

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)

