

The Cyrus Cylinder

The Cyrus Cylinder has been called “the first declaration of human rights.” It is a barrel-shaped baked clay cylinder, and despite popular belief it’s not a big object: It’s about 23cm long and 10cm wide.

This clay cylinder is inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform – a form of wedge-shaped writing – about Cyrus, king of Persia (559-530 BC) and his conquest of Babylon in 539 BC, capturing Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king. The cylinder was discovered more than 130 years ago in the ruins of Babylon in Iraq. It was excavated in several fragments. The cylinder was glued together straight away, and was read by Theophilus Pinches and Henry Rawlinson at the British Museum.

The text on the Cylinder is a declaration about the Iran/Iraq war – not the one that started in 1980, but the one in 539 B.C., in the name of the Achaemenid king Cyrus the Great, resulting in the conquest of Babylon in 539. It establishes Cyrus as a king from a lineage of kings, and denounces the previous king of Babylon, but then it talks about peace.

It tells how the god of Babylon – the conquered land – has chosen Cyrus to improve the lives of the Babylonians, and it talks about Cyrus’s efforts in repatriating displaced people and restoring temples across Mesopotamia, letting them worship the god of their choice, not the god of the conqueror. It tells the story of letting people living their lives even after their country was conquered, something that was not heard of at the time. In the ancient world and many years to come, conquering a new land would mean “owning” the land and its people.

Cyrus claims to have achieved this with the aid of Marduk, the god of Babylon. He then describes measures of relief he brought to the inhabitants of the city, and tells how he returned a number of images of gods, which Nabonidus had collected in Babylon, to their proper temples throughout Mesopotamia and western Iran. At the same time he arranged for the restoration of these temples, and organized the return to their homelands of a number of people who had been held in Babylonia by the Babylonian kings. Although the Jews are not mentioned in this document, their return to Palestine following their deportation by Nebuchadnezzar II, was part of this policy.

This cylinder has sometimes been described as the ‘first charter of human rights’, but it in fact reflects a long tradition in Mesopotamia where, from as early as the third millennium BC, kings began their reigns with declarations of reforms.

