

King of Kings

I

He is King of Babylon, and has a bedroom that is appropriate to a King of Babylon. He takes his rest on a sheepskin filled with the feathers of geese, the birds that one sees in the skies of Persia, and that swim in the rivers and ponds of Mesopotamia. The king of a richer and lazier land rests more softly. He wakes up more than once, feeling more frightened than he does in battle. He does not lie on steady ground – as soon as he moves, it gives way, as if he rests on an abyss. But he is King of Babylon, and this is how he must sleep, on a mattress, on his own, surrounded by no living creatures. There could be concubines if he wanted them – he has chosen not to have them, and the guards are outside the room, not inside. Animals, most of all, are kept out – the smell of animals, the Babylonians believe, is intolerable. Where the common man must endure it, it is the pride of the nation to shield the king from such inconveniences

Cyrus has always slept close to his horse.

He could always see an open fire at night, sacred to Ahura Mazda, by which the guards watched over him, and by which he could convince himself of the existence of the world. There is no fire tonight: he is 52 years old. But if he should be in Babylon, and set up his tent between the Tower and the Hanging Gardens, and sleep there like a Persian, he will forever be a conqueror, an invader, a stranger. If he eats like a Babylonian king, rules like a Babylonian king, even sleeps like a Babylonian king, the people of Babylon will not rise up against him as they did once against the kings of Assur, and even now against their own King Nabonid. It is how it must be. It is not even that he can't sleep. That would be bearable. It is rather that there are moments of slumber, and his enemies – which he

keeps close – are even closer to him. He sinks away – suddenly the softness of this thing, this *mattress* – becomes seductive, and in front of him swirl Cyaxares, wig and mascara hiding his decaying body, Croesus juggling gold coins, and Nabonid with the moon in his eyes. He did not fear them in the world, never has, but with the darkness pressing down on him and him being pressed down ever further because the *mattress* is no support, they have gained a hold on him

They rise up before his eyes; stand before him; raise their hands, as if to embrace or strangle him; and as they extend their arms, they fall backwards and disappear into the darkness, which for their absence becomes even deeper, and then, when there is nothing, when he sees less than he ever has, as his eyes become progressively less adjusted to the darkness in a reversal of how it must be, then, only then, is there a voice:

“Cyrus, whose right hand I have held to subdue nations before him. I have loosed the loins of kings to open before you the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut. I went before you and made the crooked places straight, and *did* break in pieces the gates of brass and the gates of iron.”

“Who are you?” he asks, and the voice resumes:

“I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places, that you may know that I, the Lord, which call you by your name, *am* the God of Israel. For Jacob my servants’ sake, I have called you by your name.”

“You have?” Cyrus asks, first to himself, and then, sitting up on his knees – only his knees give him support enough on this *mattress*, even though it makes him fear he might fall face forward – out loud: “You have?”

“I have surnamed you.....” says the voice, and waits to speak “.....though you have not known me. I *am* the Lord, and *there is* none else, *there is* no God besides me: I girded you, though you have not known me.”

The voice in the darkness, demanding credit for Cyrus’ achievement. His luck in the world had been marked. Three times had he gone to war; Cyaxares, King of the Medes, his grandfather and

his terror, oppressor of the Persians; Croesus of the Lydians, blinded by his gold, deafened by oracles; and Nabonid of Babylon, worshipper of the moon. All defeated.

Was it luck; dumb luck; luck that could not speak or proclaim itself?

Or fate; blind fate; fate groping in the darkness? And would that fate reserve a reckoning for him?

And here, after so many victories, as his luck had still not run out, as fate had still not punished him, there was the voice, proclaiming.....

“Drop down, you heavens, and let the skies pour down with righteousness; let the earth open, and let them bring forth salvation. Let righteousness spring up: I the Lord have created it. Woe unto him that strives with his maker: Let the potsherd strive with the potshards of the earth: shall the clay say to him that fashions it: “What maketh thou or your work? He has no hands.”

Only in the darkness could the voice come. Only when his officers are away, and his wives and concubines, his children, his servants, his soldiers, his enemies. He has crowned himself King of Kings, once the number of kings he had subjugated had become sufficient.

How could a King of Kings know such loneliness?

In a world where the image of a king is the image of an Assyrian king, and the monstrous logic of the Assyrians is a king's logic – and to pay homage to their god, the enemy must die, and cruelly - Cyrus had conquered three great kings, and let them live. To call on their wisdom, he said.

It isn't the truth. The truth is, he is nothing, except the inversion of their shortcomings. Out of the four of them, he is the one without their obvious faults, and so he is King of Kings, ruler of four kingdoms. He needs to be reminded of the vices, the absence of which makes him into what he is . It is not possible, for a king, to have virtues – and those who praise him for his virtues, he regards with distrust. It is rather that it is easy for a king to fall into vice. There is nothing to stop him becoming a monster in one way – Cyaxares - or another way – Croesus – or yet another way – Nabonid. Those who admire him for his virtue admire him for an absence of vice.

He has heard the voice. He sits upright, and ponders: never has he heard a voice before. A god speaks in the night – not reproachful, and not commanding. This god announces himself as the truth of all that has happened – explain it all in hindsight. Does not order Cyrus to stand up, but claims him. Where he had thought he had acted on his own behalf, on the behalf of his people, there is now a god. Is it true, or do the gods make spurious claims? Is he within his rights to turn down this god, tell this god to not disturb his sleep?

He lays on a simple tunic; having heard a voice, he will not be seen in his nakedness. He knocks at his door.

“The magus is to meet me in the throne room,” he commands, and so it is done.

II

He sits on the throne and waits. He counts to pass the time. It seems to last long, and yet he only needs to count to sixty. The magus is unrushed; he is fully attired.

“I heard a voice,” the king says.

“A voice?” the magus asks. The one great wrinkle that runs across his forehead deepens. “And did not find a speaker?”

“Just a voice.”

Protocol at the Persian court is not extensive. Not yet. There is a push now to add elements of the elaborate protocols of Babylon. Much to his regret, Cyrus has agreed to sleep on a mattress in a darkened room like a King of Babylon, but the protocol with which the Babylonians would have him

treat his courtiers is abhorrent to him. “A Babylonian courtier dresses himself in lies,” he has said, and in that, he is a proud Persian. Persian protocol is simple. When you speak to your king, you do not lie; you do not avert your eyes.

Hearing the words ‘Just a voice,’ the magus breaks Persian protocol. “The light will not reflect off a voice,” he says, and lifts up a slip of his robe, as if to wipe away sweat or to hide his face in it, and well-nigh speaks into it, rather than at the king. “Since time began, Ahriman has had to flee from the visage of Ahura Mazda. The darkness is where he can hide, and from where he can strike forth.”

“Is that all you have, Magus? A voice speaks to me in the dark, as no voice from on high has ever spoken to me. I, who have been afraid to discover that man has no god above him, and who fled this fear, from the plains of Persia, to the mountains of Media, the riches of Lydia, and the floodplains of Babylon. And never anything to show me that there was a higher being than me; and without a higher being than me, what purpose being me? What do you have to say, Magus?”

“I have not said anything.”

“Your eyes shift away, as is unfitting for a priest of Ahura Mazda, who does not lie, and must not be lied to. The tilt of your head; how you found time to dress in those opulent robes, of that garment come from far away where we don’t know who lives there; how you hide in your garments! Speak to me!”

His subterfuge having been called out, the Magus stretches to his full length, lets his robes hang by his sides and looks the king straight in the eye, but trembles as he does so.

“The voice in the darkness.... The voice that comes in the darkness..... The voice that lives in the darkness, because only the darkness will give it shelter.....”

A pause in his speech. Something unspoken, for a moment, in the space between the king and the Magus.

“...that voice is the voice of the other. That voice is the voice of he who denies. It is the voice of evil. It is the voice of Ahriman.....”

And now Cyrus bows his head. “And yet,” he says, “it is the only voice I have known.” With his right hand, he dismisses the magus, who slumps back into his robes and rushes off.

After dismissing the Magus, Cyrus knows what he should have asked him. He is now returned to his quarters and Cyrus would not call him awake a second time in the same night. And yet, the insight of the Magus has Cyrus fuming. A god has spoken to him – and the magus says it is the voice of evil, of Ahriman, because it comes in the night, with only the King as witness. “Is it not that I am king” Cyrus would shout after the Magus “that I should hear the word of God?” Had God ever visited the Magus? Of course not. The Magus had made up a notion of what God should be in the safety of his study, insulated from world and gods alike.

Who can Cyrus speak to? Who can know? Nobody: it is between him and the voice in the room. Between him and his conscience.

He could call upon the kings! In the years of their kingship, following their own triumphs – not as great as his own – this god or another god might well have chosen to address them. If anybody could tell him what attitude to take when a god addresses you and claims your kingdom for himself, it might be them.

“The Magus is no use to me,” Cyrus says. “Go wake me the kings!”

“Wake the kings, Your Grace?”

“I am the king of kings. If I say for a king to rise, then rise he will.”

“Cyaxares is awake.” Cyaxares, ancient, a husk of a man, no meat on his bones, with a wig to suggest hair and rouge to suggest blood throbbing through his veins, had become a stranger to all that makes a man, sleep not excluded. Cyrus had known all too well that it is customary to put a king to death upon conquering him: conjure up some grim vision of how a life might end, and make it a truth. Roll him into a rug and have horses trample him, one of Cyaxares’ faithless courtiers had suggested. Cyrus considered it, and wondered if, when the rug was unrolled, there was anything there left to be

found. Why invent a torture that would squeeze on so little life? Cyaxares would die anyway, Cyrus thought.

But he hadn't. He was still alive, still doffed up with wig and rouge, waking the days and waking the nights, never closing his eyes, as if he was still awake to some possibility, some chance to let his cruelty reign once more.

“The other two are sleeping?”

“They might be. They lie in their beds.”

“Wake them. All of them.”

III

Cyaxares – his inexplicable hatred. His failure to understand that even he would die, His insistence that all his successors must die, which makes him the opposite of every other king the world had known, who would always seek for the advantage of their offspring. Cyaxares was a man unacquainted with the notion of death, and the notion of mortality. Vibrancy had departed him so long ago he had no memory of it. Like a madman, he would throw himself and his kingdom against any challenge to his power. The Persians could no longer endure his tyranny, so Cyrus went to war.

Cyaxares, having been awake, was the first in the throne room, and was already attired as well as he ever was, moving his hand across his face to make the final adjustments to his mascara. Was it an inordinate skill in arranging; did he always remain in this state; or had it been that he expected to be summoned on this out of all nights?

“Grandfather.”

Cyaxares had always squinted at him. He had squinted when he was still king, and vested with the authority to destroy his life. The squinting, Cyrus thought, had been to determine whether he, Cyrus, was a threat. That was no longer a question; but it was as if Cyaxares squinted even more now.

It was night; there was little light in the throne room. Perhaps for that reason.

“Grandfather, is there a god? Is there a god, that has spoken to you? I do not ask you as your grandson. Your king commands you to say it.”

“There is one god that I know of,” says Cyaxares. “There is one god that speaks to me, and speaks to me every day.”

“Is it the god of our ancestors, the god of Medes and Persians, Ahura Mazda?”

“It is not.”

“Which god is it?”

“It is I: I am the god of my world. I am the sun in my firmament. I was king – but to be king was to lower myself. I was god, not mere king, and to prove it, I would destroy all who would take my place. I would not die – and all who could replace me would. I would survive them all.”

“Like that Greek god I have heard of.”

“I know of no Greek gods,” says Cyaxares. “I know only of myself.”

“Now that I have conquered you,” Cyrus says, “can I count myself a god?”

“There is but one god. You are king in my place, but you must still bow to me, because you are a mortal man, and I am god.”

Kill him after all, merely to disprove his divinity? Cyaxares stands right opposite the throne, facing the king. Nobody contests him the centre of the hall, but he is a man given to knowing when there is somebody behind him. His hearing can't be good – if it decayed as the rest of him. It can't be as good as that of the guards, or of Cyrus. And yet, he half turns, casts a glance at the door, and sidles away, to stand towards the edge of the hall.

Nabonid stumbles into the throne room, looking a fool, a lunatic, a worshipper of the moon, hair dishevelled, robe buttoned up wrongly. For twenty headstrong years he ruled Babylon, led by a

vision of greatness, indifferent to what his people demanded. As he woke from his dream, Cyrus spared his life, and that was the cruelest punishment. Isn't it kindness towards a man dreaming, to kill him in his sleep, and brutally? Smothering him with a pillow might seem less cruel, but it is not. It prolongs the awareness of approaching death. A dream should end abruptly: waking up is violence.

But Nabonid used to lie in that bed in which Cyrus himself now sleeps, and Cyrus does not know how anybody could dream in that bed. To dream is to be safe; to be safe is to feel the ground beneath you. Sleeping in that bed, sleeping on feathers, one becomes a feather oneself, tossed and driven by the wind. Nabonid: a figure of pity. But on this night, having lain in Nabonid's bed, and having been spoken to by an entity he must suspect is the voice of evil, Cyrus has no pity.

“Nabonid, King of Babylon: Did you sleep well, before I had you woken? Did you dream your soft dreams?”

“I sleep poorly.”

“I sleep in your bed now. It is where you slept well, and where I do not. It pains me to hear that your mattress' hardness kept you awake.”

“It was not the mattress' hardness,” says Nabonid.

“I ordered them to give you the softest mattress after mine. Is it, that you cannot endure the softness of the mattress either?”

“No. It is not the hardness, nor the softness. It is not the mattress. The gods keep me awake.”

“As they do me,” says Cyrus. “I spoke of the mattress, because I would not lay my sleeplessness at the gods' doorstep. You have been king longer than I have. Tell me about the gods.”

“My goddess is the moon,” says Nabonid. “I prayed to her. I would elevate her; she would grant me rule of the world.”

“Did she speak to you?”

“Many a time, as I laid in that bed you now lie in. Through the high window I would see the moon. A full moon, or just a sickle, but all the brighter for it. Her voice was not bright as her shape was. She whispered in the night. Nabonid – Nabonid – Nabonid. . . . I was grateful when I saw her in the night sky, and grateful when she spoke to me. She made her demands, and she made her promises. Have you heard of her demands?”

“I have,” Cyrus says. “You were to banish the cult of the god of storms, Marduk. Institute the cult of Sin, goddess of the moon, in its stead. Your exiles told me about it, when they offered me your throne.”

“How could I believe in Marduk? I never heard a voice in the wind. The moon would speak to me.”

“You are certain you heard a voice?”

“It is hard to be mistaken of what you hear on quiet nights. I could hear a cat meow on the walls surrounding the palace; a dog bark across the river. I heard a voice; it was soft and tender. She soothed me in my sleep. Have you heard the doves cooing in the hanging gardens?”

“I have.”

“That is how quiet the night is, that you can hear the doves. And yet, no voice.”

“There is no moon,” Cyrus says.

“She must explain to me why she did not keep her promises. I did right by her, why could she not do right by me?”

“I have heard a voice,” Cyrus says. “Taking credit for all my victories.”

“After you already won them,” says Nabonid. “That makes him more trustworthy than the moon.”

The throne room is amazingly large, and empty. Babylon is packed full of people – the world’s greatest city, and gripped by its fabled confusion which has not abated even after a thousand

years. The Babylonians all speak – and as they cannot understand each other, they speak ever louder and more insistently, until the noise comes from every corner, and a single language is spoken that is no longer understandable to any human being – but perhaps to a god. The din of Babylon – is it a language? One would not expect to have to be afraid of silence and emptiness in the city of Babylon. But just now, it was the silence. Was it so silent in his bedroom, that he finally heard that voice? No. What he heard was not the whispering of the moon, as Nabonid had.

Now, looking at the throne room in the light of torches, it strikes Cyrus how empty it is. In the daytime, when he came here to ascend his throne, taking the risk of letting all and sundry be witness to it, the number of people seemed infinite.

There is but one place to sit, and it's the throne. Because it is the only way that the king can be distinguished from the masses by being the only one who sits. It means that, when there is no crowd, the throne room is an open space, as terrifying in its openness as his bedroom is in its silence. Two men in front of him – Nabonid, petitioning, looking at him. And Cyaxares, standing to the side, casting hateful glances. He, Cyrus, the third dancer in this masque, is stationary, and so it is not yet a dance, but it will become one, if one more enters the space, and also finds no seat.

Croesus comes in. His face! Eyes tiny, mouth open. Bent over. A man of good health, strapping, corpulent, but at the present moment even ancient Cyaxares looks better. It takes Cyrus aback for a moment, until he understands: out of the four of them, only Croesus had been asleep.

The wisdom of Croesus: the wisdom of a fool, who had stood on a pyre, and found wisdom. Cyrus had saved Cyaxares because it was his grandfather. When he had taken Sardes, his gods and his people might demand that a lust for blood be slaked. Was being burnt too kind a fate for Croesus, who had attacked Persia for no reason but because an oracle said he should? It was exactly as much kindness as he deserved, and kindness it was: so many worse ways to die. A pyre was erected, Croesus was put up there to burn, for Cyrus to see it in front of him. Cyrus could not look away, and he did not look with only his eyes; he felt a tingling all over his skin, and in his crotch. He had not seen a man

burn, but had been told how it was: once the flames reach the crotch, there it ends. That's when the skull bursts open, and the brains bubble out like boiling milk or wriggling maggots.

The pyre was lighted, he felt his skin crawl, saw Croesus open his mouth: "Now I know what (Cyrus can't make out the name, it sounds Greek) meant: I am not the happiest!" Curiosity about what Croesus meant was sufficient excuse for Cyrus to end the charade. A simple gesture and the fire was put out: it was mastery of life and death. Better, he decided, to be master of life. He would not order the death of another king. And a good thing too, because here is Croesus now.

"Croesus!" Cyrus shouts out. Cyaxares takes a few steps further back, Nabonid scurries away in the opposite direction. As Croesus steps forward, both circle to get behind him. Croesus is now the centre of proceedings. "I see you have been woken," Cyrus says. "My servants found your fellow crowned heads awake in their rooms. Only you felt you could sleep under my protection. I thank you for it."

"As long as you are king, and I am not, I can sleep," says Croesus. "You know what a mighty king I have been. Counted the happiest man by ever so many, until I believed it myself. It was not out of vanity, it's what I had been told. Only Solon came to my court to tell me I was not the happiest. Solon was reputed to the wisest of all men, but what value was his judgement against that of so many? Solon was one voice out of many. I could not trust in a voice, nor could I ignore a voice. If there was a voice from among the ranks of men, I would distrust it – and forever ponder what it had said. The confusion here in Babylon is as nothing compared to the confusion in my head. I went to war, consulting a dozen oracles – the gods speak through each of them. I put them all to the test, asking questions to which I knew the answer, and two oracles proved themselves – that of Ammon in Siwa, that of Apollo in Delphi. I listened to their counsels, attempted to decipher their words, and arrived at the certainty that I would win, and so I went to war against you, Cyrus, And here I stand, at your mercy for ever and ever. I am finally a happy man, and not in need of asking anyone whether I am the happiest. No god has spoken to me either. If a god had spoken to me, I would have relied upon the mercy of that god, and would have ceased to fear. If a god spoke to you, accept it as a blessing. Do not hesitate to obey."

Croesus stands in front of him. His dais is elevated, so he sits above Croesus. Another notion of a Babylonian, or even a Median or Lydian king, rather than a Persian king, to sit on a dais, but now he is king of Babylonians, Medians, and Lydians. It is as frightening, to sit on a dais, elevated above those he speaks to, even though he sits down and they stand up – a reversal of nature, like a *mattress* is a reversal of nature. Being elevated is reminiscent of sitting on a horse in battle, facing a line of infantry. The infantry have their feet firmly planted on the ground, they can rest their lances. Raised above them, he is unsteady.

The three kings, standing before him, are like the infantry. Croesus, in front of him, is flanked by Nabonid on his left. Cyaxares, thin like a lance on whom a man could impale himself, makes a circuitous movement, as if he wishes to come behind the throne.

“I never surrounded myself with Magi,” says Croesus. “I trusted in gold, and above all, I trusted in my judgment. Because it makes no difference: if you will trust the judgment of any man, you might as well trust your own as that of another. It is only the word of the gods that we should trust in more.”

“Nabonid, what do you say?”

“My goddess spoke in a whisper. She now holds her peace. As long as no other god spoke louder than her, I would believe her. You are king now. Let your god speak to you.”

“Grandfather?”

“There is but one god: it is I. And one believer: I, also.”

Were any of their answers of the slightest use?

“I dismiss you,” Cyrus says. “All three of you.” The roughness in his voice tastes bitter in his mouth. “I beg your pardon, for waking you,” Once they have left the hall, he can return to his bed.

He looks at his mattress – it look solid, but it isn't. He sits down on it, it gives way. How to speak to a god? Does he even know where the voice came from? Does he stretch out his arms to the

ceiling? He doesn't want to, his arms are heavy, he couldn't even crane his neck. Fold his hands in front of his mouth? Not even that. Whispers to himself, as a way of speaking to God.

“You, god, have spoken to me. Some speak to you and you do not answer, but you have spoken to me, and I will answer you with a question. I asked my kings, and my questions led to many answers – but no answers that were greater than the men I asked them of. What should I ask you? Whether you are the evil one, that you hide in the shadows? Whether you are the God of Israel, or the god of all men? Why you make us suffer, make us grow old, make us die?

I will not ask you any of that - but only this.”

He puts his wrists against his temples, and he shouts: “What do you want from me?”