

[55] Hanspeter Schaudig, "Restoration of Temples," 141–164, 684 (glossary). See *CAD*
18, 108, 1:3':b, that lists *tamāhu + qātu* as "to take up in order to assist," "to lead," in
the context of the Cyrus Cylinder.

[56] Cogan, "Cyrus Cylinder," 315.

[57] Schaudig, "Text of the Cyrus Cylinder," 22.

[58] Tiemeyer, *Comfort*, 97.

[59] Ogden, "Moses and Cyrus."

The Genre of Isaiah 40–55: Propaganda or Satire?

The Cyrus Cylinder has also influenced the discussion of genre in Isa 40–55. The Cyrus Cylinder clearly forms a piece of royal Persian propaganda in favour of Cyrus's rule in Babylon, to the degree that Chavel has aptly called it "the self-congratulating Cyrus cylinder."[60] It celebrates Cyrus's victory over Babylon and highlights the achievements of his reign. It assigns the responsibility of Cyrus's success to Marduk: Marduk was angry with Babylon due to Nabonidus's perceived neglect of the Marduk cult in favour of that of the moon god Sin, and thus sought someone, namely Cyrus, who would restore the Marduk cult to its proper place.

The polemical nature of the Cyrus Cylinder forces biblical scholars to reassess how they interpret the (alleged) affinity with the Isaianic material. If the Cyrus Cylinder has indeed influenced the message of Isa 40–48, does that mean that the Isaianic text constitutes a piece of Persian propaganda? Alternatively, does Isa 40–48 offer a (critical) reaction against the Cylinder? A range of views has been defended by scholarship.

On the one hand, Joseph Blenkinsopp situates the author among Cyrus's followers[61] and Lisbeth Fried suggests that Isa 40–55 forms an example of *vaticinia ex eventu*, the aim of which was to legitimise Cyrus as the Davidic monarch and heir to the Davidic throne.[62] On the other hand, Dykesteen Nilsen argues that Isa 40–48 seeks to refute aspects of Babylonian religion.[63]

In these ideological discussions, it is important to remember that whereas the Cyrus Cylinder serves the purposes of Cyrus himself, Isa

---

[60] Simeon Chavel, "Prophetic Imagination in the Light of Narratology and Disability Studies in Isaiah 40–48," *JHS* 14 (2014), article 3 (3).

[61] Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Second Isaiah-Prophet of Universalism," *JSOT* 41 (1988): 83–103 (84–85).

[62] Fried, "Cyrus the Messiah," 374–375, 390–393.

[63] Nilsen, "Creation in Collision," 10.

40–48 serves the purpose of the Isaianic author. Expressed differently, the material about Cyrus in Isaiah is not a depiction of Cyrus's own understanding of himself; rather, it constitutes the Isaianic author's understanding of Cyrus's kingship *in relation to Israel*.[64] As expressed by Stéphanie Anthonioz, it is *Israel* rather than Cyrus who is elected by YHWH (Isa 41:8, 13).[65] Furthermore, the worship offered by the nations etc. is to *YHWH* (Isa 42:10–11) rather than Cyrus (Cyl. 1:28–30).[66] Likewise, whereas in the Cylinder the people hailed Cyrus as the one who had saved them (Cyl. 1:19), in Isaiah it is YHWH who through his creative powers is their redeemer (Isa 43:1–7),[67] and it is YHWH (rather than Cyrus) who in Isa 43:14–21 has defeated Babylon. Given these differences, Anthonioz argues that Isa 40–48 forms a polemic against the portrayal of Cyrus in the Cyrus Cylinder, to defend the kingship and supremacy of YHWH. It is also a polemic against the idol worship of Babylon: Yhwh is the creator rather than a thing created. Using similar expressions, such as "shepherd," Isaiah 40–48 stresses the supremacy of YHWH over and against Marduk: YHWH rather than Marduk has called Cyrus, and Israel rather than Cyrus is YHWH's true servant.[68] Put succinctly, Cyrus in the Cylinder and Cyrus in Isaiah are different characters who have different roles. In the Cyrus Cylinder, Cyrus is Marduk's tool; in Isa 40–48, Cyrus is YHWH's tool *for the sake of Israel*.[69] Erich Gruen likewise argues that the portrayal of Cyrus in Isa 40–55 is not wholly complimentary: no lofty ideals or sterling qualities

---

[64] Cf. Leuenberger, "Begründung," 53.

[65] Anthonioz, "Polémique," 34–35.

[66] Anthonioz, "Polémique," 36.

[67] Anthonioz, "Polémique," 36–37.

[68] Anthonioz, "Polémique," 37–38.

[69] Anthonioz, "Polémique," 40–42. Anthonioz further argues that a comparison between Isa 40–48 and the Cyrus Cylinder demonstrates that the so-called idol fabrication passages (40:19–20; 41:6–7; 44:9–20; 46:6–7) are integral to Isa 40–48: they are propaganda against the Achaemenid politics and the Babylonian religion, in a similar way that the Cyrus cylinder is propaganda against Nabonidus's beliefs.

are ascribed to Cyrus. Rather, the king is portrayed as little more than God's tool who discharges YHWH's commands: "Deutero-Isaiah has, in effect, claimed for Yahweh the imperial accomplishments of the Persian king."[70] Sebastian Grätz makes a similar point: although Yhwh has mobilised Cyrus, it is ultimately not about him, but about Israel. Israel is "chosen" (*paal* בחר) whereas Cyrus is "stirred up" (*hiphil* עור) by God to serve the interests of Israel.[71] It is thus appropriate that whereas Cyrus speaks in the first person alongside Marduk in the Cylinder (and serves his own interests), in Isa 40–48 only YHWH speaks about Cyrus.[72]

CYRUS AND THE SERVANT

The Cyrus Cylinder has often been used to shed light upon the Servant Songs in Isa 40–55. Notably, several scholars have identified the Servant of Isa 40–54 with Cyrus. According to Emery Barnes, the statement in the Servant Songs in Isa 42:1–7 (6) and Isa 49:1–6 (6) that the Servant will be a "light to the nations" can be compared with the statement in the Cyrus Cylinder 1:19 that all the people in "the entire land of Sumer and Akkad" bowed before Cyrus and kissed his feet "with shining faces."[73] Barnes further argues that these two Servant Songs stem from Deutero-Isaiah himself (rather than being a later addition, cf. Bernhard Duhm) and represent progress in his teaching. At first, Deutero-Isaiah saw Cyrus as his servant but later, as the situation developed, "a spiritual agent must take up the work."[74]

　　More tentatively, and without referring explicitly to the Cyrus Cylinder, other scholars have discussed the same issue. Joseph Blenkinsopp

---

[70] Gruen, *Construct of Identity*, 231.

[71] Grätz, "Kyroszylinder," 347.

[72] Grätz, "Kyroszylinder," 348.

[73] W. Emery Barnes, "Cyrus the 'Servant of Jehovah': Isa. Xlii 1–4 (7)," *JTS* 32 (1930): 32–39 (3). Cf. Laato, *Servant of YHWH*, 45–46.

[74] Barnes, "Cyrus," 38–39.

argues that the task "to open the eyes that are blind and bring out the prisoners from the dungeon" (Isa 42:7) is best understood to refer to the actions of Cyrus, yet this reading of the first Servant Song must "remain in the realm of hypothesis like all other attempts made to date to unmask the incognito or this servant."[75] With more confidence, Ulrich Berges identifies the earliest layer, found in Isa 42:5–9, to be about Cyrus. According to Berges, these verses originally formed the continuation of Isa 41:21–26. The later Isa 42:1–2 constitutes a reinterpretation of the original material, where the promises about Cyrus become applied to the Servant.[76] Other scholars stress the differences between the two figures. Leuenberger, for example, challenges the notion that the Isaianic Servant is a royal figure.[77] Along similar lines, Goswell claims that the servant's role in Isaiah (42:1–4, cf. 61:1–3) *precedes* the deliverance of God's people and the founding of God's kingdom, as he, like a prophetic figure, *announces* how God will secure justice for his people.[78] Taken together, it is fair to conclude that nothing compels the exegete to identify the Isaianic servant figure with Cyrus and that there is very little palpable evidence in favour of such an identification.

---

[75] Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Servant and the Servants in Isaiah and the Formation of the Book," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah. Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans (VTSup, 70/1; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 155–175 (164).

[76] Ulrich F. Berges, *The Book of Isaiah: Its Composition and Final Form* (trans. Millard C. Lind; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 321–323, 336–337. In a later publication, "Kingship and Servanthood in the Book of Isaiah," in *The Book of Isaiah: Enduring Questions Answered Anew. Essays Honoring Joseph Blenkinsopp and His Contribution to the Study of Isaiah*, ed. Richard J. Bautch and J. Todd Hibbard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 159–178 (170–171), Berges emphasises Cyrus and the Servant's complementary roles and stresses the differences between them.

[77] Leuenberger, "Begründung," 50.

[78] Gregory Goswell, "A Royal Isaianic Servant of Yhwh?" *SJOT* 31 (2017): 185–201.

ISAIAH 40–48 AND EZRA 1–6

A few scholars have explored the relationship between the references to Cyrus in Ezra 1–6 and those in Isa 40–48. This discussion has two intertwined aspects: the textual relationship between the two sets of sources and the historical issue of the building of the temple. Scholars involved in this discussion often refer to the Cyrus Cylinder to support their claims.

It should be noted upfront that there are significant differences between how Isa 40–48 and Ezra 1–6 depict Cyrus and his duties towards God's people. These differences may reflect their distinct genre, namely the poetic, theocentric quality of Isa 40–48 versus the more historically oriented presentation of Ezra 1–6. Alternatively, and what is argued here, is that their their divergent understandings of Judah's restoration is a matter of ideology. Whereas Isa 40–48 downplays the significance of the repatriation of the Babylonian Jewry and the role of the Jerusalem temple in Judah's worship, Ezra 1–6 upholds the superiority of the exilic community and the significance of formal worship.[79]

Is Isaiah 40–48 a Source of Influence behind Ezra 1–6?

It is customary to view the references to Cyrus in Isa 40–48 as chronologically earlier than those in Ezra 1 and 6. This relative dating raises the question of whether the Cyrus material in Ezra 1–6 is influenced or even inspired by the references to Cyrus in Isa 40–48. Several scholars have argued that Isa 40–48 forms (part of) the stimulus for the Cyrus edicts in Ezra 1 and 6. Williamson, for instance, argues that it "is difficult not to suppose that the writer of Ezra indeed had such passages in the forefront of his mind so close is their language and content to that which he is describing as the fulfilment of prophecy," [80] Sebastian Grätz likewise claims that Isa 44:28 shows affinity with the Cyrus Edict in

---

[79] See further Tiemeyer, "Continuity."

[80] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 9–10.

Ezra 1:2–4, the purpose of which concerns Cyrus's task of building the temple.[81] Along similar lines, William Schneidewind maintains that the best evidence for the positive view of Cyrus in Ezra 1–6 is not the cuneiform sources but Isa 45.[82] Coming from a slightly different angle, Erich Gruen states that the material in Ezra about Cyrus, "with its stress on Yahweh's responsibility for Persian successes and Yahweh's stimulus for the Persian edict to rebuild the Temple and reinstated the exiles, fits perfectly with the forecast of Deutero-Isaiah."[83]

In the following discussion, I wish to nuance these views, as none is fully in-line with the actual content of Isa 40–55. There is remarkably scant textual support for considering Ezra 1:2–4 to be dependent upon Isa 44:28–45:7.

Isaiah 40–48 Does Not Claim that Cyrus Brought the Exiles Back

First, none of the passages about Cyrus in Isa 40–48 speak about the repatriation of the exiles. Instead, as already noted above, Cyrus is depicted as YHWH's tool who acts against the nations in general and Babylon in particular. The focal point of Cyrus's divinely ordained activity is to bring havoc upon the Babylonians. In parallel, YHWH will act on behalf of his people Israel. This latter statement *can*, of course, involve bringing the exiles back from Babylon, yet this is never explicitly

---

[81] Cf. Sebastian Grätz, "Alter Wein in neuen Schläuchen? Die Bücher Esra/Nehemia zwischen Tradition und Innovation," in *Denkt Nicht Mehr an Das Fruhere! Begrundungsressourcen in Esra/Nehemia Und Jes 40–66 Im Vergleich*, ed. M. Maria Häusl (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 77–91 (80), who highlights the affinity between Isa 44:28–45:7 and Ezra 1:1–4.

[82] William Schneidewind, "Cyrus and Post-Collapse Yehud," in *Cyrus the Great: Life and Lore*, ed. M. Rahim Shayegan (Ilex Series, 21; Boston: Harvard University Press, 2019), 106–115 (113).

[83] Gruen, *Construct of Identity*, 232. I understand this statement to mean that Gruen sees Isa 40–55 as the earlier text, which influenced the conceptualisation of Cyrus as responsible for building the temple.

stated, and it is methodologically flawed to read them into the text for no apparent reason. What further speaks against it is the minor role that the return of the exiles plays generally in Isa 40–48 (and even less so in chs 49–55).[84] Cyrus is presented in Isa 40–48 as carrying out YHWH's will, but there is no reason to maintain, on the basis of Isa 40–48, that that would involve the repatriation of Babylonian Jewry to Judah. These are concerns that come to the forefront in Ezra 1–6 but should not be read into the fabric of Isa 40–48.

Isaiah 40–48 Does Not Claim That Cyrus Built the Temple

Second, with one exception, none of the passages about Cyrus in Isa 40–48 speak about the rebuilding of the temple. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, only one verse in the entire Isa 40–55, namely Isa 44:28, mentions the temple.[85] The second half of this verse is in many respects a duplicate of the preceding Isa 44:26, which contains much of the same information and a similar syntactical construction, albeit without the reference to the temple and instead with a reference to the cities of Judah. Because Isa 44:28b imitates the preceding verse 26, many scholars treat this statement as a later addition (cf. below).[86] Verse 28 may be translated literally as follows:

> [YHWH] who says to Cyrus (האמר לכורש): "My shepherd" (רעי). He will accomplish my desired will (וכל–חפצי ישלם). And saying to Jerusalem (ולאמר לירושלם): "You shall be rebuilt" (תבנה) and to the temple: "You shall be refounded" (והיכל תוסד).

---

[84] See further Tiemeyer, *Comfort*.

[85] The arguments listed here can be found in more detail in Tiemeyer, "Continuity."

[86] See, e.g., Karl Elliger, *Deuterojesaja: Jesaja 40,1–45,7* (BKAT, XI/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1978), 478–479; Jürgen van Oorschot, *Von Babel zum Zion: Eine literarkritische und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung von Jesaja 40–55* (BZAW, 206; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 76; Reinhard Achenbach, "Das Kyros-Orakel in Jesaja 44,24–45,7 im Lichte altorientalischer Parallelen," *ZABR* 11 (2005): 155–194.

Verse 28b attests to unusual and somewhat strange syntax that does not fit well with verse 28a.

(1) First, the infinitive לאמר ("saying") does not fit the three-fold use of האמר in the preceding verses 26–28a. Further, a clear subject is lacking: is it Cyrus or YHWH who is "speaking" to Jerusalem and the temple? In my view, its present literary context favours viewing YHWH as the speaker.[87] As YHWH is the speaker in both verse 26 and verse 28a, it makes syntactical sense to assume that he is the speaker also in verse 28b.

(2) Secondly, the verbal forms are probably incorrect. The first form תבנה is vocalized as a 3 f. sg. *niphal* jussive ("to be built"), and thus must refer to the f. sg. Jerusalem. The following statement, והיכל תוסד, is grammatically difficult to explain. As the word היכל is m. sg., the expected jussive form would be יוסד rather than the attested f. sg. תוסד. This lack of exact correlation (in contrast to v. 26 where the two *niphal* forms are aligned with the two subjects) is indicative of the secondary status of verse 28b.

The ambiguous and unusual syntax of verse 28b is interesting theologically as it obfuscates any straightforward attribution of the restoration to Cyrus. Like verse 26, verse 28b uses *niphal* verbal constructions to convey a *passive sense* with the agent left unspecified: places will be re-established. In my view, by using the jussive *niphal* verb forms, the text *carefully avoids* attributing the rebuilding of Jerusalem (לירושלם תבנה) and the re-founding of the temple (והיכל תוסד) to Cyrus. Cyrus is God's shepherd—neither more nor less. The rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple are not his explicitly stated responsibilities.[88]

In view of these factors, verse 28b is likely to form a later addition to the oracle in Isa 44:24–45:7. I contend that this addition was inspired by the *historical rebuilding* of the temple in 515 BCE. In other words,

---

[87] *Contra* a few scholars, among them John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40–55, Vol. 1* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 16; Fokkelman, "Cyrus Oracles," 312; and Reinhard G. Kratz, *Kyros im Deuterojesaja-Buch: Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Entstehung und Theologie von Jes 40–55* (FAT, 1; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1991), 73 n. 259, who assume that Cyrus is the implied speaker.

[88] *Contra* Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 220; Leuenberger, "Begründung," 57.

the influence is historical rather than literary. Given the actual situation on the ground, a later editor saw fit to rectify the silence of Isa 40–55 vis-à-vis the temple and added this clause to complement the statement about the rebuilding of the city.[89] This addition was furthermore prudently constructed, adopting the passive syntax of the preceding verse 26, lest it attribute anything to Cyrus that he did not do. The resulting verse 28 says nothing about Cyrus's role in the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. Accordingly, as above, it is unwarranted to attempt to locate a concern for the rebuilding of the temple in Cyrus' tasks as listed in Isa 40–48. Again, these are concerns that come to the forefront in Ezra 1–6 but should not be read into the fabric of Isa 40–48.

Turning from history to text, the final form of Isa 44:24–45:7, that is, including verse 28b, may have served as a source of inspiration for the authors of Ezra,[90] yet the lack of shared focus speaks against it. The Cyrus passages in Isa 40–48 focus on Cyrus's role as conqueror and destroyer of Babylon; the Cyrus passages in Ezra 1–6 focus on the rebuilding of the temple, the return of the temple vessels, and the return of the exiles.

The Interpretations of the Cyrus Cylinder in Isaiah 40–48 and Ezra 1–6

If we add the Cyrus Cylinder to the equation, there is a similarity between, one the one hand, the Cyrus passages in Isa 40–48 and the Cyrus Cylinder (Cyrus is the deity's tool called to do the deity's work in the world) and, on the other hand, between the Cyrus Cylinder and the Cyrus Edicts in Ezra 1 and 6 (restoration of local cults, permission for exiles to return).

---

[89] See further Tiemeyer, "Continuity."

[90] *Contra* Jürgen Werlitz, *Redaktion und Komposition: Zur Rückfrage hinter die Endgestalt von Jesaja 40–55* (BBB, 122; Berlin: Philo, 1999), 184; Ulrich F. Berges, *Jesaja 40–48* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 373.

There are two possible ways of interpreting these instances of affinity: textually and historically. Both options presuppose the plausible scenario that the final forms of Isa 40–48 and Ezra 1–6 post-date 538 BCE. If it could be proven that both sets of authors were familiar with the actual *text* of the Cyrus Cylinder, we might have concluded that each text focused on a distinct and different aspect of the Cyrus edict.[91] Alternatively, and in my view more likely, the authors of Isa 40–48 and Ezra 1–6 were familiar with Cyrus's *historical actions* and/or oral or written proclamations by Persian officials regarding Cyrus's actions. It is thus preferable to see Isa 40–48 and Ezra 1–6 as two independent texts that each emphasise different aspects of Cyrus's career for their own polemical purposes. For the author(s) of Isa 40–48, it was important to highlight Cyrus's actions as being engineered by YHWH and subordinate to his authority;[92] for the authors of Ezra 1–6, it was important to show Cyrus's concern for the rebuilding of the temple.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have endeavoured to outline and critically evaluate the scholarly interaction with the Cyrus Cylinder. I remain sceptical that the Cyrus Cylinder as a text has yielded any form of direct influence upon the biblical material because they differ in both content and focus. First, regarding content, whereas the Cyrus Cylinder emphasises how Cyrus restores the Babylonian deities to their rightful place in Babylon, the edits in Ezra stress the return of the exiles and the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem. The differences are both a matter of entities (gods versus peoples) and geography (Babylon versus Yehud). Second, looking

---

[91] Cf. the discussion in Tiemeyer, *Comfort*, 98; cf. Hans M. Barstad, "Lebte Deuterojesaja in Judäa?" *Veterotestamentica* (Norsk Teologisk Tidskrift, 83; Oslo, 1982): 77–87.

[92] Cf. Barstad, "Deuterojesaja."

at focus, whereas the Cyrus Cylinder focuses on Cyrus's excellence and military might, Isa 40–48 emphasises YHWH's role in world history.

Instead, I find it more likely that Cyrus's action in history influenced the writings of both Isa 40–48 and Ezra 1–6. In more detail, Isa 40–48 and Ezra 1–6 are both polemical texts that, each in their own way, stress YHWH's supremacy over the rulers and deities of the surrounding cultures. Knowing of the rise of the Persian Empire under Cyrus's leadership and how exiles from various places had been allowed to return home to their country of origin, the biblical authors strove to make sense of these happenings and to describe them in such a way that it adhered to their own worldview and set of beliefs. On the one hand, the authors of Isa 40–48 declare how Cyrus was YHWH's tool, who served YHWH's purpose to destroy Israel's enemies. On the other hand, the authors of Ezra 1–6 proclaimed how Cyrus served YHWH's purposes by bringing the exiles back home and allowing them to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.