

An Appraisal of Amelie Kuhrt's Attempt at Demystifying King Cyrus' Image in History

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In her thought-provoking, scholarly work, “Cyrus the Great of Persia: Images and Realities,”¹ the world famous historian, Amelie Kuhrt seeks to demystify Cyrus and present an assessment of Cyrus rooted in historical reality while trying to divest Cyrus of the traditional image and legend that surround him as a merciful ruler throughout history. Kuhrt comments that Cyrus accommodated himself to the local norms of his subjects whenever possible, however he did so only after conquering them. But how else could a conqueror do so in antiquity? Cyrus never claimed to be Jesus Christ, an assumption that seems, consciously or unconsciously, guiding Kuhrt. She summarily concludes: “his carrier fits smoothly with the behavior of his imperial predecessors and successors,” which is not at all borne out by history. “Although the evidence is not immense,” she asserts: “in terms of religious tolerance, too, it is hard to define the difference between Assyrian and Achaemenid practices.” Imposing the “yoke of Assur” in conquered territory symbolized their incorporation into the empire, and “not the forcible imposition of a new religion,” which is not what Roux and other Assyriologists would accede to. She compares it with the Achaemenid declarations that “Ahuramazda was the god of the king,” who “had created the universe and placed it under the care of the Persian ruler and who ‘encapsulated’ and uphold,” which, however, seems to be her own perception, or mis-perception, as the Achaemenids never formally proclaimed it. As I have mentioned in my thesis on the Achamenids being Zoroastrian, the Achaemenids were simply claiming their god, Ahura Mazda, was the greatest of gods, thereby subtly lesser gods. They wanted their subjects to be guided by that belief, but they never). Imposed their

1 In Heinz, Marlies, and Marian H. Feldman. *Representations of Political Power: Case Histories from Times of Change and Dissolving Order in the Ancient Near East*. Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2007, pp. 169-191.

religions on them and I have found not a single historian who says otherwise. Mary Boyce even maintains that the Persians, although so successful in conquering others, came to believe that Zoroastrianism was essentially meant for Iranians and Eranshehr and not for others. (See my [*Argument For Acceptance in Zoroastrianism, 2015*](#)).

Cyrus's Dependence on Babylonian Culture

Kurht also claims that “each motif in the Cyrus Cylinder was drawn from a repertoire of traditional Mesopotamian themes, used by earlier claimants to the Babylonian thrones to legitimize their rule.” In order to prove her point she gives the example of a Chaldean leader who “seized it (Babylon) by force”, which is not exactly the case with Cyrus who shrewdly orchestrated the Babylonian citizenry to welcome him as their new ruler ready to uphold all the sacred duties incumbent on the rulers of Babylon and to take utmost care of their deities and their shrines, which indeed he did. “In fact,” she maintains, “it reflects the pressure the Babylonian citizens were able to bring to bear on the new royal claimant more that it casts light on the character of the potential king-to-be,” that is, on Cyrus. However, this observation is not fully in consonance with her statements discussed earlier where she portrays Cyrus as overtly imposing his sway on Babylon. Moreover, as she provides no evidence for it, it may reflect her own bias rather than a historical fact.

It was R. Kittel who was the first to argue as Kuhrt does, that the similarity of content between Cyrus' proclamation and II Isaiah suggests the dependence of both on the “Babylonian court style”. However, Morton Smith of Columbia University examines this hypothesis at length and declares it as simply “impossible” because the parallels “go beyond the content of the so-called court style: They include specific references to Cyrus' campaign and his capture of Babylon. Indeed, this historical program is their chief concern, the theology, ritual and titles merely justify it.” (“Isaiah and the Persians”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol.

83, No. 4, 1963, pp. 415-421.) Thus, it is difficult to accept Kuhrt's argument that motifs in the Cyrus Cylinder originated from traditional Mesopotamian themes.

Cyrus Negating His Earlier Image

She mentions that Cyrus attended "a lengthy ceremony (two weeks), during which the king's contract with the Babylonian gods and citizens was publicly reaffirmed," but Cyrus was robed "in Persian ('Elamite') dress." She uses this incident as "a clear limit to how far Cyrus was prepared to fall with the Babylonian customs. Instead, the Babylonians were made to recognize, unmistakably that they were now subject of a foreign ruler." However, this is a rather presumptuous statement by such a seasoned scholar as there is no evidence Cyrus meant to give such an alarming signal so early on as to risk his acceptance at the critical juncture of what practically was his coronation in the Babylonian eyes and that too after fully acknowledging the Babylonian god Mardeck. In the absence of any objective evidence, Cyrus's gesture could be interpreted in many different ways, such as he chose an Elamite robe, rather than a Persian one, simply because the Elamite tradition was more akin and familiar to the Mesopotamian tradition than the Persian one and would make him more acceptable to them, or the Persian robe was still in the making and the Persians themselves were used to putting on Elamite robes then.

Kuhrt's uncritical reliance on Herodotus (1.189) that the Persian conquest of Babylon was preceded by "an enraged Cyrus, 'punishing' a river for causing the death of one of the sacred white horses," who held special significance in the Zoroastrian and even pre-Zoroastrian beliefs, is not justified as it is now being increasingly recognized that Herodotus often misinterpreted such religious actions by Persians as punishing the waters, which to the Persians is a highly sinful act. (See my thesis on Achaemenians being Zoroastrians). ([All my papers will be available on Avesta.org](http://All_my_papers_will_be_available_on_Avesta.org).) A sacred horse represented the Persian god Mithra

(as well as the Indian god Mitra) whose death required some pieties by the performance of proper rituals. Pierre Briant argues that the dead horse may well have been the sacred white horse, “the Magi were instructed to immolate each month in front of the tomb of Cyrus.” (*From Cyrus to Alexander*, Eisenbrauns, 2002, p. 96).

She also relies on Herodotus (1.201-14) in order to espouse what apparently seems to be a cognitive bias for going out of the way for dismantling the traditional image of Cyrus, which is a worthy scholarly pursuit except for her apparently one-sided approach: “Cyrus’s bloody end in the land of Massagetae is a textbook example of what befalls the greedy expansionist whose ambitions know no bounds”. Branding Cyrus as “a greedy expansionist” appears to be a subjective rather than a scholarly statement. Historians concur that the Massagetaes’ flagrant hostility and violent, incessant inroads into Iranian territory (which continued long after Cyrus) perhaps left him with no option but to invade them in order to protect his subjects from their attacks. He might have found it imperative to fight them in order to ensure the continuity of his empire he had so painstakingly built up. As noted by W.B. Henning long ago: “No one ever knew anything worth mentioning about them (the Massagetae); no one can say whether even their war with Cyrus, is historical “when” Cyrus, who, – it is said, – fell in a battle with these ferocious nomads of the steppes around Lake Aral”. (*Zoroaster-Politician or Witch Doctor?*, Oxford University Press, London, 1951, p. 23.) Kuhrt’s narration of this incident could well be a “textbook” example” of representation of facts led by one’s cognition, consciously or unconsciously. As a psychologist for fifty long years I wonder if she is guided by some cognitive bias against Cyrus which makes her go overboard in her quest, especially as it is so untypical of her in view of her singular achievements as a world renowned historian and scholar.

Opinion of Other Scholars on Cyrus Conflicting With Kuhrt's

Kuhrt presents more evidence unfavorable to the traditional image of Cyrus but it is not sufficient enough to support her thesis. She presents evidence for and against Cyrus being kind to Astyages and Croesus, but they rather end in a draw instead of pointing at a firm conclusion. Moreover, while quoting Ctesias for claiming Cyrus had killed Astyages, she does not mention, as Wiesehoffer does, that per Ctesias, Astyages “had later been killed without the king’s knowledge” (p. 49). “Hence, Wiesehoffer concludes, this matter “can neither be ruled out nor proved with complete certainty” (*Ancient Persia*, I.B. Tauris Publishers, London, 1996, p. 50). On the other hand, Wiesehoffer offers much more contemporary and convincing evidence than Kuhrt to prove that Cyrus’s “leniency towards Croesus is totally unhistorical” (p. 50). He too emphasizes that the person and politics of Cyrus need to be examined with much more discrimination than is found “in his popular image.” “But was there in fact such a thing as a political concept behind Cyrus’s attitude? Or is the make-up of the king’s personality a sufficient explanation for everything?”, he asks and resolves it by comparing Cyrus with Xerxes who he believes was very much misunderstood, while Cyrus “acquired an exemplary character because certain political constellations were in his favour and certain factors that might have clouded his image were not – or not yet – operative”, such as the Greco-Persian wars (pp. 51-55), which is however not wholly true as Cyropaedia idealized Cyrus long after these wars and Alexander arrested looters at his tomb. Pierre also admits Cyrus of the Biblical sources has become an ornament and a mythic figurehead. However, such Biblical sources were not written in Cyrus’s lifetime but much later and so Cyrus himself had little to do with his favorable image. Pierre adds: “But historians cannot choose their sources, here anymore than elsewhere.” “Even today, Cyrus is presented by his modern acolytes as the inventor of human rights.”

As long as Cyrus and even his successors treated Jews generously and unprecedentedly more humanely than those who ruled over the Jews before the Persians as well as after them right up to our own times, as I have documented at length in a yet unpublished thesis, Cyrus well deserves the reputation for granting the human rights to the Jews.

In ancient times it was quite customary for a conqueror to carry off the gods, cultic objects and statues of the conquered nation along with the royal family and elites in order to destroy any chances of their gods helping them to revolt, as Xerxes did much later. But the willing restoration of a conquered territory and its' temples, though not a usual practice, also resulted in the return of its gods and elites as Cyrus did for Judea. "The 'exceptional' character of the actions taken by Cyrus on behalf of Jerusalem," remarks Pierre, "thus arises only from the narrowly Judeo-centric perspective of our sources." However, many native Jews were left behind in Judea and as Judea's strategic importance for invading Egypt was not yet likely to be evident yet to Cyrus, and Cyrus and his successors were to employ some of its elites as cup bearers and trusted court officials. The Jews were the only people then who in Yahweh had their own Ahura Mazda, which may have led Persians to have an easy accord and meaningful dialog with them, which, in fact, as I have detailed in my thesis on the relations between the Jews and Zoroastrians, lasted till the very end of Zoroastrian rule in Iran.

There is little doubt that history and historians have treated Cyrus rather favorably, but all the same few historians have made a big case of it as they often felt his actions deserved it. Moreover, Cyrus had little to do with it as Cyrus was being Cyrus all through his career as a king and acted no more or less than a regular Persian king. But because of his propensity for generosity and tolerance which was hitherto unknown to the people of the Near East, his shortcomings may have escaped notice. Moreover, he had the unique advantage of having an unsought and self-inspired Greek admirer among the archenemies of Persia in the person of

Xenophon who idealized him in his *Cyropaedia*, which influenced European historians up to our times. History is known to have conferred such favors on the select few and certainly not on his son Cambyses. Therefore, Kuhrt's attempt at ferreting out the real Cyrus behind his public persona is rather welcome, indeed even necessary for fathoming and analyzing historical reality. Unfortunately, her erudite attempt leaves a feeling in the mind of the reader that she seems to fault Cyrus himself for this phenomenon instead of explaining, as Bryant does, the factors that raised him to a legendary status long after his death. Consciously or unconsciously, she leaves an impression that Cyrus was responsible somehow for contriving and politicking for a favorable image for himself as if he was a twentieth century politician so keen on ensuring a positive image for posterity.

Cyrus was simply acting as a Persian ruler should, so distinct albeit from his brutal Mesopotamian predecessors. Even the editors of the book which contains Kuhrt's thesis concede: "In contrast to Sargon's strategies that highlighted his powerful break with (local) tradition, Cyrus sought to emphasize continuity by taking care of the local temples and maintaining the spatial structures of the city, although of course he had changed the political order significantly," (p. 15), meaning, he had now become so powerful. However, they add: "The limitation (and perhaps even falseness) of his tolerance is evident in the case of Babylon where Cyrus performed the important local religious ceremonies but did so in traditional Persian costume". It is interesting that these editors describe Cyrus' costume as Persian, and not Elamite as Kuhrt does, which has its own implication. We have already pointed out the fallacy of such an assumption, and the editors too seem to provide an explanation for it: "He (Cyrus) had nothing that he could declare as "originally" Persian, so he had to use the cultural elements of others."

The editors further observe: "The integration of the cultural symbols of conquered societies into the building program of Persian political power not only acknowledged the 'real' political

position of the ‘others’ but helped to convince them that they ranked on the same level with the Persians.” (p. 15-16), which is quite opposite of what Kuhrt claims. In my thesis on Mesopotamia and Iran Through Antiquity, I have tried to show at length how insanely cruel and inhuman Assyrian rulers were and how remarkably Persian kings differed from them in their tolerance of the people they conquered and so I will not dilate on it here, except for challenging her statement: “In terms of religious tolerance, too, it is hard to define the difference between Assyrian and Achaemenid practices,” statement that no historian I know have made or could possibly make without being challenged or retorted. See also Lester L. Grabbe’s two volumes on *Judaism From Cyrus to Hadrian*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992. Kuhrt’s contention also runs counter to what the *Cambridge History of Judaism* (Volume I, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 329-330) holds. “But unlike the Assyrian kings, who attempted to spread the worship of their tribal god Ashhur in the countries they conquered, the Achaemenids were far from wanting to impose on their subjects the cult of Ahuramazda, the supreme deity in the Iranian pantheon. In Babylonia the Persian kings worshipped Marduk, Sin, and so on; in Egypt, Amon, Ra and others; in Jerusalem Yahweh; in Asia Minor the Greek gods; and in the other conquered countries they paid homage to the local deities. They did this not merely from political considerations. Although the Persian kings considered their Ahuramazda the most powerful god, they also believed in the gods of the subjugated peoples, worshipped them, and sought their assistance.” Historians uniformly and readily recognized the tolerant attitude of the Achaemenids.

Since Kuhrt herself states that the winged genie representing Cyrus on gate R at Passargad combines Elamite and Egyptian features, (p. 179), it is untenable for her to make much of the Elamite robe Cyrus wore at the two-week long “pseudo-coronation” ceremony, as so many different assumptions could be made of it. For instance, if Cyrus wore an Elamite and not Persian

robe at the ceremony as claimed by her, it may be he obviously did so because he preferred not to emphasize his Persian heritage but settled for something that the Babylonians can easily relate to and were more familiar with. Since the dominant culture of Fars was then still not fully Persian but intermixed with the Elamite culture, it might even be senseless for Cyrus not to wear an Elamite robe the Persians put on then, (just as the Parsis adopted Hindu attire for centuries), ostensibly to set himself apart from his Babylonian subjects after being an integral part of them in a two-week ceremony. We need scholarly and convincing reasons for a mere robe being a deciding factor here even when Cyrus had ignored his religious tenets by worshipping their god. What Pierre observes in this regard is very typical of all historians I have read: "The Persians did not try to spread either their language or their religion. Instead they exhibited great reverence for the local religions and sanctuaries; --- only the Persians spoke Persian and worshipped the Persian gods." (p. 77). My own take is that Achaemenids were Zoroastrians and were governed by the precept of Free Will (Yana 30, 45, and 31.11, etc.) too much to impose their beliefs on others. (See my essays on Free Will.) Kuhrt concludes, that Cyrus was "politically pragmatic" and "His rapid conquest of vastly dispersed territories not previously united under one political umbrella are easily comparable with, possibly greater in their breathtaking scope and scale than Alexander the Great's epic achievements." On her own admission, evidence contrary to the traditional image of Cyrus through the centuries, "with its gaps and uncertainties to compete with", is not likely to displace image through history. She ends her thesis with the remark: "Legend and traditions have the power to create their own persistent truths." At the same time, however, they are hardly ever created without some basis in reality which is also the task of the historian to explore. And in Cyrus's case there are many mitigating factors suggesting some apparent basis in reality for the Cyrus legend.

Historians need to search deeper for the reasons for the Cyrus legend. One obvious, though often neglected reason for his rise

may be found in his religious roots. As R. W. Ferrier notes: “His military success and enlightened diplomacy were probably inspired by the religious beliefs of Zoroaster, which was spreading at this time”. (*The Arts of Persia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989, p. 1) Amelie Kuhrt, with her tendency for presenting a more realistic view of Achaemenid history, contends: “In the realm of religion, too, the Persian kings did not simply let everyone do as they wished. In Egypt and Babylonia, they were careful to appear as active upholders of local cults in order to ensure control of the wealthy sanctuaries and the adherence of their staff. In smaller centers, such as Jerusalem and Magnesia-on-the-Maeander, they granted some privileges to the temples, *because they acknowledged the support their gods had given the Persians*”, as shown by a letter to Darius I to his satrap. Gadata, reprimanding him for demanding a tax from the sacred gardeners of Apollo and ordering them to cultivate unconsecrated land, “misunderstanding the intention of my ancestors towards the god, who announced the precise truth to the Persians”. However, scholars have lately regarded Darius’ letter as fraud as its language is of later vintage, though some historians disagree. “Conversely, *the shrines of people who had rebelled could be, and were destroyed* (the Apollo sanctuary at Didyma, Herodotus 6.19; the Athena temple in Athens, Herodotus 8.53). We also have the statement by Berossus that Artaxerxes II introduced a statue-cult of Anahita in the imperial centers (see p. 674). The aim was probably to reinforce the cohesion of the Persian communities living far from the imperial heartland, a way of strengthening their sense of identity as members of the governing elite. One effect was to distinguish the Persians of the diaspora through their cult and it introduced Iranian shrines into the provincial capitals”. However, such an alleged effect was not an intended one and even though Persia may have introduced its shrines in the satrapies, its alleged effect claimed by Kuhrt does not seem plausible in view of the constant reports by the Greeks about the observance of strict secrecy by the Magi which lasted until the conquests of Alexander. In no way Persians introduced or propagated Persian

beliefs there. Moreover, as Kuhrt must know so well, in ancient Mesopotamia shrines of rebellious nations were destroyed not just as an indication of religious intolerance or the like but as an attempt at denying them any power of protection by their gods so they could be defeated more easily. This is why Xerxes took the statue of Greek gods with him to Persepolis and Alexander came to retrieve it. And Kuhrt does not mention that Xerxes asked his Greek soldiers the day after destroying her temple to pray there to their gods as his real purpose was then fulfilled. This was a very common practice in the ancient Near East, which I have elaborated elsewhere, along with further evidence of Achaemenid tolerance.

I hope this rather amateurish response from a life-long psychologist and Magus grounded and interested however in his ancient history, but not an academician or a scholar in this area, will inspire others to throw more light on this intriguing topic.