



# Zoroastrianism

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Zoroastrianism is the monotheistic faith established by the Persian prophet Zoroaster (also given as Zarathustra, Zartosht) between c. 1500-1000 BCE. It holds that there is one supreme deity, Ahura Mazda (Lord of Wisdom), creator and sustainer of all things, and encourages adherents to express their faith through the principle of Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds. The religion is also known as Mazdayasna ("devotion to Mazda") and Mazdaism. This belief system developed from the polytheistic ancient Persian religion, which regarded Ahura Mazda as the greatest of a large pantheon of gods and, like the later Zoroastrianism, saw life as a struggle between the forces of light and goodness and those of darkness and evil.



Faravahar, Yazd

Bernard Gagnon (CC BY-SA)

Zoroastrianism was adopted by the Achaemenid Persian Empire (c. 550-330 BCE), the Parthian Empire (247 BCE - 224 CE), and found its fullest expression under the Sassanian Empire (224-651 CE). The Sassanians made Zoroastrianism the state religion while, at the same time, developing a different branch of the faith – usually referred to as a 'heresy' – known as Zorvanism. After the Muslim Arab Invasion in 651 CE, Zoroastrians were persecuted, the faith suppressed, and their religious sites destroyed or turned into mosques. Zoroastrianism survived, however – though adherents were greatly reduced in number – and continues to be observed in the present day.

## Early Origin

The polytheistic faith of the early Persians was most likely already developed in some form prior to their arrival in the region of Iran sometime around the 3rd millennium BCE and then was influenced by the Elamites and people of Susiana who were already established there. This belief system held that there were many gods, ruled by Ahura Mazda, who guided and protected humanity from the threats and influences of dark forces, led by the spirit-deity Angra Mainyu.

The purpose of human life was to choose to follow the precepts of Ahura Mazda and reject the temptations and traps of Angra Mainyu. The first couple created by Ahura Mazda – Mashya and Mashynag – had lived in peace and harmony with all things in the paradise Ahura Mazda had created

for them until they listened to the whisperings of Angra Mainyu who convinced them that he was their creator and Ahura Mazda was their enemy and a deceiver. For doubting their true lord and listening to lies, they were expelled from paradise and condemned to a world of difficulty and strife, but their descendants could still live meaningful and fulfilling lives by remaining loyal to Ahura Mazda.

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With no written scripture, it is unknown how the faith was observed or how rituals were conducted. Certain aspects of the faith, however, were preserved in later Zoroastrian works, and it is known there was a priestly class (later known as the *magi*) and the gods were worshipped at outdoor shrines known as Fire Temples – altars on which the fire of the god was always kept lighted. Unlike in Egypt or Mesopotamia, there were no temples to the gods or elaborate rituals. Sacrifices, probably in the form of food, grains, and precious objects, were delivered to the priests in return for their intercession with the gods and this practice made the clergy one of the wealthiest and powerful social classes of Persian society. One group of priests were known as *karfans*, and there was another, *kawis*, whose role is even less defined, but both of these had a vested private and political interest in maintaining the practice of religion as it had always been understood.

## Zoroaster

It was into this milieu that Zoroaster was born to noble Persian parents, Pourusaspa and Dughdova. His father, Pourusaspa, was most likely of the priestly class, since his son would become a priest and sons usually followed their fathers' profession, and the high status of the family is further suggested by the fact that Zoroaster began his education at an early age rather than having to work. He had four brothers – two older and two younger – but nothing else is known of his family or early life.

He was a priest by the age of 15, most likely an assistant to an older clergyman, and is said to have left his parents' home at the age of 20 to pursue his career. One of the rituals performed by the *karpan* priests was the ritual slaughter of animals for sacrifice, and it is certain that Zoroaster witnessed this many times – and may have even been required to participate – because he found it so distasteful that he would later make a point of rejecting this practice.



New Year's Image, Persepolis  
Ginolerhino (CC BY)

Whatever he might have done in his twenties is unknown but, at the age of 30, he attended a religious festival celebrating the rites of spring (probably the New Year celebration known as Nowruz) and experienced a life-changing vision. On the riverbank before him, a bright image appeared of a celestial being who identified himself as Vohu Mahah (“good purpose”) and proclaimed he had been sent by Ahura Mazda himself to deliver a message: the priests had misunderstood the divine truth and were worshipping false gods – there was only one god, Ahura Mazda, who did not require blood sacrifices but only ethical behavior. Zoroaster had been chosen to preach this revelation and seems to have begun his mission immediately.

## The New Truth

Zoroaster's good news was not received by anyone else with the same enthusiasm he had himself. He was rejected by the priests, his life was threatened, and he was forced to flee his home. He would not stop preaching the new, revealed truth, however, remaining constantly in prayer to receive guidance from Ahura Mazda in how he should proceed. His prayers and questions to the god would later be committed to writing and form a central section of the Zoroastrian scriptures known as the *Avesta*.

In time, he found himself at the court of a king named Vishtaspa and engaged in a theological debate with his court priests for the king's entertainment. According to the *Avesta*, Zoroaster defeated all of their arguments and clearly showed the validity of his revelation but, as this challenged the established order, Vishtaspa was not pleased and had the prophet thrown into prison. While jailed, Zoroaster miraculously healed Vishtaspa's favorite horse, which had been suffering a paralysis, and the king had him freed and listened again to his message. Vishtaspa, according to Zoroastrian tradition, became the first convert and, since he was a king, others quickly followed.

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Zoroaster wrote nothing down and neither did his early disciples. Tradition holds that his words were memorized, repeated in rituals, and passed down orally for generations until they finally found written form. How the religion spread after Vishtaspa is unknown, but it was widespread by the time of the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550-330 BCE) whose ruling class were Zoroastrians. Zoroaster is said to have continued preaching his faith until he died, around the age of 77, either of old age or, according to later works from the Sassanian Period, assassinated by a priest of the old religion.

## The Vision

Zoroaster's new faith was founded on the vision he had received by the river and the answers given to his continual prayers. It rested on five principles:

1. The supreme god is Ahura Mazda.
2. Ahura Mazda is all-good.
3. His eternal opponent, Angra Mainyu, is all-evil.
4. Goodness is apparent through good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.
5. Each individual has free will to choose between good and evil.

Ahura Mazda was the uncreated, eternal, and only god, while the many other deities previously worshipped were merely spirits or emanations from the divine. Popular deities such as Mithra or Anahita were no longer to be worshipped as immortal, all-powerful deities but could still be honored as representations of Ahura Mazda's benevolence.

A problem which the *Avesta* does not address is where Angra Mainyu – and the forces of evil – comes from if the universe was created by an all-powerful deity who is all-good. It seems that the *Avesta* assumes an understanding in its audience which would make such an answer redundant. Zoroaster's prayers and admonitions suggest that the original audience already knew Angra Mainyu's origin and so this was most likely another aspect of the old religion which he kept.



Faravahar at Persepolis  
Napishtim (CC BY-SA)

Whether an original explanation for the problem of evil was given and lost or simply assumed, the question was not explicitly addressed until the 19th century CE. Various suggestions had been given previously, most notably in the form of Zorvanism which solved it by making Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu equal in power and both created beings, but this dualism was rejected by traditional Zoroastrians.

The German Orientalist Martin Haug (l. 1827-1876 CE) suggested a resolution to the problem, claiming that Angra Mainyu was not a deity was an emanation from Ahura Mazda, the negative-energy discharge from the creative act, which took on sentience from the act of creation itself but had no actual power. All Angra Mainyu could do, then, is try to disrupt and distort the great plan of Ahura Mazda, and this disruption is what people call “evil” – actual “evil”, in this view, would not exist.

## Life & Afterlife

The central value of the faith was human free will. If one followed the precepts of Ahura Mazda, one lived a fulfilling life; if not, one became tangled in deceit and experienced strife and confusion. Starting with the Five Principles as the basis for one's decision, one was then to express one's faith through the fourth one – *goodness is apparent through good thoughts, good words, and good deeds* – and one practiced this through:

- Telling the truth at all times – especially keeping promises
- Practicing charity to all – especially those less fortunate
- Showing love for others – even if they did not return the sentiment
- Moderation in all things – especially in diet

Although there is evidence of conversion efforts by Zoroastrians after Zoroaster's initial mission, the faith is said to have spread through the virtuous behavior of believers who adhered to three core values of behavior:

- To make friends of enemies



- To make the wicked righteous
- To make the ignorant learned

If one lived in accordance with these values, one would not only have a good and productive life but would be rewarded in the afterlife. When one is born, one's higher spirit (*fravashi*) sends one's soul (*urvan*) into the body to experience the material world and choose between good and evil. At death, the soul was thought to linger on earth for three days, close to the corpse, and a dog would be brought into the room to scare away evil spirits and protect the soul while the gods evaluated the life of the deceased.

After the three days, the *urvan* was reunited with its *fravashi* and traveled to the Chinvat Bridge, the span over the abyss between the living and the dead, where they would encounter the two dogs who guard it. The dogs would welcome a justified soul and rebuke the evil. The soul would then be met by the Holy Maiden, Daena, who was a representative of the conscience of the deceased. To the justified soul, she would appear a beautiful maiden; to the condemned, she would be an ugly old hag. Daena would comfort the newly arrived soul and lead it onto the bridge where it would be guarded against demonic attack by the angel Suroosh.



Ahura Mazda, The Rock-Cut Tombs of Qizqapan  
Sulaymaniyah Museum (Copyright)

The bridge would widen and become welcoming for the justified soul but would narrow and become difficult for the condemned. Suroosh would guide the soul to the angel Rashnu, righteous judge of the dead. Souls whose good and bad deeds were equal went to *Hamistakan*, a kind of purgatory, where they would remain until the end of time and the day of resurrection when they would be reunited with Ahura Mazda. Those who had lived in accordance with the light went to the paradise of the House of Song; those who had not were dropped from the bridge into the hell of the House of Lies where they were tormented in darkness and, no matter how many others were nearby, would always feel completely alone. There were four levels of paradise ascending upwards, the highest being the company of Ahura Mazda himself, and four levels of hell descending down, the lowest being complete darkness.

Even if one were assigned to the lowest level of hell, however, it was not an eternal punishment. Ahura Mazda, as Ultimate Goodness, would not let any of his creations suffer eternally and, in time, a messiah would come – the *Saoshiyant* (“One Who Brings Benefit”) – who would bring the *Frashokereti* (End of Time) – when all souls would be gathered to Ahura Mazda in a joyful reunion – even if they were in the darkest hell – and Angra Mainyu would be destroyed.

## Rituals & Scripture

Adherents made their choice known not only through their daily actions but through ritual worship of Ahura Mazda through the service known as the *yasna*. The purpose of the *yasna* was to bear witness to *asha* (truth, order), resist the lie (*druj*), and strengthen the resolve of believers to fight against the forces of darkness. The world was full of unseen spirits both good and evil – the *ahuras* (good) and *daevas* (evil), and one needed to be aware of these and either take precautions or listen carefully; the *yasna* encouraged this.

These rituals always involved fire, the sacred element which was the last to be created, and water, which represented wisdom and was among the first. A fire was kept lit at an altar known as a Fire Temple, and a priest would officiate in reciting the sacred words and offering up prayers in the presence of the sacred flame. At the conclusion of the service, water was honored through the rite of *ab-zohr*, an offering to purify the waters of the world and make amends for any damage done.



Fire Temple  
Diego Delso (CC BY-SA)

There was no funeral service on par with those of other cultures because a show of excessive grief was considered unseemly. Death was a natural part of life and Zoroastrian funeral services were conducted quietly and with moderation. The corpse was cared for in the home and an especially important rite was the *sagdid* (“glance of the dog”) in which a dog was brought into the room to scare away evil spirits and, on a practical level, to make sure the person was dead and not simply in some form of coma. Once the ritual was completed, the body was prepared and carried out of the house. Corpses were left out exposed to the elements on structures commonly called Towers of Silence because interring them in the ground was considered unhealthy. Once the body had been picked clean by various scavengers, the bones were interred.

These rituals were performed in accordance with the body of work which makes up Zoroastrian scripture, custom, and belief. The central texts are:

- Avesta
- Denkard
- Bundahisn

The *Avesta* contains the Gathas (17 hymns attributed to Zoroaster himself) and the Yasna (liturgical texts) and Visperad (a separate part of the Yasna). It was written down during the reign of Shapur II (309-379 CE) and revised/codified under Kosrau I (r. 531-579 CE). The *Vendidad*, considered by some part of the *Avesta* and rejected by others, is the ecclesiastical code, the *Denkard* a collection of beliefs and customs, and the *Bundahisn* addresses cosmology and cosmography.

## Suppression & Legacy

The concepts in these texts were transmitted orally for centuries before they were written down, and during that time, although the ruling houses of the different empires had adopted Zoroastrianism, they did not impose that belief on their subjects. Freedom of belief and tolerance of other faiths was central to the vision of Cyrus the Great and was maintained by his successors, by the Parthians, and was fully embraced by the Sassanians even though they made Zoroastrianism their state religion.

Freedom of religious thought during the Sassanian Period is exemplified in the development of the so-called 'heresy' of Zorvanism, an offshoot of Zoroastrianism, which claimed Time (Zorvan) was the supreme being and Ahura Mazda a created entity. In this vision, Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu were twin brothers, of equal power, who fought each other, but it was ultimately Time which dictated all things. Since Time could not be placated, Zorvanism encouraged a fatalistic view of life at odds with the central value of free will of the Zoroastrians, and yet there is no evidence of persecution of Zorvanites.

The first attack on this level of religious tolerance came from Christians in the 4th century CE who put out the sacred fires in the temples and preached against Zoroastrianism as a false faith. They did not have the numbers or political power at this time to do much more, but the Muslim Arabs, who invaded in the 7th century CE, certainly would. Zoroastrian Fire Temples, shrines, and libraries were destroyed, and Zoroastrians were forced to convert to Islam, flee their homes, or continue the faith in secret. Scholars point to this period in discussing wide-scale cultural loss – such as Zoroastrian texts which might have addressed the origin of evil.

Zoroastrianism survived – among the Parsees of India (where refugees from the Muslim Invasion fled) – and among the people of Iran who kept it alive – and is still practiced around the world in the present day. Although the early Christians and Muslims repudiated and attacked the faith, its fundamental concepts influenced both Christianity and Islam as well as Judaism. Zoroastrianism, in fact, is the first monotheistic faith to advance the concepts of individual responsibility for salvation, judgment after death, a messiah, an end-time, and a heaven and hell, and should rightly be regarded as the precursor to the later religions which claim an original vision which was actually established centuries before by Zoroaster and was so confident of its truth that it never needed to try to silence any others.

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