

Persian father, that is, Medo-Persian heritage. In his person Cyrus combined both aspects of the Medo-Persian kingdom, and he also marks the beginning of its transition from Mede dominance to Persian dominance.

### Ancient Pagan Divination

Classical historians have provided many interesting details concerning Cyrus the Great and have included the details of some humorous prophecies concerning his life and reign. The documentation of this ancient pagan divination provides some of the oddest of details concerning not only Cyrus but also concerning other Mesopotamian kings. The classical historians have made the initial connection of these prophecies to Cyrus, but sometimes the import or nuance of the prophecy is not explicitly stated.

Of interest to this study is the characterization of Cyrus as “the Persian mule,” that is, the offspring of a donkey and a mare. The original prophecy given by Nebuchadnezzar is transformed with the changing aim of its latest renovator. This interesting connection originally referring to Cyrus, “the Persian mule,” eventually targets the name Ahasuerus, the biblical name of Esther’s Persian king, who had the same appellative name as the father of Darius the Mede. The ancient development of this particular series of ancient pagan divinations will now be described.

Cyrus the Great is described as “the Persian mule” 1) in a prophecy from Nebuchadnezzar, 2) in a prophecy given to the Lydian king Croesus, and maybe also 3) in a prophecy given when Darius the Great re-conquered Babylon. These prophecies concerning “the Persian mule” will be reviewed, and then a passage in Esther concerning “Persian mules” will also be examined.

### The Persian Mule, Enslaver of Babylon

The first prophecy which reportedly was given by Nebuchadnezzar shortly before he died is preserved in the work of Megasthenes.<sup>128</sup> Nebuchadnezzar’s prophecy has been passed down from Megasthenes through Abydenus and then through Eusebius.<sup>129</sup> Here is the prophecy credited to Nebuchadnezzar as recorded by Abydenus:

Nebuchadnezzar (as the Chaldean story goes), when he had ascended the roof of his palace, was inspired by some god or other, and cried aloud, “I, Nebuchadnezzar, announce to you the future calamity which neither Bel, my ancestor, nor our queen Beltis, can persuade the Fates to avert. There shall come a Persian, a mule, who shall have your own gods as his allies, and he shall make you slaves. Moreover, he who shall help to bring this about shall be the son of a Median woman, the boast of the Assyrian.

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<sup>128</sup> Megasthenes (350 BC-290 BC) was a Greek traveler who may have accompanied the invasion of India by Alexander the Great. Fragments of his work are reported by later historians such as Arrian, Strabo, Diodorus, Pliny, and Abydenus.

<sup>129</sup> Abydenus, a Greek historian in the third century BC, was the author of a *History of the Chaldeans and Assyrians*, of which some fragments are preserved by Eusebius in his *Praeparatio Evangelica*.

Would that before his countrymen perish some whirlpool or flood might seize him, and destroy him utterly. . . .” When he had thus prophesied, he suddenly vanished.<sup>130</sup>

Nebuchadnezzar’s prophecy<sup>131</sup> of the Persian mule was later connected to the conqueror of the Chaldeans, Cyrus the Persian. This secular report of a sickness of Nebuchadnezzar and its possible confirmation of his sickness reported in the book of Daniel is usually the significance which is noted by most commentators.<sup>132</sup> But the significance of this prophecy to its original Babylonian audience was that a Persian (mule) would subdue the Chaldeans.<sup>133</sup> Also notable is the phrase “the son of a Median woman.” In fact, a mule is the offspring of two species of equine, the product of a mare (female horse) bred with a donkey.<sup>134</sup>

### The Mule, King of the Medes

The second prophecy concerning a Persian mule is related by Herodotus. Croesus, the Lydian king, inquired of the oracle at Delphi, “Whether his sovereignty should be of long duration?”<sup>135</sup> The answer came from the oracle:

But when a mule shall become king of Media;  
Then with your delicate feet away to the pebbles of Hermus;  
Flee away, do not remain, nor blush to be a coward.<sup>136</sup>

When Croesus received this answer he was pleased because “he thought that a mule would never be king of the Medians in place of a man.”<sup>137</sup> Later, after his defeat by Cyrus, Croesus inquired from the oracle why they deceived him. They responded that he had misunderstood the message, and that it was his fault, not theirs. So they explained:

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<sup>130</sup> Eusebius. *Præp. Ev.*, Lx. 41 quoted by F. W. Farrar, “The Book of Daniel,” in Dods, Marcus, Robert Alexander Watson, and F. W. Farrar. *An Exposition of the Bible; A Series of Expositions Covering All the Books of the Old and New Testament*, vol. 4 (Hartford, Conn: S.S. Scranton Co., 1903), 398.

<sup>131</sup> Notice that Nebuchadnezzar was the recipient of other prophetic messages (Dan 2:28-45; 4:1-26).

<sup>132</sup> Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), *The Truth of the Christian Religion*, ed., le Clerc (London: W. Otridge and Son, 1805), 170. E. B. Pusey, *Daniel the Prophet* (Oxford: The Devonport Society, 1864), 126; Hendrik Antoine Brongers, *Instruction and interpretation: Studies in Hebrew Language* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 31.

<sup>133</sup> Humphrey Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations, from the Declension of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah to the Time of Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1845); Charles Boutflower, *In and Around the Book of Daniel* (London: Society for Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1923), 105; Young, Edward J. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1975. 367.

<sup>134</sup> An earlier Mede king was compared to a mule in the treaty between Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, and Ramataia the Mede. The texts enumerated specific curses for failure to keep the treaty: “Just as the seed of a hinny is sterile, even so let your name, your seed, and your son’s seed as well as your daughters be expunged from the land.” The English translation of this treaty can be found in Jorgen Laessoe, *People of Ancient Assyria: Their Inscriptions and Correspondence*, tranl. by F. S. Leigh-Browne, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, 121-123.

<sup>135</sup> Herodotus I. 55.

<sup>136</sup> The passage in the original reads:

ἀλλ’ ὅταν ἡμίονος βασιλεὺς Μήδοισι γένηται,  
καὶ τότε, Λυδὲ ποδαβρέ, πολυψήφιδα παρ’ Ἑρμον  
φεύγειν μηδὲ μένειν μηδ’ αἰδεῖσθαι κακός εἶναι (Herodotus I. 55).

<sup>137</sup> Herodotus I. 56.