

Is 45:1-13
16 October 2011

“From Parts Unknown”

“I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”¹

That’s the poem “Ozymandias,” by Percy Bysshe Shelley. He tells the story of an ancient Egyptian ruler who wanted his memory to live forever. Shelley published his poem in 1817, just after most of Europe had experienced the wrath, and defeat, of Napoleon. Ozymandias is another name for Ramesses, as in Pharaoh Ramesses the Great. There’s a list of Pharaohs who may have been in power at the time of the Exodus. This guy is on the list of candidates.

Shelley uses his poem about an **ancient** tyrant to comment on a tyrant of **his day**—Napoleon, who famously proclaimed himself emperor of the French.

Here’s a proclamation by someone **else** who thought very highly of himself: “I am Cyrus, king of the universe, the great king, the powerful king...king of the four quarters of the world.”² There’s more to it than that, but I think you get the point! Still, to be fair, he does attribute his conquests to a higher power. And yes, this is the same Cyrus who appears in our Old Testament reading.

In Isaiah 45, we see something that is found **nowhere else** in the Bible. Verse 1 begins, “Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus.” (The Good News Bible isn’t very helpful here.) The Hebrew word for “anointed,” מָשִׁיחַ (*mashiah*) is also the word for “messiah.” Nowhere else in the scriptures is a foreign king called “messiah.” Only Israelites are referred to as “anointed”: they, and certainly, the coming one, the one the New Testament calls the Messiah.

So what’s going on here?

Our scripture reading is from the second major section of the book of Isaiah, which begins with chapter 40. The time frame is just before Babylon is overthrown by the Persians. The king is our good friend Cyrus, and after he conquers the

¹ in Laurence Perrine, *Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 653.

² www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/article_index/c/cyrus_cylinder_-_translation.aspx

Babylonians, he will allow all of the exiles, Jewish and otherwise, to go home. He's not doing this just because he's a nice guy. Showing the people—people your enemy treated badly—that things are better with **you** calling the shots is not a bad move!

The prophet proves to be a real cheerleader for Cyrus. In chapter 41, he paints this picture: “Who was it that brought the conqueror from the east and makes him triumphant wherever he goes? [In case you haven't figured it out, he's saying that God is helping Cyrus win.]

Who gives him victory over kings and nations? His sword strikes them down as if they were dust. His arrows scatter them like straw before the wind. He follows in pursuit and marches safely on, so fast that he hardly touches the ground!” (vv. 2-3, GNB). Now that is moving!

Of course, not everyone agrees with the prophet's viewpoint. It looks like he's going way overboard in praising this Gentile.

Still, this really isn't about Cyrus. Verses 4 and 5 of today's text go to some length to make the point. “For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you [or, I ‘have given you a title’³], though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me.” Though you do not know me!

If Cyrus is labeled “messiah,” if he is considered “anointed,” it's only because he's in a unique position. He's the one who can end the Babylonian exile. In the mysterious working of God, Cyrus is the one who can bring it about. That says nothing about the faith of the man himself. The title “messiah” is by no means permanent.

As Klaus Koch puts it, “Cyrus was not converted to Yahweh; nor did his victory draw the attention of the nations to Israel's God. One greater than even the most [worthy] Persian conqueror was needed, before the...barriers of the Israelite religion could be broken down, and the salvation contained within them spread to the ends of the earth.”⁴

We should notice something. In choosing Cyrus, God does so without permission! God fails to clear it with anyone. No protocols are followed; no demographic surveys are conducted; no focus groups are polled. As far as faith is concerned, this selection of God is from parts unknown.

When I was a kid, we lived in Virginia Beach for several years. This was the 1970s. Something my Dad and I watched on television was professional wrestling. I don't know if they still do this, but back then, they had the good guys and the bad guys. They had their designated corners of the ring.

One of the bad guys we frequently saw wore a mask. When it was time for the match to begin, the announcer would point to his corner and call out, “And from parts unknown, the Super Destroyer!” This, inevitably, would elicit a cascade of boos and angry shouting.

In my young mind, I thought that the “Super Destroyer” was a title that had been given to him. (Kind of like Cyrus being given the title “messiah.”) I figured that he must be the best! I wasn't sure if he was the best at wrestling, the best at being a bad guy, or

³ New Jerusalem Bible

⁴ Klaus Koch, *The Prophets: The Babylonian and Persian Periods* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 130.

maybe the best at both! If I had known he selected that name for himself, it would have ruined the wonder, the mystery.

Still, the thing I remember most vividly was the announcer proclaiming that the Super Destroyer was from parts unknown. Sometimes even something like wrestling can be a lesson in the life of faith. We too often put on our masks, and in whatever way we envision it, declare that we are the Super Destroyer.

It is a **good** thing when God chooses “from parts unknown.” It is a **good** thing when those decisions aren’t left up to us—when God interrupts our expectations. As we said in our call to worship, “If we come with fixed ideas and precise expectations, we should prepare to loosen them, for we are in the Presence of the ultimate Mystery.”

That point is **really** made in verses 4 to 6. That phrase we already saw, where the Lord tells Cyrus “you do not know me,” is interwoven with another one. Verse 5 begins and verse 6 ends, “I am the Lord, and there is no other.” Friends, this is the work of a poet.

God’s choosing without permission—God’s choosing from parts unknown—has a dramatic result. It’s shown in verse 7, right in the middle of our passage.

“I create both light and darkness; I bring both blessing and disaster. I, the Lord, do all these things.” That middle phrase especially has caused confusion. The King James translates it, “I make peace, and create evil.” That has led many to think that there is a dual nature to God: good and evil, constantly at war.

But God isn’t divided. God is pure light; God is pure love. It’s been noted, “In Israelite thought nothing, not even evil and darkness, could be removed from the dominion of Yahweh.”⁵ Evil isn’t **in** God, but God has power **over** it. The exiles knew all about darkness, evil, and disaster. But they were also learning that their God—the only God—had the final say. And if God chooses to use Cyrus, they really shouldn’t complain, as the rest of our scripture reading tells us.

Admittedly, it is easier to **say** that than to put it into practice. The future of our congregation lies in parts unknown. A big part of our job as designated pastors is for Banu and me to try to shine some light into that future. Clearly, we only have a tiny glimpse of that.

Beyond us here, beyond the exiles in the scriptures, beyond Cyrus, the question is, “Do we know the God who does so much in those parts unknown?” **How well** do we know the God who says in verse 13, “I myself have stirred Cyrus to action to fulfill my purpose and put things right”?

There’s no denying it: there’s a powerful temptation to make sure that everything is settled. Depending on our personality type, we’re comfortable with varying levels of uncertainty. Some can tolerate great amounts of uncertainty, others, very little. We have to be careful, or we’ll wind up like Ozymandias. We’ll put our faith in something that winds up crumbling into dust.

Fortunately, in Christ, the **returning** messiah, even if our lives seem to be a “colossal wreck, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands [stretching] far away,” our legacy is sure. Our faith isn’t a blind faith. It’s an affirmation that the God of both light and darkness goes before us.

⁵ John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 77.