

# ZOROASTRIANISM

**Overview:** Though there are few worshippers of Zoroastrianism today, the rise of this belief system so coincides with Israelite history and belief that it is worth understanding the origins and effects it had upon the world.

## **History:**

The chief god of the Persian system of religion was Ahura-Mazda, “the wise Lord.” The official priests were called the Magians. The king believed Ahura-Mazda granted him the right to rule; he was the “image” of the god, in a very real sense.

The Persians believed in nature gods such as Air, Water, Heaven, Earth, Sun, and Moon. They did not worship these gods in temples. Instead, they sacrificed animals in open fields, to the accompaniment of chanting from a Magian priest. The Persians also burned sacrifices to their gods.

In the middle of the sixth century B.C., Zarathustra began to reshape Persian religious thought into what later became known as Zoroastrianism.

The conflict of good and evil was basic to Zarathustra’s teachings. Zoroastrianism recognized Ahura-Mazda as its only god, but Ahura-Mazda was in eternal conflict with the evil spirit Angra Mainyu. Zarathustra opposed sacrifices and offerings of drink. He started the worship of Ahura by perpetual fire. The Persians built fire temples for this purpose.

Zoroaster taught, however, that eventually Ahura Mazda will defeat Ahriman and good will triumph over evil.

This popular religion challenged the Jews to state their faith in clear terms. Jewish rabbis founded academies to preserve the truth of God’s Word and to combat the intriguing doctrines of the Zoroastrians.

In the New Testament we read how “the magi” came to worship the baby Jesus in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:2). They may have been representatives of the priestly caste of the Zoroastrian religion.

Persia profoundly altered the course of Israelite history. The apocalyptic ideals of Persian philosophy are strongly represented in the apocryphal books of the intertestamental period. So pervasive was the influence of Persia that it is difficult to isolate Israelite art and architecture from the Persian influences. The Aramaic language (a late Persian dialect of Assyrian) became the standard language of Jewish politics and religion after the intertestamental period

Zoroastrianism has barely survived in its homeland. Fewer than 10,000 persons in Iran (ancient Persia) practice the religion today. A larger group has survived in India under the name Parseeism. The present-day Parsees of India are descendants of Persians who moved there from Persia several centuries before the birth of Christ.

### **Zoroaster**

the English spelling Zoroaster, is derived from the Greek spelling, which incorporates the word *astēr*, “star,” probably because of the later association of the prophet as the source of astrological knowledge. His original name, Zarathuštra, may have meant “camel driver.” The Sassanian form of his name was Zarduš.

*A. Date and Place of Birth* The English spelling, Zoroaster, is derived (Mas’udu and al-Buruni), which place Zoroaster 258 years before Alexander, have yielded a rather precise date for Zoroaster in the Achaemenid era (569–426 B.C.). Numerous scholars (e.g., Herzfeld, Hinz, Tisdall) have adopted this “late” date, identifying Vishtaspa, the ruler Zoroaster converted, with Hystaspes, the father of Darius I.

Other scholars (e.g., Gnoli) argue for a date not later than ca 1000 S.C. (see also Shahbazi [1977]). Boyce has adopted the earliest possible date of ca 1400 B.C. on the basis of linguistic and sociological data. This would place the prophet in Turkestan even before the migration of the Iranian tribes into northeastern Iran.

The evidence of the Avestan dialect of the Gathas places the prophet in the area of Afghanistan, Chorasmia, Hilmand, and Seistan. The late Arabic traditions which placed the prophet in Azerbaijan in northwestern Iran were probably due to the magi, who “adopted” the prophet.

*B. Family and Converts* According to the Denkard at the age of thirty Zoroaster converted to the sole worship of the god Ahura-Mazda (“the wise Lord,” esp in opposition to Angra Mainyu, “the Evil Spirit”). For ten years he had no converts, but two years after his first convert he gained his most notable one, the ruler Vishtaspa.

*C. Teachings* Whether Zoroaster’s theology was dualistic (two co-eternal spirits), henotheistic (the exaltation of one god over all the others), or truly monotheistic is disputed (see Boyd and Crosby).

Scholars disagree also about how to interpret the numerous references to reverence for the *gav*, “cow,” in the Gathas. Are these to be taken literally as an indication of the pastoral concerns of Zoroaster against raiding nomads (so Duchesne-Guillemin, Herzfeld, Moulton)? Or, as a number of scholars (Cameron, Hinz, Insler, Schmidt [1975]) have argued, as metaphors for the righteous vision of the prophet?

*D. Death* According to the Arabic writer al-Buruni (A.D. 973–1048) Zoroaster was killed at the age of 77 by invading Turanians (see the Persian national epic, *Shah Namah* [ca A.D. 1000], which describes the event).

### ***Relations with Judaism and Christianity***

*A. Relations with Judaism* Since the late 18th cent many scholars have concluded from certain biblical parallels that Judaism was indebted to Zoroastrianism. M. Smith (JAOS, 83 [1963], 415–421) compared Isa. 45:7, “I form the light and create the darkness, I make peace and create evil,” with Zoroastrian texts. Many have attributed the development of Satan and demons to Iranian influence (e.g., Masani, Widengren, Winston, Zaehner). The one indisputable derivation is that of the demon Asmodeus (in Tobit) from the Iranian demon Aeshma (see W. Davies and L. Finkelstein, eds *Cambridge History of Judaism, I: Persian Period* [1984]).

Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls a number of scholars have compared the dualism of these documents with that of Iran, especially with Zurvanism. (See Shaked [1972], but note the reservations of Frye [1962].)

On the other hand, the lack of evidence from the Parthian era and the late nature of the cosmological and demonological texts raise doubts about any such alleged borrowings (see Frye [1967, 1975], Moulton [1913], J. Neusner, *History of Religions*, 8 [1968], 159–177).

*B. Relations with Christianity* Not many scholars since C. Autran *Mithra, Zoroastre et la préhistoire aryenne du Christianisme* [1935]) have attempted to derive Christian doctrines directly from Zoroastrianism rather than indirectly through a Judaism which had been influenced by Zoroastrianism. Hinnells has argued for such a connection by attempting to show that certain Iranian concepts existed prior to Christianity.

Mithraism, a mystery religion centered on Mithra, became very popular especially among Roman soldiers in the 2nd cent A.D. His cult was later associated with *sol invictus*, “the unconquerable sun.” In the 4th cent the church’s appropriation of December 25, the day celebrated by this cult, as the birthday of Christ was no doubt an action designed to counteract this movement.

## **Views of God:**

Zoroastrianism is characterized by worship of Ahura Mazda (also known as Ormazd or Ormuzd), the Supreme Being represented as a spirit of light, truth, and goodness. Ahura Mazda is opposed by an archrival, Ahriman (or Angra Mainyu), a spirit of darkness, falsehood, and evil.

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JAOS *Journal of the American Oriental Society*

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## **Views of Scripture:**

*Younger Avesta* The main body of Zoroastrian scriptures is known as the Avesta (Middle Pers *wastag*, “tradition”). These texts have come to be known as the Younger Avesta since they were composed a long time after Zoroaster, probably in eastern Iran. This collection of numerous works was never combined in a single book. Of the 21 *naskas* or volumes known from the Denkard (see II. C. 2 below), we have but one entire *naska*, the Vendidad, and portions of others preserved, i.e., no more than one-fourth of the original Avesta. No doubt much was destroyed with the Islamic conquest of Iran in A.D. 651.

1. *Yasna* These comprise in 72 chapters the texts which priests recite in the ritual of the pressing of the *haoma* plant (Pahlavi *hom*; cf. Vedic *soma*). Zoroaster denounced the abuse of the *haoma*. The original plant may have had intoxicating or hallucinogenic effects but was later replaced by the ephedra.
2. *Visparad* “All Protective Powers” are a collection of invocations to protectors of various classes of living beings that are recited at the end of the *Yasna* especially during the feasts for the various seasons.
3. *Vendidad* < Avestan *vidaevo data*, “the law directed against demons”; Pahlavi *Videvdad*). The 22 chapters reveal how the Evil Spirit created sins, plagues, and death. Ch. 2 contains the myth of Yima, the good lord who sinned. Ceremonies and formulae deal with repentance and purification for sins and protection against the 99,999 diseases created by the Evil Spirit.
4. *Yashts* (Avestan *Yashti*, “prayer” or “sacrifice”). These are 21 ritual hymns in honor of the pre-Zoroastrian *yazatas*, beings who deserve reverence.
5. *Khorda Avesta* (“little Avesta”). This collection of hymns was compiled by Aderpad Marespand in the reign of Shapur II (309–379).

C. *Pahlavi Texts* In addition to translation and commentaries on the Avesta, we have Zoroastrian texts dealing with such important themes as cosmology and eschatology which were not composed until the 9th–10th cent A.D. The two most important Pahlavi texts are:

1. *Bundahishn* (“*creation*”) This important treatise relates how Ormazd and Ahriman, the Good and Evil Spirits, came into being and narrates their 9,000-year long conflict.
2. *Denkard* (“*acts of religion*”) This is an encyclopedia of nine books, which include summaries of the Avestan books and a biography of Zoroaster. Some authorities place its composition at the end of the Sassanid era, others in the post-Islamic period.

## **Views of Salvation:**

Human beings have free will and have to make a choice between good and evil. They are their own saviors. Ahura-Mazda's eventual victory is aided by faithful Zoroastrians. They are to propagate everything which is good (e.g., agriculture) and destroy everything which is evil (e.g., noxious insects).

A strong emphasis on carefully observing various rituals developed in the centuries after Zoroaster. As fire is considered the symbol of Ahura-Mazda it is protected from even the rays of the sun and from the gaze of unbelievers. *Atharvans*, "fire priests," reciting from memory verses of the Avesta, carefully feed the perpetual fire with sandalwood. They have their mouths covered with the *paitidhana*, a cloth to prevent polluting the fire. They carefully press the haoma (ephedra) plant. As young Parsees come of age they are invested in a *naojote* or initiation rite with the *sudreh*, a special shirt, and the *kushti*, a sacred thread. The latter is to be tied and retied several times a day during prayers, before meals, etc.

Ritual pollutions are purified by the application of *gomez* or urine from a sacred white bull. Part of this *bareshnum* ritual involves the touching of a dog, the creature considered closest to human beings. The Parsee dead are neither buried nor cremated but are exposed in *dakhmas*, "towers of silence," where vultures strip the flesh from the bones in an hour or two. The bones are then deposited in a well.

### **Views of Messiah:**

Zoroaster taught that a *saošyant* or "benefactor" would come after him. Much later (perhaps in the 3rd cent B.C., according to Boyce [1984]), the coming of three saviors was predicted, alternating with periods of evil. These were to be born of virgins from the seed of Zoroaster preserved in Lake Kasaoya. The first savior was named Aushedar, the second Aushedarmah, the third asvatereta. The last would accomplish the final overthrow of evil, the resurrection of the dead, and the coming of God's kingdom on earth.

### **Views of Life After Death:**

The dead have to cross the *Chinvat Peretu* or Bridge of the Separator, which spans the abyss of Hell to reach Paradise. The bridge expands for the righteous but contracts to a razor's edge for the wicked. According to the Denkard the righteous are met by a beautiful female figure, the wicked by a hideous hag. An intermediate place called *Misvana Gatu*, "place of the mixed," is reversed for those who merits and demerits balance.

### *Medes and the Magi*

According to Herodotus the Magi (sing *mágos*) were MEDES (i.101). The Magi chanted a sacred text (i.132), killed noxious creatures like ants and snakes, and exposed their corpses to be mangled by “bird or dog” (i.140). Many of these practices correspond to those found in later Zoroastrian texts (see Molé, p. 78).

Their relationship to Zoroaster and his doctrines is not entirely clear. There is some reason to believe that they may have initially resisted these teachings as they came from the east, perhaps as early as the 7th cent B.C. (so Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism II*, pp. 21, 40). But eventually the Magi seem to have adapted (some would say corrupted) Zoroaster’s teachings. Later Greek traditions even went so far as to identify Zoroaster as a *mágos*.

The Greeks were fascinated with the Magi, who traveled to Turkey with the Persian conquest of that region under Cyrus in 546 B.C. (see Benveniste). In the Hellenistic and Roman periods those called Magi were associated with astrology and with “magic.” A number of rock-cut tombs and reliefs depict the Magi. Among these is a relief of a tomb at Dukkan-i Daud, which depicts a *mágos* holding the *barsom*, a bundle of sacred twigs. Ghirshman dated these as pre-Achaemenid, i.e., to the 7th–6th cent B.C., but Von Gall would date them to the reign of Darius I at the earliest. A relief at Eshqavand depicts a man in a Persian garment praying before an incense vessel and a smaller figure in a Median garment, perhaps a *mágos*, before a fire altar.

The small size of tombs such as the one of Eshqavand led Von Gall to interpret them as repositories for the bones of the corpses of Magi. A Lycian rock-cut tomb (ca 400 B.C.) was made apparently for a Persian, who followed the magician custom of excarnation. The Aramaic inscription indicates that it was an *astodana*, “ossuary,” meant to preserve the disarticulated bones after the corpse had been exposed.

*A. Cyrus* While we have no certain Old Persian texts from Cyrus (those from Pasargadae his capital are attributed by some scholars to Darius I), Akkadian and Hebrew texts indicate that he acknowledged non-Persian deities such as Marduk and Yahweh.

Door jams of the Audience Palace at Pasargadae have varied reliefs including a man clad in a fish garment of an Assyrian type. Barnett suggested that these reliefs may represent iconographically Cyrus’s religious toleration. On the jamb from the Gatehouse is a winged figure with an Egyptian crown, whom Barnett identified with the Phoenician Baal. Classical sources inform us that Cyrus’s tomb was surrounded by a wooded paradise and that the magi offered daily sacrifices of sheep and monthly sacrifices of horses. A faint rosette on Cyrus’s tomb at Pasargadae has been interpreted by Stronach as the symbol of Ahura-Mazda; others take it to be a symbol of Mithra. Dandamaev and Duchesne-Guillemin believed that Mithra was Cyrus’s god.

*B. Cambyses* In contradiction to Herodotus’s account of Cambyses’s desecration of the Egyptian Apis bull, Egyptian texts themselves reveal that Cambyses honored the apis, the incarnation of

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the god Ptah,, and also the god Neith of Sais. (See A. Klasens, *Ex Oriente Lux*, 10 [1945–48], 339–349.)

*C. Darius* In his own extensive inscriptions Darius mentions by name only Ahura-Mazda (e.g., the Behistun Inscription mention the great adversary Angra Mainyu but condemns *Drauga* (“the Lie”). In his tomb relief the king is shown before the sacred fire.

The Elamite tablets from Persepolis develop a view of religion which differs from that presented in the royal inscriptions. These texts mention Elamite gods, e.g., Humban, served by Elamite priests, but do not exalt Ahura-Mazda. Nor do they shed much light on the worship of Anahita and Mithra or the role of the magi (see Koch).

*D. Xerxes* In his famous “Daiva” text Xerxes condemned the daivas, who were associated with the Lie. Exactly who these daivas were is a matter of controversy. In the Gathas the word daiva can designate gods as opposed to human beings, or it can mean spirits who incite people to violence and oppose prosperity. Duchesne-Guillemin suggested that Xerxes was referring to the gods of Babylon, who were punished after the revolt of Babylonia. Herzfeld thought that these were the gods of rebellious Media. Bianchi believed that the daivas were the gods displaced by the rise of Ahura-Mazda to supreme prominence.

*E. Artaxerxes I* Some 80 pestles and 97 mortars found at Persepolis bear Aramaic inscriptions which date them from the 7th year of Xerxes to the 29th of Artaxerxes I. Bowman’s translations of these inscriptions attempted to interpret them as directions for the haoma ritual in a Mithraic cult. Almost all other scholars who have translated the texts interpret them as simple dedications (P. Bernard, *Studia Iranica*, 1 [1972], 165–176; B. Levine, *JAOS*, 92 [1972], 70–79; J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Orientalia*, 42 [1973], 445–457). It has been argued that the so-called Zoroastrian calendar was adopted in 441 B.C. during the reign of this king.

*F. Artaxerxes II* This king adopted the Zoroastrian calendar according to other scholars. He was the first to mention gods other than Ahura-Mazda, setting up divine statues of Aphrodite (i.e., Anahita) at Babylon, Susa, Ecbatana, Persepolis, Bactra, Damascus, and Sardis. Gnoli has argued that the Iranian triad of Ahura-Mazda, Anahita, and Mithra has been influenced by the Mesopotamian triad of Anu, Ishtar, and Nebo.

*G. The Winged Figure* Hovering over the king in many Achaemenid reliefs is a winged figure inside a circle (see PICTURE IN PERSIA). Though many have identified this figure as Ahura-Mazda, Shahbazi and Calmeyer by noting the variations on the figure’s crown argue that it cannot represent Ahura-Mazda. Shahbazi thinks that it represents the divine *Khvarenah* (Median *Farnah*), the grace granted to the king, and Calmeyer his *Fravashi* or his “soul.”

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