

Rivers, Rams & Royalty: The Rise of the Shepherd King

Characters:

Saba

Tela (Tel-ee)

Benjamin (Ben-ya-mean)

Servant

Astyages

Mandane

Harpagus

Median Shepherd

King Cyrus

Persian Soldier 1

Persian Soldiers (non-speaking)

Darius

Persian Soldier 2

King Croesus

Babylonian Soldier 1

Babylonian Soldier 2

Babylonian General

King Belshazzar

Feast Servants

Daniel

Scene 1:

"Glory to God in the Highest" playing

Saba: *(entering from stage left in awe and wonder, falling to his knees with arms lifted towards heaven)* It's time! It's finally time! I had prayed I would see it in my days – all of our study – the prophecies – it's true! What an honour, of all people on earth we are blessed.

Benjamin: *(following behind with joy and youthful glee)* Our savior has been born! The Messiah – the anointed of the Lord. This very night! *(Picking up a lamb in his arms as he sits down)*

Tela: But in a stable? How has the Messiah been born in a stable?! The poor child...the poor mother! Surely someone would have been willing to make room for them if it was known who they were?

Saba: How can we...the Messiah!...how dare we go before the presence of a king?

Tela: Uncle, this isn't a king like Herod – don't you remember what he said – the babe is lying in a manger – we might not know what to do before kings, but if there is one thing we know, *(picking up a lamb)* it is mangers!

Benjamin: *(Sitting up quickly)* King Herod! What is he going to do when he finds out? He's not going to stand by and let a baby threaten his power.

Saba: *(Waving him off)* The Messiah – the anointed one – it seems so clear now, how did we not realize!? We have been so blind – our eyes have been opened!

Benjamin: Saba, grandfather - What is it? You don't make any sense.

Saba: Child – the anointed is born, he lies in a manger, born to shepherd his people – that is why the angel has appeared to us – shepherds! Think! Think through the prophets! We thought it was just history – but it's not – it was a prophecy!

Benjamin: Saba! Please, explain to us – we can't keep up with you.

Tela: *(slowly)* Ahh - I think I understand – the anointed shepherd king – he speaks of the prophecy in Isaiah – King Coorush – Cyrus as you may know him.

Benjamin: Cyrus? What does a gentile king from 400 years ago have to do with the birth of the Messiah?

Tela: Don't you remember anything from your studies?!

All sit down on stumps with lambs around their feet.

Scene 2:

Tela: *(pre-recorded narration)* Long before the Romans ruled this land, even before the Greeks, the Babylonian golden grip was being threatened by a King from the east.

Astyages, King of the Median Empire was a cruel and oppressive ruler who saw treachery and guile in every member of his court. His greatest fear was that his beautiful and enchanting daughter Mandane would rise in power to overthrow him.

Astyages enters eating roll, throws it at audience while yelling at servant.

Astyages sits despondently on his throne, cleaning his nails with butcher knife, servant enters

Servant: Your Highness, Princess Mandane is here to see you.

Mandane: *(coming in directly behind)* I don't need an introduction to see my own father. *(to the servant)* You may leave us. *(to Astyages)* Father, we missed you at the banquet (again) today; your court will begin to think you don't care for them.

Astyages grunts in response

Mandane: *(Picking up flower arrangement off a table and reorganizing it distractedly while talking)* I heard the strangest rumor from my maidens this morning. It was so absurd I knew I had to share it with you. Someone has started the gossip that you've actually agreed to marry me to Cambyses, of Persia. That goatfoot prince. *(laughing)* To think, me, the princess of Media being married to a nobody like him.

Astyages: I hope you like the smell of sheep because it is no rumor. I agreed to the marriage this morning. You will be leaving for Persia as soon as we have the scrolls sealed.

Mandane: But Father, I don't mean to question your wise judgements, but we both know how important strong marriage alliances are – you of all people – you've married both your sisters to Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon and Croesus, King of Sardis. Me marrying Cambyses – well, that's just a waste – his family is insignificant, they have no power, no money – pray help me to understand.

Astyages: *(standing up aggressively, firmly)* You will understand that my word is law. You *will* marry Cambyses and leave for Persia at once. Be gone!

Mandane leaves stage sadly shaking head, Astyages paces back and forth in front of stage

Tela: *(pre-recorded narration)* Astyages soon realized that his attempt to restrict Mandane's power had failed. With her marriage to Cambyses she soon grew to be loved and favoured by the people of the Persian empire. Astyages' paranoia grew to new heights with the approaching birth of Mandane's first child.

Harpagus enters with a baby.

Harpagus: Sir, we knew you would want to be the first to meet him – your grandson – the heir to your kingdom. *(handing the child to Astyages)*

Astyages: *(takes the child, looks at it with disgust; quietly to himself)* So little, so innocent, so ugly and such a threat to my power. I must be rid of him now before he can do any damage. Here *(thrusting the baby back into Harpagus' arms)*. Take it – take it up into the mountains. Get rid of him, I don't care how. And tell no one.

Harpagus: Sire, it's your flesh and blood! He is your heir! Surely there is another way to safeguard your power.

Astyages: Harpagus, I trust you with all my affairs; but it's your life or his. Go, and be quick!
(Astyages walks out)

Harpagus: *(hesitating)* I cannot do such a thing. There must be another way. *(leaving stage via stairs)*. But how? What will I do? *(looking off stage at shepherd approaching front of stage)* You there! By order of the king, take this child. Take him into the mountains, and leave him for the wild beasts. And take this to repay you for your troubles. Go! Go!
(Harpagus turns and leaves quickly)

Shepherd: A child! A child! The gods have answered our prayers! My wife lies at home weeping for our lack of children, and now here in my arms – a child!
(leaves in a hurry)

Scene 3:

Benjamin: Really!? That's how Cyrus was born?! Was he really raised by a shepherd?

Saba: Well you certainly tell a good story Tela, but I'm not sure how much of a historian you would be!

Tela: Well the exact details of Cyrus' birth are a bit fuzzy, but all the old records do agree that Cyrus lived in constant danger of his grandfather Astyages, and he was raised to shepherd the Persian nation.

Benjamin: Wow! Can you imagine growing up as a shepherd, and then *poof* - one day you are the king of the world. That's the stuff legends are made of!

Saba: *(thoughtfully, putting his arm around Benjamin)* Our beloved King David roamed these very hills caring for his sheep and then *poof* *(shaking cane)* one day he was King of Israel – you must first lead the sheep, before you learn to lead the people.

Tela: By the time Cyrus was grown, Harpagus had grown tired of Astyages' cruel and reckless behavior. He convinced Cyrus to lead a Persian rebellion, to break free of the Median yoke.

Saba: Cyrus was a natural born leader, and his men were willing to do all that he commanded.

Tela: After overthrowing his grandfather, and taking control of the Medo-Persian empire, it looked like nothing he set his hand to do could be stopped. The world was his for the taking, if he moved quickly.

Saba: Speaking of moving quickly, we must hurry if we are going to get to Bethlehem before the sun's rising.

Benjamin: What did he need to do quickly? What was his next move?

Saba: Well ultimately, Babylon was the crown jewel Cyrus had his heart set on taking.

Tela: But if he was going to take on Babylon, he needed a LOT of gold to fund the campaign. So first he turned his sights to the wealthiest king of the world – Croesus, king of Sardis.

Saba: Now come – we really *must* get going. On to Bethlehem!

(Shepherds exit stage)

Scene 4

(Cyrus at top of stairs, turns to speak to his men/audience)

Cyrus: Men of Media and of Persia. My grandfather Astyages was a master – harsh and wreckless. Croesus, king of Sardis, is a glutton – *(squeezing fist tightly)* always squeezing from his people. *(more gently)* But I – I will be a father. I will gain for you all manner of goods. Follow me into battle, and you shall never want. For Persia!

(jumps down among his men as they shout "For Persia", leads the charge against Sardis, defeating soldiers and taking them prisoner; come back, plundering audience as they go; soldiers ad libbing as they find treasures and put them on.)

(Persian soldiers 1 & 2 march Croesus up to Cyrus, pushing him to his knees)

Persian Soldier 1: Bow down before your king. And wipe that smirk off your face.

Cyrus: Croesus – known throughout the world for your riches. Fabulously wealthy. How does it feel to see your city plundered by my soldiers?

(Croesus doesn't respond, still politely resigned)

Cyrus: *(impatiently, pushing guard aside)* How can you stand there so calmly and watch as they plunder your city and take all of your gold?

Croesus: *(shaking off guards and calmly standing up)* Not my city, my king. You have won it – they are plundering *your* city and taking *your* gold.

(Cyrus looks up in realization & dismay; beckons to his soldier)

Cyrus: *(Pushing at his guard)* Stop them. Stop them! *(Exits, second soldier walks Croesus off stage)*

Scene 5

Benjamin: Wow, it would be nice to have some of the gold of Sardis.

Saba: Do you not remember what wise King Solomon once said “The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and as a high wall in his own conceit.” King Sardis’ wealth was like the honey that attracted the Persian bear and ultimately led to his ruin.

Benjamin: Well of course that’s true, but think of all the things kings can do because of their wealth.

Tela: Yes, but don’t you remember what the angels just said? The king of the whole earth is spending his first night in a feeding trough.

Benjamin: That doesn’t make any sense to me. If this really is God’s son, chosen to be King of all the earth – shouldn’t he arrive in a palace, with servants to do his work, and jewels and...and...

Saba: Ahh my boy – do not forget that as a shepherd you join the ranks of righteous Abel, and faithful Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Moses.

Tela: And don’t forget the woman shepherds – Rachel, Zipporah and the other daughters of Jethro.

Saba: Even Yahweh our God calls Cyrus – “my shepherd.”

Benjamin: *(In confusion)* But what was it that Yahweh was going to use Cyrus for?

Tela: Yahweh had 2 jobs for Cyrus. Just like Isaiah says that Yahweh formed his son in his mother’s womb, Yahweh also called Cyrus by name 150 years before his birth, to describe how God would use Cyrus to judge wicked Babylon for her sins.

Scene 6

(Standing over Ishtar gates)

Babylonian soldier 1: You’ll take our city when mules foal!

Babylonian soldier 2: Go back to your pasture, you goatfoots.

(Persian soldier 1 running over to table)

Persian soldier 1: Cyrus – my lord, it is just as you thought. As our army has approached the city, the Babylonian army has retreated inside their city walls and secured the city.

Darius: *(Hitting table)* Cowards! Cowards – all of them. They hide behind their city walls. Why don’t they come out to fight?

Cyrus: No Uncle Darius, it is not that they are cowards – if I had a city fortified like that to hide behind, I would do the same thing. There is good reason Babylon has never fallen.

Persian Soldier 1: Do we prepare for a siege, my king?

Cyrus: If we are going to do the unthinkable, and take Babylon, we have to do it in a way that has never been done before.

Persian Soldier 1: *(slapping a mosquito)* I sure hope we don't have to camp here for long. The bugs are terrible outside the city.

Darius: Don't get your hopes up; they have enough food for 10 years within the city. I'm a patient guy, but a siege? Boring! ...And because the river Euphrates flows right down the middle, they have a clean fresh water supply too. *(Slapping mosquito)* But you are right about the bugs, always buzzing, but never able to get them!

Cyrus: *(pausing, starting slowly in growing excitement)* That's it...the Euphrates...

(Looking through scrolls) I know I've read about this before, where is it? Here! *(Unrolls a map of the area)* if we can divert it quickly enough, we will have a road right down the middle of the city and catch them off guard.

Persian Soldier 1: Darius – is it possible to divert the river? Has anything like this been done before?

Darius: You know, now that you mention it, I remember reading in the scrolls about a queen who did great and significant things! The Babylonian queen Nitocris and how she did this very thing as part of a project to fortify the city walls. The water was diverted to a manmade swamp, just over here in the river – that's why the bugs are so bad around here. This plan you have, might just work!

Cyrus: *(to the soldier)* We'll make the river so gentle even a woman could cross it without wetting her knees! But then, what about the gates? If we can get the soldiers through the riverbed and to the gates, what then?

Persian Soldier 1: Our scouts say that the outside gates don't go all the way to the bottom of the river. *(pointing to the map)* They're only to protect the city from ships entering. We would at least be able to get through the outer gates, and might have to fight our way through the inner gates, but they're not nearly as strong. We would lose the element of surprise, but with enough men, we'll be able to break down the inner gates.

Darius: Very true, you are smart to figure this out....but won't they catch on as the water levels start to drop within the city? We'll need a diversion.

Cyrus: You know, we have the perfect thing coming up in a few days' time. Their festival to Marduk is in a fortnight, and on that night every man within the city from the least to the king himself will drink themselves sick in honor of their gods.

Darius: *(sarcastically)* Well then, let the wine flow in honor of Marduk!

Scene 7

Loud Babylonian music playing. Dancers. Servers. Loud laughing, drinking and eating. Small talk.

Babylonian General: *(entering seriously)* My king, the Medes and Persians are encamped outside. They are busy – we know not what they're doing, but we must ready our troops.

King Belshazzar: *(Throwing up wine goblet)* Enough! Don't ruin my banquet. This city has three solid walls around it. The gates are all securely closed, and within our granaries we have enough food to last a decade. So eat up! *(throwing food, everyone cheers in unison while holding up goblets)*

Babylonian General: *(distressed)* The watchmen have seen the Persians *digging* my Lord. They seem quite concerned.

King Belshazzar: It will take them months to build a causeway across the moat. Give me my night to celebrate the strength of the gods of Babylon. Tonight we will eat, and drink, and be merry! *(everyone cheers in unison while holding up goblets)*

(Banquet actors help clear stage in character)

Scene 8

Cyrus: *(walking up to top of steps with Darius & Persian Soldier 1)* Men of Media & Persia – our troops are posted where the Euphrates enters and exits the city. As soon as the water is fordable, you are to march along the channel under the main city gates. I act under the guidance of our gods. You are not to harm any citizen of the city – if they surrender. They will soon be your brothers and sisters. Bring me their king – dead or alive.

When you come to the inner gates, remember – I go before you with this ram's horn. *(throwing battering ram down to men)* When you batter down those gates, I GO BEFORE YOU! *(putting ram horn helmet on, men thumping spears and cheering loudly).* We will break down these gates of brass and cut down the iron bars. I will give to you the treasures of their hidden places, and WE WILL BE VICTORIOUS! *(Cyrus jumps down among his men, they are excitedly patting him on the back and thumping their chest, making lots of noise, all run off in front of stage)*

(Babylonian soldiers behind the Ishtar gates)

Babylonian Soldier 1: Those goatfoots are much louder tonight than normal

Babylonian Soldier 2: You can tell there are a lot more of them tonight as well. Should we send another message up to the banquet?

Babylonian Soldier 1: The general is probably too drunk to even accept a messenger, let alone read the message. He'll probably have us whipped for interrupting the celebration again.

Babylonian Soldier 2: I am so sick and tired of doing our jobs and being treated like slaves. We are free men and yet we are treated like dirt.

Babylonian Soldier 1: Do you know what they say about that Persian king, Cyrus? They call him a liberator, not a conqueror. I've heard that the nations he rules over call him "the father."

Babylonian Soldier 2: I've heard something similar – that he gives more to the people he conquers than he takes. The nations he rules over are treated more fairly than we Babylonians are by our own king!

Babylonian Soldier 1: *(dropping sword and helmet)* You know, I'm done. I'm out of here. Open the gates and *let* the Persians come if they want – I'm not going to die protecting a king who treats me worse than dung. *(exits stage)*

Mysterious music playing, Persian soldiers whispering loudly enter from the back of the audience, soaking wet from the waist down.

Persian Soldier 1: Shhh, shhh, keep quiet – we've made it through the outer gates but until we get through the inner gates we are just easy targets for the soldiers up on the wall.

Persian Soldier 2: There – a Babylonian soldier is patrolling – pretend like you have been enjoying the feast of Marduk.

Persian soldiers break into loud and raucous singing while acting tipsy. Bab Soldier 2 walks across top of gate before disappearing.

Persian Soldier 1: Quickly, get the battering ram into place before the guards come back. Who know how long it will take to break down these gates! One *(swinging battering ram)*, Two, Three!

(Gate easily swings open.)

Persian Soldiers drop battering ram in surprise and rush through yelling "It's open – the gates been left open...CHARGE!"

Scene 9

Banquet scene inside palace, table set up with benches, cushions, scales, all ban etc.

Daniel: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it. Belshazzar, you have been weighed in the balances, and are found wanting. Your kingdom is divided, O Belshazzar, and given to the Medes and Persians. This is the interpretation of the writing on the wall.

King Belshazzar: *(gulping from goblet, wiping mouth)* Well, I'm still king for now. *(everyone cheers in unison)* Bring this man his reward – bring the scarlet robe...one fine scarlet robe coming up, the gold chain, and let him be the 3rd ruler in my kingdom! *(Pulling Daniel close to him while raising his goblet again)* Here's to our long and prosperous relationship! *(everyone cheers in unison)*

(Babylonian General enters immediately)

Babylonian General: *(gasping for air)* My lord, the king from the east has broken through the city gates. *(stumbling among guests)* He has dried up the river – *(stumbling among guests)* his army has taken the city – *(stumbling among guests in complete despair)* Babylon the great has fallen!

(Persian soldiers enter wet from the waist down shouting "CHARGE", pandemonium erupts, people talking loudly, running about, tripping, falling, pushing things around trying to escape.)

(Persian soldiers find Belshazzar, grab him and drag him off stage while he shouts "I am the King!" repeatedly)

(Cyrus enters, followed by priest of Marduk who holds the Cyrus cylindery)

Cyrus: I am Cyrus, King of all the universe, the great king, the powerful king, the king of Babylon, king of the four corners of the world.
Having conquered Babylon, I will at once let all the peoples that the Babylonians have captured and enslaved go free. They can return to their countries, and let them recover their gold, temple statues, and gods that have been confiscated. All the people the Babylonians have oppressed and removed will go home. They will take with them their gods, and restore their altars to worship their gods in their own place, and in their own way. All this I declare in the name of Marduk, god of the Babylonians.

Darius enters followed by Daniel

Darius: King Cyrus, after the death of Belshazzar, our soldiers rounded up the remaining leaders of the city. I have here, one Daniel, a captive from Judea that has risen in ranks and Belshazzar this very evening appointed him third ruler in the empire.

Cyrus: *(motioning to Daniel to step forward)* An impressive rank for a Judean captive, no doubt. How is it that you came to be appointed so high a rank when the king was completely drunk?

Daniel: I served Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar's grandfather faithfully and well, but this Belshazzar I did not serve until this very night.

Darius: How is all this *(pointing to the chain and robe)* possible then?

Daniel: *(turning to answer Darius)* It is a reward, for letting Belshazzar know that you were to take the city this very night.

Cyrus: Do you have spies within my Persian camp? How did you come to know our secret plans?

Daniel: I in turn will ask you a question. How was it that in all your battles you have never failed? You have chased all your enemies, uninjured, and they have fallen. You claim here in Babylon that it was Marduk that made you victorious? In Sardis it was to Zeus you thanked. Northward, Southward, Westward you have conquered. And yet it was not you.

Cyrus: *(In consternation)* Not me? Who else stands before you King of the whole earth?

Daniel: I would like to read something to you, if I may, a portion from our Hebrew scriptures.

(opening scroll) Thus saith Yahweh to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron:

And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the Lord, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel.

Darius: That's beautiful poetry Daniel, you have real skill with words, it is a very accurate account of our taking of Babylon. But surely you are not going to claim that Yahweh, God of the Hebrews is responsible for Cyrus' victory over Babylon.

Daniel: These are not my words, oh King, they were penned more than 150 years ago by the Hebrew prophet Isaiah. Over 22 times he references the work of the future King Cyrus – drying up the river Euphrates, the gates opening before you...

Cyrus: *(Taking scroll from Daniel)* It calls me by name, he, Yahweh, called me by name before I was even born? What for? How did he know how we were going to do it? Was conquering Babylon the great work of my life – does it say more?

Daniel: Come O king and let us reason together. *(Exit stage with Cyrus and Darius)*

Scene 10

Sign Welcome to Ephrath Bethel ← Bethlehem →

Shepherds entering

Saba: *(sitting down)* Oh, I need to rest my weary bones – let us take a short break here. We are close to the city – if it were day you would be able to see it just over those hills.

Benjamin: Cyrus was named by Yahweh 150 years before he was born?! I wonder if Yahweh knew me before I was born.

Saba: Of course he did! As David once said “From my mother’s womb you have cared for me”

Tela: I wonder who the Messiah’s mother is? How is she doing? How this all came about, let us continue – we are so close – see the sign *(stops and freezes when looking at the sign, distressed)* No, it can’t be. Surely not – look we are in Ephrath. Ephrath! – when Rachel, the beautiful shepherdess died giving birth – not quite making it to Bethlehem. What if there is something wrong with the Messiah, what if this is history repeating itself! *(Growing hysterical)*

Saba: Hush, Hush – my dear – remember – the angels have said the child has been born – this is no “son of my sorrow” like with Rachel – this is going to be the son of God’s right hand! Let us keep going – you will soon see for yourself. There, there, no more weeping – you’ll be comforted soon enough.

Benjamin: *(coming behind, hesitant)* Tela *(pause)* Tela, you said God raised up Cyrus for two jobs – the first to judge Babylon...but what was the second job? Was it a happier job?

Tela: *(smiling weakly)* The happiest of jobs – he was going to lead God’s people like a shepherd back to their own land and ultimately rebuild God’s temple. I think we’ll have just enough time before Bethlehem for us to finish the story.

(Continue off stage)

Scene 11

Cyrus, Daniel and attendant enter, attendant hands Cyrus a scroll and he reads it from center stage.

Cyrus: The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, he is the God, which is in Jerusalem. 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.

Daniel: Thank-you oh King, you truly are a shepherd to my people, leading them back safely to our land. May no king stand before you, or be delivered out of your hand. You will do according to your will and become great. This is Yahweh’s will.

Cyrus: Thank-you Daniel, And when Yahweh is done with me and his work accomplished– I shall be broken and I shall go the way of all the earth. I just pray the world does not grudge me a bit of earth to cover my bones. *(puts arm around Daniel and walks off stage)*

Scene 12

(Welcome to Bethlehem sign up, Shepherds enter in front of stage and up the stairs)

Benjamin: *(Confused)* So I understand that our Messiah is like Cyrus, because he’s going to free us from captivity – but why will he help us rebuild the temple? We have *Herod’s* temple – it’s incredible – why would it need to be rebuilt?

Tela: *(shaking head)* No, it’s not a *physical* temple that Messiah is going to build – it’s talking about *people* – Messiah is going to build a temple *not* made with hands, but a spiritual house.

Saba: *(adding on)* ...made of people who follow the Messiah.

Benjamin: *(Seeing the Bethlehem sign, dancing in circles rejoicing)* We’ve made it to Bethlehem – we’re here! Now where do we look for him? Should we start knocking on doors?

Saba: No, my son, there is only once place the child will be – the only inn that has ever been in Bethlehem – Chimham’s Inn.

(Benjamin starts peering around while the others talk)

Tela: *(seeing sign "No room")* I see why the child had to be born in a stable – but was there no sukkah they could sleep in? Why such a poor start for God's son?

Benjamin: *(excitedly)* Over here! I've found them – the stable is over here... Come, quickly! Come, quietly! *(walks through the door)*

Saba: *(suddenly pointing into the distance)* Look Tela, we've arrived just at the rising of the sun. How fitting. *(pause and smiles)* It matters not that the child was born in a stable. What matters is that Yahweh has raised him up in righteousness, and He will direct him in all his ways. Christ the highest, has begun the humblest. Glory and praise be to our God who has told and shown us great things. *(puts arm around Tela and exits through the door)*

Song – "From the Rising of the Sun"