

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A.

Seventeenth Week - Seventh Day

THE NATIONS GIVEN TO CYRUS

"Keep silence before Me, O coastlands, and let the people renew their strength! Let them come near, then let them speak; let us come near together for judgment. Who raised up one from the east? Who in righteousness called him to His feet? Who gave the nations before him, and made him rule over kings? Who gave them as the dust to his sword, as driven stubble to his bow? Who pursued them, and passed safely by the way that he had not gone with his feet? Who has performed and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? 'I, Yahweh, am the first; and with the last I am He.' The coastlands saw it and feared, the ends of the earth were afraid; they drew near and came. Everyone helped his neighbor, and said to his brother, 'Be of good courage!'" (Isaiah 41:1-6).

We are now prepared to contemplate with advantage the prophecies of Isaiah that refer with considerable minuteness to the victorious career to which the great Cyrus was predestined. These very remarkable predictions of victories were specially designed to afford Cyrus himself such signal evidence of his having been guided in all his steps by Jehovah, whom the Hebrews worshiped, that he would thus embrace an irresistible urge to acknowledge Jehovah as the Lord of heaven and earth and the source of all his power. In the intensity of this conviction he should be unable to resist the command laid upon him to restore the Jews to their own land and promote the building of the temple, in which the God who had laden him with favors and prospered all his ways might be duly worshiped.

There was at this time a great and formidable power in the west which seemed fully equal to resist the Persians and overcome them in war. This was the Lydian empire, which was paramount in Asia Minor. Its king, Croesus, was formidable not only by the extent of his dominion and the tried valor of his troops, but by the resources which the possession of unbounded wealth placed at his command. In fact, Croesus was the wealthiest king of that or any other age, so that "as rich as Croesus" became a proverb. Cyrus met this mighty prince at the head of a powerful confederacy, and with greatly inferior forces Cyrus overthrew it. As a result of that victory, and subsequent victories rendered easy by it, Cyrus added the whole of Asia Minor to his dominions and thereby completed the greatest empire the world had ever seen, extending in one direction from the Black Sea to the Nile and in the other from the Mediterranean to the Indus. It seems the Scripture prophecies of Cyrus' victories primarily refer to this overthrow of that great and formidable confederacy.

The fact that the Persians had not before taken part in the affairs of the west--and in particular that Cyrus had not--is clearly pointed out in the lines which describe his westward march as one not previously "known to his feet." In fact, Cyrus had to march as far west as the neighborhood of Sardis before he was enabled to meet the enemy in full force and give him battle. This Sardis was the capital of the Lydian empire; and it seems to have been the policy of Croesus to draw Cyrus far away from his own resources and into the district where Croesus' own means were most available before giving him the opportunity of commencing battle.

The extent of this victory and its important consequences are indicated by the vastness of the terms employed--not one but *many* nations, not one but *many* kings are "as the dust to his sword and as the driven stubble to his bow." The confederate nations whom he subdued on this occasion were Lydians, Greeks, Egyptians, Babylonians, and all the nations of Asia Minor. With reference to the final extension of Cyrus' power, it embraced the Medes, Hyrcanians, Assyrians, Arabians, Cappadocians, Phrygians, Lydians, Carians, Phoenicians, and Babylonians. "He ruled also," says Xenophon,

over the Bactrians, Indians, and Cilicians, as well as the Sacians, Paphlagonians, and Megadinians, and many other nations, whose names even one cannot enumerate. He ruled the Greeks that were settled in Asia; and, descending to the sea, the Cyprians and the Egyptians. These nations he ruled, though their languages differed from his own, and from each other; and yet was he enabled to extend the fear of himself over so great a part of the world as to astonish all, so that no one dared to attempt anything against him.

What can more strikingly illustrate the sacred prophecy than this statement of an ancient pagan writer?

Then follows in our text a graphic and highly derisive account of the religious actions of the idolatrous nations to win the protection of their gods: "*So the craftsman encouraged the goldsmith; he who smooths with the hammer inspired him who strikes the anvil, saying 'It is ready for the soldering'; then he fastened it with pegs that it might not totter*" (vs. 7). There can be little doubt that much of this activity in god-making was induced by the knowledge that Cyrus and his Persians were no idolaters but rather *destroyers* of images. They thus enlisted their gods for sympathy and protection. But the God who held the right hand of Cyrus and gave to his conquering sword all the force it possessed was mightier than they.

But while the nations were to be in terror at the advance of Cyrus, the people of Israel are comforted by the assurance that they have nothing to fear but rather much ground for satisfaction: "*But you, Israel, are My servant . . . I have chosen you and have not cast you away.*"