

Understanding Zoroastrianism

Who was “Zarathushtra” & What is “Zoroastrianism?”

Zarathushtra (Greek: Zoroaster) was a Persian Prophet who is credited with having revealed the world's first creedal monotheistic religion. Historians place his lifetime somewhere between 2000 and 700 BCE, though most would agree to around 1200 BCE.

Zarathushtra was born into the polytheistic religious culture of Indo-Iran. Little is known of his early life though what is known is recorded in the Gathas, which are written in the Avestan language, similar to the Kurdish language of today. He worked as a priest and was a family man with a wife and several sons and daughters.

At around age 30, an angel came to Zarathushtra and led him into the presence of “Ahura Mazda,” the Supreme Creator who imparted to him, through a series of visions, the secrets of what was to become the Zoroastrian religion.

Zarathushtra's teachings eventually found followers among his family, clansmen, and throughout the region. During the first millennium BCE, Zoroastrianism united several great kingdoms, including the Medes (present-day Kurds) and the Persians (present day Iranians) and others throughout Central Asia. Eventually, King Vishtaspa, father of the future Persian King Darius I, accepted Zarathushtra's teachings.

The first recognition of Zoroastrianism as a religion came during the Achaemenid Persian Empire (550-330 BCE). This time period coincided with the Babylonian captivity of the Jews by King Nebuchadnezzar in present-day Iraq. This Babylonian Empire eventually fell to the Persian King Cyrus in 539 BCE.

The relationships between Zoroastrianism and Judaism began with this Babylonian and later Persian captivity of the Jews. Old Testament stories speak about the positive relationship between the Jews and their captors with many Jews holding high positions in the Babylonian and Persian ruling hierarchies.

Biblical stories of the beautiful Jewish Queen Esther as well as of the Prophets Ezekiel, Daniel, Nehemiah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephania, and others all took place within Zoroastrian Persia.

Under Persian King Cyrus, the captive Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem and permitted to rebuild their temple. Cyrus even financed the temple's rebuilding from his own treasury. The majority of Jews, however, chose to stay in Persia rather than return to Jerusalem. Today these descendents make up the very large community of Persian Jews who have, with few exceptions, enjoyed centuries of freedom and respect as part of Iran's long history and heritage.

Following the death of King Cyrus and under the rule of King Darius, the massive borders of the Persian Empire were greatly extended, thus allowing Zoroastrianism to expand throughout the entire region.

Alexander's conquest of Persia in 334 BCE ultimately decimated the large Zoroastrian communities, though the religion managed to survive and eventually to reach a new zenith during the Persian Sassanian dynasty of the 3rd century CE.

This second Persian Empire made Zoroastrianism the official creed of ancient Iran. For four hundred years, the religious and cultural institutions of the Zoroastrians once again flourished and prospered, even spreading to parts of Anatolia, Syria, Babylonia, Egypt, and the borderlands of India.

During the Arab (Islamic) conquest of Iran in the 7th century CE, many Zoroastrians were forced to flee Iran. Some went to Russia, some to China and elsewhere, but most fled to India, mainly because India was a known destination from previous trading activities. Also, the people in North India were of Aryan stock (same as the Iranians) and had similar traits.

Currently, there are perhaps 200,000 Zoroastrians worldwide, though some put the number closer to 125,000. The largest numbers of Zoroastrians today live in India where they are known as the "Parsees" (a reference to "Persians"). The majority are in Western India with the largest group living in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), a city they helped build into a world class metropolis and capital city for Zoroastrians.

In addition to the "Parsees" in India, there are about 10,000 Zoroastrians still living in Iran, mainly in or around the ancient city of Yazd where two of their ancient fires have been burning for more than two centuries. Approximately 11,000 Zoroastrians live in the United States, including 200 or so in the Washington, D.C. area. They currently enjoy a recently constructed Zoroastrian community temple just off Hunter Mill Road in Vienna, VA.

Houses of worship for Zoroastrians are sometimes referred to as "Fire Temples." Zoroastrians, however, do not worship fire; rather, the fire is kept burning as a visible symbol of purity and the "inner light" that burns inside each human heart. Many Zoroastrian families keep a small sacred fire burning in their homes which they face when they pray. Fires are always present at Zoroastrian ceremonies such as the "Navjote" initiation ceremony, weddings, and funerals.

Zoroastrianism has played a major role in the thoughts and wisdoms of Western religions and civilizations over the centuries. The Greek philosophers Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle all studied under the Magi (Zoroastrian priests) during their times. Roman soldiers carried Mithraism (an off-shoot of Zoroastrianism) across the empire during the time of early Christianity. Hundreds of Mithraic temples have been discovered across Europe, one of which was unearthed by construction workers in London in the 1970's. The image of Zoroastrian Persia has long been one of intrigue, mystery, wisdom, and learning. Indeed, Zarathushtra's teachings continue to influence our moral, ethical, and religious lives today!

Basic Zoroastrian Concepts and Beliefs

Belief in the Supreme and Universal God. Zoroastrians believe in One Supreme and Universal God who is omniscient and omnipotent ... “Ahura Mazda.” (“Lord” ... “Wisdom”). “Ahura Mazda” symbolizes truth, radiance, purity, order, justice, courage, strength, and patience. He is the Creator and Sustainer of the earth and the universe, always protecting the good from the evil.

Belief in the basic goodness of humanity. Zoroastrians believe that humans are essentially divine and share the spiritual nature of God (not born in original sin). It is everyone’s responsibility to keep the world pure ... and to maintain order.

Belief in the duality of existence. The world is seen as a battleground between the forces of good and evil. “Good” will ultimately triumph and evil forces will be destroyed, but it is the responsibility of humans to stay away from all evil. Other concepts of duality of existence are expressed in light-darkness; heaven-hell; and life-death.

Belief in the intelligence and free will of humankind. Zoroastrian teachings include the absolute freedom as well as responsibility of each individual, to choose whom he/she will serve in the battle between “good” and “evil” in the world. Ultimately, the “good” will prevail and “evil” will be vanquished.

Belief in life after death, a judgment day, and an eternal dwelling place. Zoroastrians believe that the eternal soul leaves the body at death and departs to the spiritual realm where each must give an account on the final Judgment Day. The immortal soul is then assigned to its final and eternal resting place either in heaven or in hell.

Belief in the sacredness of the earth. Zoroastrians (like Native Americans) are innate naturalists who believe in the sacredness of the earth and of its natural elements: fire, water, earth, and air. They consider purity in their physical lives, as well as stewardship of the physical earth a sacred duty.

Belief in dedication to an ethical and moral excellence which is summed up in the motto:
“Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds!”

Primary scriptures for Zoroastrians are known as the *Gathas* which were given in the *Avestan* language. The Gathas are directly attributed to Zarathushtra as his dialogue with “Ahura Mazda” through a series of visions. They are in the form of hymns or songs of praise through which Zarathushtra is believed to have attained Enlightenment.

The first part in which Zarathushtra asks questions is known as the *“Old Avesta”* and contains writings from the time of Zarathushtra and his early disciples. The second part, known as the *“Younger Avesta”* consists of later writings which were largely created to unite the two groups of believers living in Persia and India.

Zoroastrian beliefs and practices include:

- *There is only One God, "Ahura Mazda." He is the Supreme Being, the Lord of Light, the Wise Lord, the Holy One. "Ahura Mazda" can be understood through His divine attributes of "Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds." These attributes are the mantra for Zoroastrian thought and prayer.*
- *The teachings also reveal the existence of a lesser God, "Ahriman" who is known through his attributes of inflicting human sufferings such as illness, death, and natural calamities such as floods and earthquakes. "Ahriman" seeks to draw humans into the dark sides of "Evil Thoughts, Evil Words, and Evil Deeds."*
- *The central doctrine of Zoroastrianism is based on the origins and nature of "Good" and "Evil." Twin sons were born to "Ahura Mazda." Because of the choices each made, one became known as the "Holy Spirit" or "Spenta Mainyu;" the other as the "Evil Spirit" or "Anghre Mainyu".*
- *The Earth was created in order to bring about the destruction of "Evil," believed to exist because of the lesser god, "Ahriman." The sons were placed on the earth to wage the great battle between "Good" and "Evil."*
- *Human beings differ from all other living things because they are rational and can choose between "Good" and "Evil." Therefore, they can help win the great battle by practicing these three principles. There will be an ultimate and triumphant end to the great battle on the "Day of Judgment" in which "Good" will eternally triumph and prevail over "Evil."*
- *Humans have one physical lifetime and one immortal soul. After physical life, there comes an individual judgment. Each human being will be judged and then be assigned to an eternal home in heaven or punishment in an eternal hell. (It is important to note that this concept of Heaven and Hell originated in Zoroastrianism and was adopted by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Hinduism and Buddhism do not have this concept).*
- *Zoroastrians were the first known religious group to practice baptism, a tradition carried on in Christian belief and practice. They also observe a communal meal, and celebrate December 25 as the Sol Invictus, a point in time where the day (light) starts to become longer. The words "Satan," "paradise," and "amen" were also first used in the Avesta.*
- *Zoroastrians have always had an intense curiosity and intellectual search for matters related to astrology. Most Western scholars today say that the Wise Men who came to seek the young Jesus were Zoroastrians. At least one Zoroastrian Magi wrote that he had been "... beckoned by a very bright star." (Magis were thought to be learned and higher souls who could foretell important events).*

- *Traditionally, a deceased human body was placed on a “Tower of Silence” so that the decomposing body would not defile these sacred elements but rather be disposed of naturally by the sun and birds of prey. This practice was outlawed by Islam and has widely been replaced by more modern practices in urban settings.*

Important Contributions of Zoroastrianism to Other Western Religions

Belief in monotheism: There is One Supreme and Loving God.

*Concepts of dualism including good - evil; light - darkness; and heaven – hell
These appear in almost all succeeding Jewish and Christian writings and religious scriptures.*

Concepts of one lifetime, one death, one resurrection, and one final judgment

Belief in the immortality of the soul

*Religious rituals and practices of baptism; holy communion; burning of fire and incense;
and the celebration of December 25 (Sol Invictus) as the birth date of Jesus*

Contributions of language including “amen,” “paradise,” and “satan”

Metaphors of light & darkness; earthly & spiritual domains (heaven and earth)

*The free will of humans to choose between good and evil
and the ultimate triumph of good over evil*

Belief in the coming Messiah (Wise Men from the East thought to be Zoroastrians)

*Moral attributes identified: goodness, grace, mercy, and a healthy mind:
“Good thoughts ... Good words ... Good deeds”*

Worship expressed in prayers and chants and the singing of hymns and songs and praise

*Along with Jews and Christians, Zoroastrians are acknowledged in the Qur’an as
“People of the Book”*

Resources for Understanding Zoroastrianism:

- ***Boyce, Mary (2001): Zoroastrians – Their Religious Beliefs and Practices.***
- *Interviews with Dr. Farrokh Zambatti - GMU OLLI Member*
- *Interviews with Nesta Ramazani – Charlottesville, VA*

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Zoroastrian Prayers and Scriptures

*“With bended knees and hands outstretched do I yearn for
the effective expression of the Holy Spirit working within me.
For this love and understanding, truth and justice;
for wisdom to know the apparent from the real, that I might alleviate the
sufferings of men on earth.
God is love, understanding, wisdom, and virtue.
Let us love one another, let us practice mercy and forgiveness.
Let us have peace born of fellow feeling.
Let my joy be of altruistic living, of doing good to others.
is unto Him from whom happiness proceeds to any other human being.”*
From: **“The Avesta Prayer”** in **Zoroastrian Prayers**

*“In this worldly abode of ours
May communication drive away miscommunication;
May peace drive away anarchy;
May generosity drive away selfishness;
May benevolence drive away hostility;
May compassionate words prevail over false protestations;
May truth prevail over falsehood.”*
From: **the Dahm Afrigan Prayer**

*“That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another
whatever is not good for its own self.”*
From: **Dadistan-i-Dinik 94:5**

*“In humble adoration, with hands outstretched,
I pray to thee, O Lord, invisible, benevolent Spirit ...
Vouchsafe to me in this hour of joy all righteousness of action,
All wisdom of the Good Mind,
That I may thereby bring joy to the Soul of Creation.”*
From: **The Gathas Yasna 28:1**

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*And from the Old Testament concerning God’s decree to restore Jerusalem:
“... who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose’;
Saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’
And of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’”*
Isaiah 44:28