



Conquest: Religion in the Persian Empire

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Authors

Sandeep Duhan

Research Scholar

Military Science

Jiwaji University

Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, INDIA

Dr. Girish Sharma

Department of Defence Studies

& Research Center

Govt science College

Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, INDIA

Abstract

The rise of Cyrus the Great in 559 BC marked the beginning of a new era in imperial governance, where religion and statecraft worked in tandem to unify diverse cultures. The Achaemenid Persian Empire integrated conquered peoples through spiritual inclusivity, moral legitimacy, and respect for local traditions. By framing conquest as a divine mission under Ahura Mazda, Persian rulers strengthened loyalty, reduced resistance, and consolidated authority. Through campaigns in Babylon, Greece, and Egypt, they demonstrated how religion served as both a psychological tool and a diplomatic instrument, enabling Persia to expand and administer one of history's greatest empires.

Key Words

Persian Empire, Zoroastrianism, Military Religion, Spiritual Integration, Cyrus, Xerxes, Darius.

Introduction

As Cyrus the Great arose in 559 BC from the backwater plains of southwestern Iran to build the first truly cosmopolitan, multicultural empire, so too came a new age of statecraft whose echoes we can

still hear today, nearly 2500 years later (Menek, 2020). The Achaemenid Persian Empire was the largest empire the world had ever seen in its time, and at its head sat the indomitable King of Kings. New integrative techniques were made to unite disparate peoples who barely spoke the same language yet were asked to fight and die under the same banner (Van der Spek, 2014). How could a Judean, a worshiper of Yahweh, and a Sindhu, a devotee of Shiva, be brought to fight under the banner of Persia, an empire hailing Ahura Mazda? It is not an unfamiliar question faced by generals leading modern militaries composed of Christians, Muslims, Shintoists, and Hindus, among others (Daryaei, 2013). A glimpse into Persian brilliance gifts an ancient perspective on the modern relationship between military and spirituality.

United under the Truth from the great prophet Zoroaster, Cyrus and his Persian progeny glorified their military victories as the manifest destiny of Truth's victory over the Great Lie. Yet, not through the vanquishment of local pantheons but through the purification of their worshippers, restoring the old Gods to their former glory. It was an act of reverence and integration by the Persians, not one of dominance (Parnian, 2022). Such a spiritual system had two main advantages. Firstly, providing a moral substrate makes political ambitions

more palatable to the common folk composing the bulk of the armies. Though literature concerning the psychology of the typical Persian foot soldier is virtually non-existent, similar stratagems are present throughout history, from the Crusades to the Communist revolutions. The glorifying notions of righteous conquest (Mallowan, 1972). The Persians, notably Cyrus, were among the first to make this psychological discovery. Their empire was part of Ahura Mazda's plan to purify the Earth of evil. Therefore, it was divine destiny, self-reinforced by victory, that guided the ambitions of the emperor and sanctified the destruction wrought by the soldiers.

Main Body

Secondly, absorbing local customs into this divine plan instead of declaring them heretical and seeking to abolish them helped the centralized Persian bureaucracy absorb and administer new regions. Persian Emperors often participated and encouraged Persian administrators to participate in sacrifices to local Gods (Dandamayev, 1999). According to them, Apollo was indeed a noble God worthy of worship and part of Ahura Mazda's plan. With the ruling classes in place and religious customs unmolested, the King of Kings's magnanimity was often used as evidence to make independent rulers swear allegiance to the Persian Empire, obviating the need for military force.

Foreshadowing the realpolitik employed by Bismarck, such was the practical use of religion by the Persian elite that led to nearly 200 years of Persian dominance in the ancient world. Through this, Persia could marshal soldiers from across her dominion to suppress the rebellion and expand her borders to ever more distant lands, reaching toward her destiny. We will observe three military campaigns to see how this spiritual strategy was used (Tuplin, 1987). Firstly, we will look at Cyrus' annexation of Babylon, the emancipation of the Jewish people, and his legacy in the Torah. Secondly, we will investigate Xerxes' invasion of Greece and his homage to the Olympians. Finally, we will track Darius' reclamation of Egypt following a rebellion caused by his predecessor's disrespect.

Babylon

Cyrus' campaign against Babylon in 539 BC was a seminal point in not only Persian history but also Jewish theology. Babylon was known as the jewel of Mesopotamia and had long been a cradle of rich religious and cultural heritage. It was, perhaps, the first cosmopolitan city (Finkel, 2013).

In classic Persian fashion, Cyrus approached Babylon not as a conqueror but as a liberator – incorporating and respecting local customs while asserting Persian supremacy. Cyrus presented himself as chosen by the Babylonian god Marduk to restore order and end the tyranny of Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon.

We find evidence of this in the Cyrus Cylinder, an ancient clay artifact. Here, Cyrus is depicted as chosen by the chief Babylonian god. The Cylinder, dated around 539 BC, states:

“Marduk, the great lord, a protector of his people/worshipers, looked with pleasure at his (Cyrus's) good deeds and his upright heart (and therefore) ordered him to march against his city Babylon.”

This piece of Persian propaganda lent Cyrus divine legitimacy among the Babylonians, aiding his campaign by presenting his conquest as sanctioned by the gods and thus placating the Babylonian people.

One of the most significant acts of Cyrus during his rule of Babylon was the emancipation of the Jewish people. After the Assyrians conquered ancient Israel, they began the Jewish diaspora by exiling Jews from their homeland. By allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and funding a rebuild of their great temple, he gained their loyalty and gratitude, as evident in the Hebrew Bible, where he is called God's anointed shepherd or messiah.

The emancipation of the Jews is detailed in the Book of Ezra 1:1-4, around 538 BC, where Cyrus's decree is recorded:

“The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. 3 Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. 4 And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.”

Cyrus’s support for rebuilding the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem is further emphasized in Ezra 6:3-5, where his decree is mentioned:

“In the first year of King Cyrus, the king issued a decree concerning the temple of God in Jerusalem: Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid. It is to be sixty cubits high and sixty cubits wide,”

This move also placed a friendly and indebted population near the border of the Egyptian territories, a potential threat to Persian hegemony.

Greece

Xerxes I’s campaign and ultimate failure will forever be immortalized in the Battle of Thermopylae, where the valorous 300 Spartans, led by King Leonidas, face off against the great Persian horde (Degen, 2024). This campaign, though ultimately unsuccessful, provides rich historical examples of Xerxes’ consolidation of power through his imposition of Ahura Mazda’s will and his engagement with the Greek pantheon as a psychological tool against the holdout cities of Athens and Sparta.

The Davia Inscription was a royal text commissioned by Xerxes that provides his perspective on his conquest. Consider the following quotes:

“King Xerxes says: when I became king, there was among these countries one that was in rebellion. Ahuramazda bore me aid. By the grace of Ahuramazda I smote that country and put it down in its place. And among these countries there was a place where previously demons (daiva) were worshipped. Afterwards, by the grace of Ahuramazda I destroyed that sanctuary of demons, and I proclaimed: ‘The demons shall not be worshipped!’ Where previously the demons were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahuramazda at the proper time and in the proper manner. And there was other business that had been done ill. That I made good. That which I did, all I did by the grace of Ahuramazda. Ahuramazda bore me aid until I completed the work.”

Here clearly lies the cosmic context that gives purpose to the campaigns the Persians engaged in throughout the ancient world. The first prong of the spiritual strategy employed by the Persians.

The second prong is integrating the religious beliefs of the peoples being annexed. In this, Xerxes engaged in sacrifices to the Greek Gods of Poseidon and Athena, often to an extent that greatly exceeded the Greek sacrifices, highlighting Persian purity and piety and, by contrast, the presence of evil among the Greek people that needed to be purified. A masterclass in psychological warfare and propaganda.

From Herodotus’ “Histories,” we get glimpses of the Greek rituals the Persians engaged in. One of the best examples is his sacrifice to Athena while visiting the ancient city of Troy, the site of the eponymous battle that foreshadowed the contemporary one in which Xerxes was engaged.

The passage regarding the sacrifice to Athena of Ilium (Troy) is found in Book 7, Section 43. Here, Herodotus discusses Xerxes’ actions at Troy:

“When he came to the Scamander River the first river after leaving the Hellespont whose stream was insufficient for his army he went up into the Pergamum of Priam, deeming it worthy of his

observation, and having seen it and learned all about it, he sacrificed a thousand cattle to Athena of Ilium, and the Magi offered libations to the heroes.”

This act was not only a religious gesture but also a symbolic one, aligning himself with the legendary conquerors of the past and invoking their favor. In a way, he presents his campaign as revenge for what the Greeks did to the great city of Troy. Payback from the East.

Egypt

In 518 BC, Darius I embarked on a crucial campaign to reconquer Egypt, one of the empire's wealthiest and most important Satraps. This strategic move came in the wake of a period of turmoil and rebellion that had gripped Egypt after the harsh rule of Cambyses II, Darius's predecessor. Darius's campaign was not only a military endeavor but also a significant diplomatic and cultural effort (Tobin-Dodd, 2019). He aimed to stabilize the region by restoring traditional religious practices and respecting Egyptian customs, in stark contrast to Cambyses II's approach, which involved the desecration of temples and disregard for local traditions.

Here, we have a unique opportunity to see the difference in efficacy of the ruling styles of Darius and Cambyses. Darius follows the traditional Persian pattern of respecting local customs and beliefs, and Cambyses eschews them.

The quintessential example is the treatment of the Apis Bull. The Apis Bull in ancient Egyptian culture was a highly sacred symbol, representing both a living embodiment of the gods Ptah and, after its death, Osiris. This made it a crucial religious icon, embodying fertility, strength, and a bridge between the living and the afterlife.

Cambyses II's desecration of the Apis Bull was a direct affront to Egyptian religious and cultural beliefs. Such actions would have been perceived not only as sacrilegious but also as a blatant disrespect to the deeply rooted traditions and identity of the Egyptian people. This act likely contributed to tensions and resentment among the Egyptians towards Cambyses' rule.

From Book 3 Section 27 of "Histories" by Herodotus:

When the priests led Apis in, Cambyses for he was all but mad drew his dagger and, meaning to stab the calf in the belly, stuck the thigh; then laughing he said to the priests:

Simpletons, are these your gods, creatures of flesh and blood that can feel weapons of iron? That is a god worthy of the Egyptians. But for you, you shall suffer for making me your laughing-stock.” So saying he bade those, whose business it was, to scourge the priests well, and to kill any other Egyptian whom they found holiday-making.

In contrast, Darius is hailed for his pious treatment of the Apis Bull as he puts down the rebellion that flared up due to the mistreatment of the Egyptian people by Cambyses and other governors of Egypt.

7.11.7 in Strategemata by Polyaeus

The Egyptians revolted, on account of the cruelties inflicted on them by Aryandes, their satrap. In order to reduce them to obedience, Dareius himself marched through the Arabian desert and arrived at Memphis, at the very time when the Egyptians were commemorating the death of Apis. Dareius immediately made a proclamation, that he would give a hundred talents of gold to the man who could produce Apis. The Egyptians were so impressed by the piety of the king, that they took decisive action against the rebels, and entirely devoted themselves to support of Dareius.

Incredibly, this passage also highlights the utility of religious appeasement in a military context, where immediately the Egyptians side with the nobility of the king and themselves put down the insurgency.

Conclusion

The keystone of Persian military might be a novel religio-political ideology that bound diverse cultures together under the banner of empire. By presenting conquest as fulfilling the cosmic struggle of Truth over Lie, the Persian kings turned imperial expansion into a spiritual imperative. Local troops were motivated to fight not just for earthly glory, but to fulfill divine destiny.

This spiritual narrative was complemented by respect for foreign customs. Rather than crushing local faiths, the Persians co-opted them through sacrifices and veneration. By honoring deities like Marduk and Athena, Persian leaders pacified new subjects and softened cultural barriers. The grandeur of Ahura Mazda was amplified, not diminished, by welcoming other gods into the imperial fold.

Thus, did adroit religious policy enable the logistical miracle of Persian military power. It allowed the raising of vast multinational armies, kept satrapies loyal, and disarmed cultural resistance. When rebellions did arise, the Persians could brand resisters as enemies of the divine order. As exemplified in Egypt, pious propaganda and theatrics could turn occupied populaces against insurgents overnight.

In this way, the sword of Persia was edged with the sacred. Military objectives were empowered and enabled by a flexible state theology that unified Iranians, Babylonians, Jews, Egyptians and more. Their collective might be consecrated through rites, inscriptions and decrees invoking the authority of Persian and native gods alike. By baptizing earthly affairs in cosmic purpose, the ancient Persian emperors crafted an enduring strategy of spiritual statecraft and turned faith itself into an implement of war.

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