

WHAT IS ZOROASTRIANISM?



Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest living religions. It was founded in ancient times by the prophet Zarathushtra, known to the Greeks as Zoroaster.

Zoroastrianism was the dominant world religion during the Persian empires (559 BC to 651 AC), and was thus the most powerful world religion at the time of Jesus. It had a major influence on other religions and western culture in general.

The number of faithful has fallen over the centuries largely because of intense persecution. The latest figure is around only 140,000. The largest populations are in India and Iran. J Hinnells' booklet *Zoroastrianism and the Parsis* (p. 8) has 17,000 in Iran and 92,000 in India. North American Zoroastrians are reported to be around 5,000.

Major tenets

God: Ahura Mazda

The supreme being is called Ahura Mazda (or Ohrmazd), meaning "Wise Lord." Ahura Mazda is **all good**, and created the world and all good things, including people. He is opposed by Anghra Mainyu (or

Ahriman), meaning "Destructive Spirit," the embodiment of evil and creator of all evil things. The **cosmic battle between good and evil** will ultimately lead to the destruction of all evil. God is assisted by spiritual beings called *Amesha Spentas* (sometimes called "archangels"), *Yazatas* ("angels"), and *Fravashis* ("guardian angels"). Anghra Mainyu is assisted by the *Daevas* ("devils" or "demons").

Prophet: Zarathushtra

Zarathushtra's date is uncertain, but he probably lived somewhere around 1200 BC. He preached in the Inner Asian steppes. Zarathushtra received his revelations directly from Ahura Mazda, and from his Archangels (*Amesha Spentas*).

Heaven and Hell

At death the soul must cross the Bridge of Reckoning ("Chinwad bridge"). The passage is easy for the good, and they are rewarded in Heaven. Sinners are weighed down and pass into Hell. Hell, however, is only a temporary place of suffering, not eternal. When evil is finally defeated (called *Frashegird*), the souls of sinners will be released from hell. They will then join the congregation of God and the saints.

Scripture: Avesta

The central scripture is the *Avesta*. The most sacred sections of the *Avesta* are the Gathas or Hymns of Zarathushtra; they are also the most enigmatic. Later sacred literature ("Pahlavi Texts") contains extensive quotations and paraphrases from lost Avesta texts.

Asha

Asha is a key concept in the Gathas and throughout scripture. Like "Dao" in Daoism, it is too complex to be translatable by a single term. The more common translations are: Truth, righteousness, world-order, eternal law, fitness. One of the most ancient and sacred prayers is in praise of Asha. It is the first prayer learned by every Zoroastrian child:

"ashem vohū vahisstem astī, ushtā astī ushtā ahmāi, hyat ashāi vahishtāi ashem."

Truthfulness

Zoroastrians regard lying as a great sin, and have had the reputation since ancient times for scrupulous

honesty. It is better to suffer for the sake of truth than to take the easy way out and lie. Perjury is so sinful that it cannot be atoned for in this life. "In truthful speech there is good repute in the world and good life and salvation in Paradise; as regards your descendants and progeny, by doing good deeds it will be better for their families, and your soul will indeed be blessed. For him who is condemned as regards (material) wealth for the sake of truth, it is better for him than for one who is condemned as regards the soul for falsehood, because it is possible to amass wealth again, but when people have died, their souls pass on. Then there is no remedy for it." (Phl.Riv.10)

Observances

Two sacred garments, the sudreh (shirt) and kusti (cord) are the emblems of the religion. Zoroastrians perform a short cleansing ritual (Padyab), and retie the kusti several times a day with another short ritual (Nirang-i Kusti) as a sign of their faith. Other prayers are recited daily, largely in the Avestan language. The head is covered while praying. The faithful should also participate in seasonal communal festivals ("Gahambar") during the year.

Significance of fire

Fire, as a symbol of "Asha" and the "original light of God," holds a special place of esteem in the religion. Prayer is often done in front of a fire, and consecrated fires are kept perpetually burning in the major temples.

What does Zoroastrian scripture say about ...?

Suffering

All suffering is attributed to the forces of evil, and not God's will. Self mortification and fasting are not practiced. "When a person stands in the religion of the Yazatas, the Yazatas notice the pain endured by him in the world – even the fact that he came to pain by foot and that he lives lawfully on the work of his hands; and they carry and keep for him in the Reckoning of the Spirits (Armageddon) the discomfort, hunger, thirst, worry, and disease which affect him." (Dk6.106)

Paying attention

“As the soul is thus not all, but is in the world for a period for maintaining the body, it is necessary to walk with such circumspection as if one were without shoes, and the whole of this world were full of snakes, scorpions, noxious reptiles, and thorns, and one’s fear were: ‘Let not the reptiles bite me, or the thorns penetrate me.’” (Dk6.b47)

Education

“It is the desire of Ahura Mazda from people is this: ‘Know me’, for he knows: ‘If they know me, everyone will follow me’. The desire of Angra Mainyu is this: ‘Do not know me’, for he knows: ‘If they know me no one will follow me’.” (Dk6.31)

Joy

Angra Mainyu is best fought by joy; despondency is a symptom of his victory.

Hope

“There is a remedy for everything but death, a hope for everything but wickedness, and everything will lapse except righteousness.” (SLS.20.17)

Charity

Charity is essential, but shouldn’t be given blindly: “This also is revealed in the religion, that Ohrmazd said to Zartosht, ‘He who performs charity knowingly and discriminately is like me, I who am Ohrmazd. And he who performs charity ignorantly and without understanding and indiscriminately is like Ahriman’. ... ‘Charity is something so worthy, there are 33 ways from Garothman [Paradise] to the Chinwad Bridge, and everyone who is blessed on account of meritorious action is then able to go on one way, and he who is blessed on account of charity is able to go on all those ways’. ... ‘Whatever charitable men give, I give them twofold in return, and I store it up’.” (Phl.Riv.10)

Responsibility

Zarathushtra said “May we be the ones to make this world a better place!” (Y30.9) “When Ahura Mazda the Lord first created humanity, He gave the following order: ‘Be diligent to save your souls; I shall then provide for your bodily matters. For it is impossible to save your souls without you.’ People are deluded in

the following manner: they themselves strive after material things, and as regards the things of the soul, they put their trust in the Yazatas.” (Dk6.291)

Abortion

A child is said to be formed, and a soul added to its body, after a woman has been pregnant for four months and ten days. Abortion was considered murder after that period. (Vd15.9-16)

The Zoroastrian Creed

The creed is often summed up as “**good thoughts, good words, good deeds.**” It is given in full in Yasna 12 and echoes its ancient origins. It is likely to have been composed by Zarathushtra himself, and to have been used as an avowal of faith by early converts (Cf. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism, Its Antiquity and Constant Vigour*, p. 102-4). It reads in part:

“I ascribe all good to Ahura Mazda, and all the best, Asha-endowed, splendid, splendor-endowed, whose is the cow, whose is Asha, whose is the light, ‘may whose blissful areas be filled with light.’ ... Even as Zarathushtra rejected the authority of the Daevas, so I also reject, as Mazda-worshipper and supporter of Zarathushtra, the authority of the Daevas, even as he, the Asha-endowed Zarathushtra, has rejected them. As the belief of the waters, the belief of the plants, the belief of the well-made (Original) Cow; as the belief of Ahura Mazda who created the cow and the Asha-endowed Man; as the belief of Zarathushtra, the belief of Kavi Vishtaspa, the belief of both Frashaostra and Jamaspa; as the belief of each of the Saoshyants (Saviors) – fulfilling destiny and Asha-endowed – so I am a Mazda-worshipper of this belief and teaching. I profess myself a Mazda-worshipper, a Zoroastrian, having vowed it and professed it. I pledge myself to the well-thought thought, I pledge myself to the well-spoken word, I pledge myself to the well-done action. I pledge myself to the Mazdayasnian religion, which causes the attack to be put off and weapons put down; Asha-endowed; which of all religions that exist or shall be, is the greatest, the best, and the most beautiful: Ahuric, Zoroastrian. I ascribe all good to Ahura Mazda. This is the creed of the Mazdayasnian religion.”

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(“Good thoughts, good words, good deeds”)

The Hymns (“Gathas”) of Zarathushtra

To quote Dr. Boyce again, “The prophet Zarathushtra, son of Pourushaspa, of the Spitaman family, is known to us primarily from the Gathas, seventeen great hymns which he composed and which have been faithfully preserved by his community. These are not works of instruction, but inspired, passionate utterances, many of them addressed directly to God; and their poetic form is a very ancient one, which has been traced back (through Norse parallels) to Indo-European times. It seems to have been linked with a mantic tradition, that is, to have been cultivated by priestly seers who sought to express in lofty words their personal apprehension of the divine; and it is marked by subtleties of allusion, and great richness and complexity of style. Such poetry can only have been fully understood by the learned; and since Zoroaster believed that he had been entrusted by God with a message for all mankind, he must also have preached again and again in plain words to ordinary people. His teachings were handed down orally in his community from generation to generation, and were at last committed to writing under the Sasanians, rulers of the third Iranian empire. The language then spoken was Middle Persian, also called Pahlavi; and the Pahlavi books provide invaluable keys for interpreting the magnificent obscurities of the Gathas themselves.” - *Zoroastrians, Their religious beliefs and practices*, London, 1979, p. 17.



Symbol commonly used to represent the Farohar (or Guardian Angel)

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