

People—World Celebration in Iran

EZRA TAFT BENSON

President Oaks, my beloved brethren and sisters, humbly and gratefully I approach this assignment this morning. I'm very, very happy to be back on this great campus. I cherish very much the days that I spent here as a student. I'm proud to be an alumnus of this great institution; and of all these degrees—honorary, eleven of them—I think that there's none that I cherish more than the one from Brigham Young University.

I had a glorious weekend. I've had the privilege of being at another of the Lord's institutions: I was up at Ricks College, where we reorganized the two student stakes on the campus and partook of that wonderful spirit they have there. And now to come here, to this, the Lord's great university, and partake further of that same spirit—it's a real joy and a pleasure and an honor. I think this spirit cannot be duplicated anywhere, on any campus anywhere in the world, and I've visited many campuses in many countries. I remember some years ago, while living back in the nation's capital the first time, I had a very good friend, one of the great agriculture leaders of the country, Dr. H. E. Babcock of Cornell University. I'd invited him to attend one of our sacrament meetings—which is not uncommon; I'm always inviting my friends to attend our

meetings—and he finally did attend. I met him on the street, and he said, "Well, last Sunday I attended your sacrament meeting, as you call it, but you weren't there."

I said, "No, I was visiting another ward. But how did you like the meeting?"

"Oh," he said, "it was wonderful, especially the spirit. But," he said, "I wish you'd tell me one thing. Why is it, when you Mormons come to the end of a meeting, you don't seem to have any place to go?" He said, "That meeting ended, the benediction was said, and then the people stood there and they visited and visited and visited. I thought I'd never get out of that chapel. And when I got out in the foyer it was more congested than ever."

Then I had to explain to him that this is characteristic of the Church; it's this great spirit of fellowship and brotherhood and love that we have. And I said, "Not only that, Doctor; it's one of the marks of the divinity of this work."

Well, I felt that spirit very keenly Saturday and Sunday up at Rexburg; I always feel it

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when I come here. I said to one of the professors up there after we'd been together most of two days, "This spirit is wonderful here on the campus. A person ought to be willing to work for almost nothing up here."

He said, "Brother Benson, we almost do."

But now, Sister Benson and I, a few days ago, attended our annual movie. We try to go once a year. Sometimes it's not easy to find a good show every year, but this one was a good one. It was entitled *Young Winston*. I thought of it as President Oaks announced the groundbreaking for the law school. It's a good movie. I hope you see it. And I was just thinking, of all the men I've met I think the three greatest statesmen I would choose are J. Reuben Clark, Senator Robert Taft, and Winston Churchill. I was at the White House, at the dinner honoring Winston Churchill, when President Eisenhower presided at the meeting at the dinner. After the meal was over and Winston Churchill was being introduced, President Eisenhower said, "Now, Mr. Prime Minister, we'd be happy to hear from you, and we'll be glad to have you talk as long as you want to talk." And he talked for forty-five minutes and gave the most masterful review of world conditions, country by country, that I have ever heard or ever expect to hear.

Following this movie, I was told an incident in the life of Churchill which I'll relate to you. He was very ambitious as a young man. He was what you might call a political climber. He had a very good opinion of himself. He was very ambitious and very effective. He was often very critical—almost wickedly critical, some of his opponents thought—of the opposition. He'd made a speech in London and had torn into his opposition rather vigorously. One of his acquaintances on the other side of the aisle politically, a woman, was so disturbed and so angry at the end of his speech that she looked him squarely in the face and she said, "Winston, if I was your wife I'd poison your coffee."

He said, "Madam, if I was your husband I'd drink it."

A Great Conference

Now I was just calculating, for thirty years I've had the privilege of coming here and talking about the glorious principles we prize as Latter-day Saints, giving counsel, admonition, warning of some of the dangers, talking about standards. This morning, if the Lord will bless me, I'd like to do something just a little different. Sunday afternoon, October 1971, a few minutes after the close of the semiannual conference of the Church, I boarded a fully loaded plane at the Salt Lake airport. Most of the passengers were rejoicing, happy, chatting Latter-day Saints, returning home from an inspiring general conference of the Church. There were stake presidents, bishops, high councilors, Relief Society workers, and many other cheerful, grateful members of the Church.

At Chicago I had the pleasure of greeting them one by one as they came out of the jetway into the terminal building, going to Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, South Bend, Fort Wayne, Indianapolis, Cleveland, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, St. Paul, and many other points in all directions from Chicago, and some of them to Europe. One of the first comments from a bishop: "Brother Benson, it was a great conference." Which brought forth a response from a stake president, "That's the only kind of conference we ever have in the Church," to which all agreed, including several western LDS businessmen who had stopped off for conference in route to business appointments in the eastern half of the United States.

Then, after getting a bit of a picture of membership distribution in this world Church, I was asked why I was leaving Salt Lake so soon after conference. Where was I going, and why? Then, what about the work in Europe, Asia, South America, and so forth? Several of them had missionary sons, brothers, or

nephews in countries mentioned. All seemed to have the enthusiastic missionary spirit. Some few had recently attended regional meetings in Indianapolis and Lansing. It pleased a grateful father to have someone say, "We met your son and heard him speak. What a great mission president."

Then followed the brief forecast of the dual mission on which I was embarking. First to countries of continental Europe, then on to the world celebration in Iran, commemorating possibly the oldest secular event celebrated in history, the twenty-five hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Persian nation—2,500 years ago, 529 years before the birth of Christ—by King Cyrus the Great.

The European Trip

The European trip was unique. It involved an American free enterprise firm, CPC International, operating 129 factories and plants in 41 nations, employing 44,400 people on all continents with annual sales of its 500 products totaling more than \$1.5 billion, with headquarters in the New York City area at Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. The three days would include inspection trips, field tours, luncheons, dinners, and receptions. The seventeen-man board, broken up into small groups for the tour, concluded its program with an all-day board meeting, panels, lectures, and reception for the European business, governmental, and industrial fraternity at company European headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. At every turn during the three days, people, people, everywhere people. Good people, gracious people, kind people, industrious people, enterprising people who believed in friendly competition and association, free markets, private property, and freedom of choice through free enterprise, which system has given us more of the good things of life—a higher standard of living—than any other system in operation in this world.

These leaders from all parts of free Europe—fifteen nations—believe in and promote this free enterprise system. They're men of good will, men of high ethical standards, our brothers, men who need the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to enrich their lives and increase their effectiveness. With deep appreciation I accepted their hospitality and prize their solid friendship.

An Invitation

Then, after four interesting, eventful days, my thoughts and my attention turned from my associates and the interests of this American-based organization to the world celebration—the twenty-five hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great—in Iran, the world's oldest existing constitutional monarchy.

Something of the world character and interest in this great historic event had been forecast through national magazines and metropolitan newspapers throughout the world. Such headlines as "Iran Plans Spectacular Party," "50 Monarchs Gather in Iran," "To Celebrate 2500th Birthday," and so forth. These are typical of hundreds. The concentration of interests was brought to my attention when I placed a telephone call from Brussels, Belgium, October 7, and was told that because of the backlog of calls it would take four days—till October 11—before the call could be completed. The celebration was to start October 10.

One of the least publicized and possibly most important aspects of the recent twenty-fifth centenary celebrations in Persepolis, Iran, was the presence there of representatives of twenty-eight world religions. It was the first time in modern history that religious leaders were treated on the same level of importance as politicians. The guiding spirit behind this phenomenon was a white-haired Boston Irishman named Baron von Blomberg, President of the United Religions Organization.

The invitation to attend came about through a communication, the letterhead bearing the imprint of the royal crown and the heading “Honor Semper—SOVEREIGN ORDER OF CYPRUS.” With the approval of the author I quote the letter:

(Received September 1, 1971)

My dear Mr. Benson:

Given the task [by the king] of inviting world religious leaders to the 2500th anniversary of Cyrus the Great, in Iran—I should like to have a Mormon leader included.

Having been with you in Innsbruck, Austria, and of course knowing your distinction, I write to ask if you would be with us or, if not, could you help us to get proper Mormon representation.

The time is short, as the dates are Oct. 10 to 17. Transportation and hospitality is paid. This is the greatest celebration in the history of Iran—royalty, heads of State, diplomats will be present.

Kindly give thought to the above and let me know soon. Thank you for your courtesy and with continued high regards,

Baron Frary von Blomberg

President

World Fellowship of Religions

The Innsbruck, Austria, meeting referred to in the Baron’s letter occurred in this manner. In 1964, just before the opening of the Winter Olympics, we were touring the Austrian Mission of the Church. On the tour were President Peter Locher, his wife, and Sister Benson. And on that tour we were to dedicate a lovely chapel, just finished, in Innsbruck. Some six hundred people crowded the building designed to serve a growing branch of two hundred. Invited and present were the mayor of Innsbruck, the national senator of the area, and, with the mayor, Baron von Blomberg. The new chapel was located on a new street, unpaved except in front of our property. In his

most fitting talk the mayor explained that while they “didn’t quite have enough time to get the entire street paved, we were able to complete the street and sidewalk paving in front of your property in time for this dedication.”

It was a lovely, spirited service of gratitude and rejoicing for the restored gospel. As the baron said, when he confirmed the letter of invitation by long-distance telephone, “I remember well the spirit of that occasion and how deeply I was impressed by the messages given.” Yes, my brothers and sisters, the Spirit is very real. You cannot fool the Spirit. Some people try, only to learn of their own folly.

And so that is the genesis of the invitation. The office of the First Presidency, after seeing the letter of invitation and knowing that I would be in Europe at the time—and with all expenses paid—advised me to attend this unusual celebration.

Cyrus, the Deliverer of the Hebrews

Iran has been able to maintain its separate identity as a nation despite three major invasions. The Persian language is reported to be “still as liquid as it was during the pre-Islamic era.”

Cyrus the Great (date of birth unknown) was a descendant of a line of kings ruling in Anzan (Babylonian Ansan), a country known to the nations west of it as Edom (highland). Although much is missing of the details of the life and activities of Cyrus the Great, there is enough to establish him as a great leader, a useful son in the Lord’s plan for his children, especially for ancient Israel. Living something more than 500 years B.C., he figured in the prophecies of the Old Testament—mentioned in 2 Chronicles 36:22–23 and Ezra 1:1–2 and by the prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel. Greek writers give more of the details of his life. I quote briefly from 2 Chronicles 36 and the prophet Ezra, chapter 1:

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him, and let him go up. [2 Chronicles 36:22–23]

And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.

And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered. Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods;

Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

And this is the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives,

Thirty basins of gold, silver basins of a second sort four hundred and ten, and other vessels a thousand.

All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem. [Ezra 1:4–11]

Cyrus repaired the shrines and pacified tributary peoples by restoring to them the images of their gods. Among those whose religious feelings he thus regarded were the captive Hebrews, to whom he at the same time restored certain political and social rights. The coming of this deliverer had been foretold to them by the prophets, and no doubt the faithful welcomed him with hope and joy. He gave them permission to return to Jerusalem and directed that Jehovah's temple should be there rebuilt at the expense of his own treasury. The Lord of us all used this powerful leader as an instrument to accomplish his purposes, as he had done before and will do many times again in the days ahead. Cyrus the Great is reported to have spent the last years of his life reducing to order the affairs of his vast empire to the blessing of the people. He apparently was politic and considerate, knowing how to use the sentiments of others for large, beneficial, and political ends. And even if his friendly treatment of the Hebrews sprang mainly from a desire to have attached subjects on a threatened frontier, he was nonetheless their deliverer from bondage.

Cyrus has been referred to as a nonreligious leader with religious, Christian ideals.

Cyrus is said to be the first king to promulgate the "Declaration of Human Rights." He granted equal status to all his subjects and freedom of religious worship. He rebuilt the temple of Solomon which had been destroyed by the Babylonian kings and freed some 40,000 Jews who had been jailed by the Babylonians, allowing them to return to their homes. [Quincy Herald-Whig (Quincy, Ill.) September 5, 1971]

Yes, God, our Father, uses the men of the earth, especially good men, to accomplish his purposes.

Modern Prophets Speak of Cyrus

In 1842, two years before his martyrdom for the testimony he bore to the world, the Prophet Joseph Smith said this:

If there was anything great or good in the world it came from God. The construction of the first vessel was given to Noah, by revelation. The design of the ark was given by God, "a pattern of heavenly things." The learning of the Egyptians, and their knowledge of astronomy was no doubt taught them by Abraham and Joseph, as their records testify, who received it from the Lord. The art of working in brass, silver, gold, and precious stones was taught by revelation, in the wilderness. The architectural design of the Temple at Jerusalem, together with its ornament and beauty, was given of God. Wisdom to govern the house of Israel was given to Solomon, and to the judges of Israel; and if he had always been their king, and they subject to his mandate, and obedient to his laws, they would still have been a great and mighty people; the rulers of the universe—and the wonder of the world. If Nebuchadnezzar, or Darius, or Cyrus, or any other king possessed knowledge or power, it was from the same source, as the scriptures abundantly testify. If then, God puts up one, and sets down another, at his pleasure—and made instruments of kings, unknown to themselves, to fulfill his prophecies, how much more was he able, if man would have been subject to his mandate, to regulate the affairs of this world, and promote peace and happiness among the human family. [Times and Seasons, 3:856–57 (July 15, 1842)]

Another modern prophet recognized the source of greatness in man. On January 9, 1881, President Wilford Woodruff said this of Cyrus the Great:

Now I have thought many times that some of those ancient kings that were raised up, had in some respects more regard for the carrying out of some of these principles and laws, than even the Latter-day Saints have in our day. I will take as an ensample

Cyrus, on account of his temperance. He was one of the kings of the Medes and Persians. I believe his father was a Persian and his mother a Mede. To trace the life of Cyrus from his birth to his death, whether he knew it or not, it looked as though he lived by inspiration in all his movements. He began with that temperance and virtue which would sustain any Christian country or any Christian king. And even when he was sent in his youth to his grandfather Astyages, the king of the Medes, he showed that he had been carefully brought up, and he followed his early training in a great measure throughout his life; while as king or leader of the Median armies, he conquered nearly the whole world—in fact, I do not know that he ever lost a battle. His grandfather was living in luxury, and when young Cyrus was sent to him he offered to serve him as butler—only he didn't do as butlers sometimes do—that is, taste the wine before putting it on the table. Cyrus, when offered wine, said, "I am afraid it is poison." "You are afraid it is poison? What makes you think it poison?" "Why, because I have seen it make you and some of the princes act very strange, you would stagger and act very curious." He followed this principle of temperance during his whole life. Before a battle he offered sacrifices to the Gods; when he finished a battle and had a victory he did the same thing. I have been struck [continues President Woodruff] in reading his history with the course he took in this matter. He would never enter into revelry or debauchery over the nations he had conquered. He taught such principles until the day of his death. Before he died he told those by whom he was surrounded, that he did not want his body put into a gold coffin or a silver coffin; he simply desired his body to be laid in the dust and covered with earth. Many of these principles followed him, and I have thought many of them were worthy, in many respects, the attention of men who have the Gospel of Jesus Christ. [Wilford Woodruff in Journal of Discourses, 22:207]

A Royal Tribute

Little wonder, then, that on Tuesday, October 12, 1971—under a blue sky and gentle

breeze, which unfurled hundreds of green, white, and blue flags in a most impressive ceremony—a royal tribute opened a big week of tribute to Cyrus: A 101-gun salute, “heard round the world” (as the 800 visiting press put it), and a solemn eulogy of Cyrus the Great by his successor, His Imperial Majesty, the Shahanshah.

Before the plain, stone tomb in the middle of a vast plain, surrounded by towering mountains, the head of a nation spoke in an emotion-choked, yet firm and clear, voice these words:

At this glorious moment, in the history of Iran, I and all Iranians, the offspring of the empire which thou founded 2,500 years ago, bow our heads in reverence before thy tomb. . . .

Cyrus! We have today gathered at thy eternal resting place to say to thee: “Rest in peace, for we are awake, and will forever stay awake to guard thy proud heritage.” . . .

We vow that we will safeguard, with an iron will, the greatness and glory of this land bequeathed to us as a sacred trust by our forebears, and to leave to those who will come after us a country yet more proud and more great than ever.

We vow to ever safeguard the traditions of humanism and benevolence on which thou founded the Persian Empire, and to remain for the people of the world the bearers of the message of world brotherhood and truth. . . . Today as in thy age, Iran bears the message of liberty and the love of mankind in a troubled world and is the guardian of the most sublime human aspirations. The torch thou lit, has never died in stormy times. Today it casts its light upon this land more brightly than ever and, as in thy time, its brilliance spreads far beyond the boundaries of Iran.

Cyrus! Rest in peace, for we are awake, and we will always stay awake. [Encomium upon Cyrus the Great by His Imperial Majesty Mohammed-Reza Pahlavi Aryamehr Shahansha of Iran, Pasargadee, October 12, 1971]

What God Has Wrought Among His Children

The scene at the tomb of Cyrus the Great will remain: flags waving, bands playing, youth choir singing the national hymn, the king paying tribute to eternal principles and greatness in man, applauded by worldwide representatives of nations, religions, and people, people, people. Yes, the good that men do lives after them and is always recognized by inspired men who also recognize the source of greatness in men.

This was it—the spirit and greatness of the occasion—an oath of allegiance to the past, the present, and the future. Yes, there was much, much more. How can a weak man describe the twenty-five hundredth anniversary celebration of the founding of the Persian monarchy by Cyrus the Great? A nationwide celebration, thirteen years in preparation, centering in historic Persepolis, ancient religious capital of Cyrus and Darius. Yes, the celebration participated in by heads of state of the entire world in an overwhelming response. The decorations, the receptions, the concerts, the theater, the dancing, the magnificent parade, all in a setting of unequalled beauty. And all this climaxed by the living panorama of the long history of Iran, as it passed before us on the desert in a fabulous tent city, at historic Persepolis.

Yes, I know you have seen glimpses of it, via satellite, on color TV, and in large color sections in U.S. and international publications. The historic site, the preparations, the spirit of the people, even to one who had been in Iran before, are almost unbelievable. The talent of the free world was drawn upon for this most memorable event. As I viewed the cuisine, the crystal and china, the linens, the colorful, rich fabrics, the special effects, the transportation, the program of events, the construction, the organization, and so forth and so on, I could only exclaim, “What God has wrought among his children! How he has blessed us!” Oh, that these good people, our Father’s children, our brothers and sisters, could all hear and receive

the message of the restored gospel. How it would enrich their lives and add feelings of security, peace, and joy to their souls.

It was pleasing to note the progress being made under His Imperial Majesty, the Shah of Iran, a dynamic leader. Basic freedoms are being extended to the people. Educationally, industrially, and agriculturally, progress is being made to bless the people and their families.

May God bless the good people of Iran and our Heavenly Father's children everywhere.

May we be grateful for the leadership of good men, the glorious blessings of freedom, and the rich blessings of a material nature which freedom makes possible. And most important of all, may God speed the day when the message of the restored gospel, with its priceless, eternal, spiritual blessings, will reach the hearts of all our Father's children everywhere, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.