

Sacred & Profane Season 2 Episode 7: “What’s So Great About Cyrus?”

[00:00:00] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** I'm Martien Halvorson-Taylor.

[00:00:02] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And I'm Kurtis Schaefer, and this is Sacred & Profane, a show about religion in unexpected places. And today we are talking about the age old, but still surprising ways in which religion shapes politics and politics shapes religion.

[00:00:22] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** We found some fascinating appearances of an ancient king in modern political life. We're talking about King Cyrus. You may remember that last year we did an episode on Cyrus and his edict “The Cyrus Cylinder” and how it echoes our own debates about immigration and national identity.

[00:00:44] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And we absolutely recommend you go back and listen to that episode. By the way. But even if you haven't listened, you may be familiar with Cyrus. He founded one of Asia's first great empires after conquering much of the Middle East in the 6th century B.C.E. And he's enjoyed a long and rich afterlife in our cultural imagination, partly because of the role he plays in one of the most famous stories in the Hebrew Bible.

[00:01:12] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Cyrus, after conquering the city of Babylon, issued an edict allowing a number of exiles in Babylon to return to their homelands. In the Bible, he's described as setting the Jews exiled to Babylon free to return to their homeland, Jerusalem.

[00:01:34] **Reader** Thus, says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes. I made the earth and created humankind upon it. It was my hands that stretched out the heavens and I commanded all their host. I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness, and I will make all his pads straight. He shall build my city and set my exiles free.

[00:02:10] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And so, maybe it shouldn't be a surprise that Cyrus wasn't just a power player in the ancient world. He's become a powerful symbol for political leaders in the modern world for a whole host of reasons. George Washington was called an "American Cyrus" by his supporters, both for his military victories and his outreach to American Jews. Not to be outdone, Napoleon proclaimed himself a modern Cyrus after invading the Middle East and promising that Jews would be free to return to the Holy Land.

[00:02:44] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Today on the show, we'll look at two leaders who have become closely associated with Cyrus for very different reasons: President Donald Trump,

[00:02:54] **Newsclip** America's going to have a challenge either way. With Trump, I believe we have a Cyrus to navigate through the storm.

[00:03:03] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And the last shah of Iran,

[00:03:06] **Newsclip** Cyrus, the father of Iran, which the Shah raised today.

[00:03:15] **Menahem Merhavy** You know, there's a lot of empty room there, a lot of space for imagination and for filling in one's own world view. And that actually makes him, you know, the great candidate for building legitimacy around.

[00:03:30] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** This is historian Menahem Merhavy. He explores, among other things, how Cyrus is remembered in modern Iran. And that's where we'll start.

[00:03:42] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Menachem says It's hard to find a clearer example of Cyrus being used as a powerful political symbol than 20th century Iran, specifically during the rule of Mohammad Pallavi, the last Shah.

[00:03:59] **MenaheM Merhavy** He more than hinted that he was a modern Cyrus.

[00:04:07] **Kurtis Schaeffer** The comparison to Cyrus was part of the Shah's ongoing campaign to present himself as a legitimate ruler both inside and outside of Iran. His rule had been shaky for most of his reign. Then, in 1952, Iran's popular prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, effectively seized control of the government. The Shah returned to power only after a coup backed by the US and UK.

[00:04:36] **MenaheM Merhavy** For me, that I mean, the way I see it when the Shah returns, he realized you know much more than sitting on the throne, he needs to actually legitamate his is rule, all the more so since he returned with massive assistance from the West. And then he needed to, you know, to stand out as an authentic Iranian king.

[00:04:57] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Positioning himself as a modern-day Cyrus helped the Shah lay claim to thousands of years of Iranian history and culture. He could paint himself as a cosmopolitan, tolerant, and liberal ruler, respected his subjects. And at the same time, he could also use Cyrus to lay claim to the most important political traditions of the West.

[00:05:20] **Mohammed Palavi** Mesdames et messeiurs, il est extremement agreable de vous souhaite la bienvenue dans notre capital.

[00:05:28] **Kurtis Schaeffer** That's the voice of the Shah speaking at the United Nations' very first conference on human rights. It took place in Tehran in 1968.

[00:05:39] **Mohammed Palavi** C'est une coincidence remarquable....

[00:05:41] **Transaltor** It's a remarkable coincidence because we hardly need to be reminded that it was near here that the ancestor of this document which recognizes human rights was proclaimed across this very land some twenty-five hundred years ago.

[00:06:08] **MenaheM Merhavy** This is our state and this is you know, we started it before the West ever spoke about human rights and freedom of speech and so on and so forth. They definitely build on that a lot.

[00:06:20] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** But that was just the beginning. When I spoke with Menachem. He said the grandest example of how the Shah worked to portray himself as a modern Cyrus came in 1971. 1971 was the year that the government launched an elaborate celebration to commemorate over 2,000 years of Iranian monarchy that began with King Cyrus. The highlight was a party in the Iranian desert. It was meant to show the world that Iran had arrived on the world stage with the Shah at its head.

[00:07:06] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And it was absolutely decadent. Over 60 heads of state were shuttled out to a specially built luxury tent city near the ruins of Cyrus's ancient capital. Soldiers dressed in ancient Persian uniforms were on parade, food and wine or flown in from one of the finest restaurants in Paris, including the main course, peacocks stuffed with foie gras. The festivities were broadcast across the world. Later, Orson Welles was hired to narrate a feature film of the event.

[00:07:46] **Orson Welles** Cyrus, King of Kings. Champion—long before Magna Carta—of human rights and liberties. Cyrus, the founder of Persian Culture and the father of Iran, which the Shah rules today.

[00:08:03] **Menahem Merhavy** Then the Shah addresses the tomb of Cyrus the Great as part of this big extravaganza.

[00:08:10] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** The Shah began by addressing Cyrus —"Korosh" in Farsi— one king to another.

[00:08:15] **Mohammed Palavi** Korosh. (continued speech in Farsi in background)

[00:08:21] **Orson Welles** O Cyrus, great King. King of Kings. Achemedian King. King of the Land of Iran by the Shah and Shah of Iran. Offer these salutations from myself and from my nation.

[00:08:42] **Menahem Merhavy** You know, "I King of the King of Iran. You know, I salute you. Rest in peace because we are here to keep on the good work." Or something like that.

[00:08:56] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** But the event came to underscore the difference between how Iranians remembered the actual Cyrus - the benevolent ruler of a proud and diverse Iranian empire - and how many saw the Shah - as the leader of an oppressive police state propped up by foreign powers - and the sheer cost of the party estimated to have run over six hundred million dollars didn't help either.

[00:09:31] **Kurtis Schaeffer** These costly celebrations of Cyrus became major political fodder for Ayatollah Khomeini, who had helped deposed the Shah and establish the Islamic Republic.

[00:09:43] **Menahem Merhavy** It kind of backfired in the sense that Iranians didn't buy it as buying legitimacy to the Pahlavi state. However, they did not throw the baby with the bathtub.

[00:09:59] **Kurtis Schaeffer** That is to say, while the Shah is gone, Cyrus is still a popular figure among Iranians. And especially in the Iranian diaspora. Cyrus and his edict remain a source of pride, colosely associated with human rights and religious freedom.

[00:10:15] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** In other words, this comparison fails not because people didn't see good qualities in Cyrus, but because it was a top-down image created by the Shah himself. It was a bit like giving yourself your own grandiose nickname—it doesn't tend to stick when you name yourself.

[00:10:35] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And that's one key difference in the comparison between Cyrus and President Trump.

[00:10:42] **Netanyahu** I want to tell you, the Jewish people have a long so we remember the proclamation of the Great King Cyrus the Great, Persian King. 25 hundred years ago, he proclaimed that Jewish exiles in Babylon could come back and rebuild our temple in Jerusalem. And we remember how a few weeks ago, President Donald J. Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

[00:11:09] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** That was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a press conference in 2018.

[00:11:15] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Netanyahu is far from alone in making the Trump-Cyrus connection.

[00:11:19] **Newsclip** U.S. evangelical Christians are divided about what to do with Donald Trump. The views range from standing with him, abandoning him, or believing he has a biblical mandate.

[00:11:31] **Preacher** I walked out of that office after meeting with him and I knew God had chosen him for such a time as this.

[00:11:31] **Commentator** God was raising him up like Cyrus. It's not a normal election. And so it's like we almost need a different kind of candidate. Trump has the Cyrus anointing.

[00:11:57] **Sarah Posner** I think that in all things in evangelical Republican politics, it really is more about politics than it is about the religion.

[00:12:05] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** This is reporter Sarah Posner.

[00:12:07] **Sarah Posner** My name is Sarah Posner. I've been covering the Christian right and Republican politics and the evangelical quest for the perfect presidential candidate, which they ultimately appear to find in, surprisingly, Donald Trump.

[00:12:23] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So Trump's support among white Evangelicals seems like such established fact. Now, let's go back to when he first seemed to become their preferred candidate, which is when you begin to see these comparisons to Cyrus start to pop up. Why did Cyrus become this powerful frame for Trump's candidacy?

[00:12:46] **Sarah Posner** Well, I think first, a little context is in order to understand what. Politicized evangelicals have been traditionally looking for in a presidential candidate since the Reagan era. Since that time, they have basically created a litmus test for Republican presidential candidates that they applied in primaries.

[00:13:14] **Newsclip** Governor Bush, a philosopher, thinker and why?

[00:13:18] **George W. Bush** Christ. Because he changed my heart.

[00:13:22] **Newsclip** I think the viewer would like to know more on how he has changed your heart.

[00:13:13] **George W. Bush** Well, it's I don't know. It's going to be hard to explain. When you accept Christ as a savior, it changes your heart, changes your life. And that's what happened to me.

[00:13:35] **Sarah Posner** This person has to have a relatable salvation story. They have to be a professing Christian. They have to be a good family man. And by that, I literally mean man. And they had to check off all of these boxes, including not just being a Christian, but also promising to govern from a Christian worldview or from a biblical worldview. And Trump, he was so obviously on April to even provide the most cursory basic answers to those questions that Evangelicals wanted answered.

[00:14:14] **Donald Trump** So I hear this is a major theme right here. But Two Corinthians, right? Two Corinthians 3:17. That's the whole ballgame. Is that the one? Is that the one you like? I think that's the one you like because I loved it. And it's so representative of what's taken place.

[00:14:38] **Sarah Posner** So they had a bit of a problem in Trump in 2016 because obviously he was not checking off those boxes, yet the evangelical base was falling head over heels for him. So what you saw, particularly in the charismatic and Pentecostal subculture of American Evangelicalism, was a number of different people claiming to have insight into biblical prophecy.

[00:15:13] **Newsclip** Why Trump? Why did you pick him?

[00:15:14] **Preacher** I began to see what a lot of Christians saw was that God was raising up this man who we didn't even necessarily like.

[00:15:25] **Sarah Posner** And, well, perhaps Trump wasn't a Christian, but perhaps he was instead a leader that God sent to America at this time to save America. Much like Cyrus enabled the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem. And so I then it kind of just continue to catch fire such that the Cyrus comparison just became very commonplace in evangelical discussions about Trump and has even been used by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to say that Trump is like a Cyrus to the Israeli people.

[00:16:06] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So let's sort of talk about the substance of the comparison in likening Trump to Cyrus. They're acknowledging that he is not of the tribe. Right. So he's a he's a gentile king.

[00:15:22] **Sarah Posner** Right.

[00:15:23] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And the end, they're figuring him as a divine instrument.

[00:15:26] **Sarah Posner** Yes.

[00:15:27] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** It's a way of accommodating for his not looking like a Christian leader.

[00:15:34] **Sarah Posner** Exactly.

[00:15:35] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And so what else does it account for in him? How else does the comparison work?

[00:16:40] **Sarah Posner** Well, oddly enough, the comparison works because he's the - now, the forty-fifth president and Cyrus is discussed in the forty-fifth chapter of Isaiah. That is also a very common theme that you'll see played out in these evangelical circles as sort of further justification or as a way of further bolstering their claim that this is this is God's hand on Trump. Trump is a leader who's maybe not one of us, but he understands us. And God sent him at this time to save us from to save us. When they say us, they mean, you know, their white Christian view of America to save us from these other forces, whether it's, you know, secularism, feminism, socialism. Trump is saving us from all of that.

[00:17:35] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Is there a sense when you say evangelicals feel that he's on their side? Is there a sense that the evangelical community is beleaguered or under threat?

[00:17:47] **Sarah Posner** Yes. I mean, that is precisely why they see him as this savior figure, because to them, you know - Roe versus Wade, Obergefell, this Supreme Court decision that legalized same sex marriage - all of these things are taken by Evangelicals as being a threat to Christianity and therefore, in their view, to their religious freedom.

[00:18:11] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** How much has has Trump actively cultivated people aligning him with with Cyrus?

[00:18:20] **Sarah Posner** That's a good question. He certainly hasn't done anything to tamp it down, and none of his surrogates have done anything to tamp down that talk. I think that there have probably been situations where it has been said in his presence, but I also haven't seen him like pound his chest to say he's like King Cyrus, although I think, you know, anything's possible.

[00:18:42] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** As you know, there been a number of people who have touted the comparison to Cyrus, and they can come from all sorts of different traditions. So David Koresh was one. And of course, the Shah was another. You know, in all those cases, it was a person, you know, choosing to contextualize their mission in the history of of a great figure. This feels different.

[00:19:08] **Sarah Posner** Yes. It did not come originally from Trump. And I think it's important to understand that it comes from this subculture of Evangelicalism, where it's extremely common place for a self-anointed prophet to say that he or she has, you know, prophesy that some event is going to come to pass, such as Trump will win the presidency, for example. And for this demographic, somebody making that kind of comparison about a public figure isn't so unusual. You know, there's a lot of talk about a particular moment in history being someone's Esther moment. Again, you know, we're back in Persia. But, you know, the Esther moment being you know, it's your moment to save your people from a genocide or it's your moment to save America from liberalism. But I think that the Cyrus comparison has a very different feel to it. The Esther comparison is about each individual being able to play a role.

[00:20:12] **Newsclip** Could it be that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this? In other words, an Esther moment. And God has ordained that at some moment in life, you're essential.

[00:20:26] **Sarah Posner** You know, that you can have your Esther moment if you get involved in politics and save America from these evils, whereas the Cyrus comparison for Trump is very much about this pretty much bowing down to this on this great leader.

[00:20:56] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Menahem and Sarah, give us two great examples of how stories from the ancient world are used in contemporary politics. Both accounts of how Cyrus was used make me wonder more broadly about the power of stories from the ancient world.

[00:21:17] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** There's something there. There's something about the story of Cyrus as uncovering an ultimate truth about leadership and about destiny. There's something really kind of sweeping in what Cyrus does that makes him such a compelling model for generations afterwards.

[00:21:38] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So in this case of the Shah, I can get that because in part he's got great stage props. It makes for great theater, right. He can go to ruins and speak through the millennia to that leader who lived there. It's like something out of an opera with the Trump case. I don't get it so much.

[00:22:03] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Right. Yeah, so the Shah has the land, he's got Cyrus, his tomb. Trump and his evangelical followers, they've got the Bible. You know, Cyrus is in some of the most beautiful passages in the book of Isaiah. He figures in a number of other important books as well. He is a major figure. I think for me, one of the things that it shows me is that we have a book - in this case the Bible - or we have an edict - you know, in this case the Cyrus Cylinder - and they're both open to interpretation and people can appropriate them in very highly creative ways.

[00:22:48] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Well, there's something powerful about being able to talk directly to the past. The Shah did it right. He was speaking, speaking to Cyrus in a leader to leader through thousands of years, and in the case of evangelical communities, they have made Trump into a biblical figure. They have made Trump into a character who now has thousands of years of history behind him. And that's a powerful thing to do.

[00:23:18] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Right. And there's also something very affirming about looking toward an uncertain future with all the confidence that you know how it works out, because you know about this biblical past or this ancient King Cyrus.

[00:23:37] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Yeah. Even in the midst of crisis, you know that it's going to work out because it's worked out before.

[00:23:52] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sacred and Profane is produced for the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. Our guests are Menahem Merhavy and Sarah

Posner. Her book, *Unholy: Why Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Trump* will be out this May. Our communications manager is Ashley Duffalo. Emily Gadek is our senior producer. Kelly Jones is the Lab's editor.

[00:24:19] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Our readers were Meghan Hartman and Peter Jacobs. Music on this episode comes from Blue Dot Sessions. You can find out more about our work at religion.lab.edu, or by following us on Twitter @thereligionlab. And if you like the show, head over to iTunes or the platform of your choice to rate and review us. It really makes a difference for new shows like ours.