



History of Zoroastrianism

Origins (c. 1700–1200 BCE) - Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions, founded by the prophet **Zarathustra (Zoroaster)** in northeastern Greater Iran south of the Aral Sea.

Scholars estimate Zarathushtra lived around 1500 BCE, although traditional Zoroastrian sources suggest earlier dates.

Early Development (c. 1000–600 BCE) era, Zoroastrian teachings were initially passed down orally. The core texts of the religion, the **Avesta**, were compiled over time. Zarathustra's teachings influenced local tribal traditions, emphasizing truth, order, and the importance of individual responsibility in the cosmic struggle between good and evil.

During the **Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE)**, Zoroastrianism became prominent during the reign of rulers such as **Cyrus the Great**, **Darius the Great**, and **Xerxes I**. While the Achaemenids practiced religious pluralism Zoroastrianism provided the ideological foundation for governance, promoting concepts like divine kingship and moral justice.

Following Alexander of Macedonia's conquest of Persia around 330 BC, during the **Hellenistic Period (330–247 BCE)** Zoroastrian practices declined under the Greek influence. Many temples were destroyed, and religious texts were burnt or lost. However, Zoroastrianism persisted in rural areas and among certain communities.

It was during the **Parthian Empire (247 BCE–224 CE)**, Zoroastrian traditions were being supported again and allowed religious pluralism. During this time, Zoroastrian priests began reviving and codifying the religion. The Parthian rulers adopted some Zoroastrian rituals to legitimize their rule.

The Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE) marked the golden age of Zoroastrianism. It became the state religion, and the clergy held significant political power. The Avesta was compiled in its current form during this period. Sasanian rulers, such as **Ardashir I** and **Khosrow I**, promoted Zoroastrian doctrines, architecture, and rituals.

It was the **Arab-Muslim conquest of Persia** in the 7th century CE that marked a turning point. With the Islamic conquest, many Zoroastrians converted to Islam due to political, economic, and social pressures. Many were killed, raped, and taken as slaves. Zoroastrian temples were destroyed, and the faith diminished in prominence. Some communities, however, fled to India, where they became known as the **Parsis**.

Today, in the **modern era**, Zoroastrianism is practiced by small communities in Iran, India, and in the diaspora populations worldwide.



The Parsis in India have preserved many rituals and traditions, while Zoroastrians in Iran face challenges due to religious discrimination. Despite its small size, Zoroastrianism remains influential, having shaped key concepts in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Zoroastrianism's rich history reflects its profound impact on ancient civilizations and its enduring legacy in shaping religious thought.

Key Beliefs and Practices

Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion. **Ahura Mazda** as the Creator of all existence believing in one God that is the source of all which is good and benevolent in the world. 'Ahura' means Lord and 'Mazda' means Wisdom.

The concept of **moral dualism in Zoroastrianism** is the struggle between two mentalities, namely Spenta Mainyu, the progressive or benevolent spirit Angra Mainyu, the destructive or regressive spirit. The concept of twins is not that of a common source, but one of total opposition based upon the inherently different natures of the two spirits.

This constant struggle between the two mentalities is at the core of Zarathushtra's teachings giving humans the freedom to choose between truth and righteousness (Asha) or falsehood and chaos (Druj).

The concept of **Asha**, the path that all Zoroastrians are encouraged to follow, is a central and profound concept in Zoroastrianism, embodying the ideas of **truth, order, righteousness, and cosmic harmony**. It represents the divine law that governs both the physical and moral aspects of the universe, ensuring balance and justice. The concept of **Asha**, the path that all Zoroastrians are encouraged to follow, is a central and profound concept in Zoroastrianism, embodying the ideas of **truth, order, righteousness, and cosmic harmony**. Asha is fundamental to Zoroastrian ethics and cosmology, contrasting with **Druj**, which signifies deceit, disorder, and falsehood.

Let us go further in understanding the concepts to see what it all means.

What is Cosmic Order?

Asha is the universal law that maintains the structure and functioning of the cosmos. It governs natural phenomena, the cycles of the seasons, and the orderly movement of celestial bodies. By aligning with Asha, individuals and societies contribute to the stability and prosperity of the world.

What is Moral and Ethical Truth?

On a personal level, Asha reflects the principles of truthfulness, integrity, and righteousness. Zoroastrians are encouraged to live by the motto "Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds", which embodies the practical application of Asha in daily life.

What is Divine Will?

Asha represents the will and wisdom of Ahura Mazda (the supreme God). It is through Asha that



Ahura Mazda created and sustains the universe. Following Asha is thus an act of worship and devotion to the divine.

What are the practical implications of ASHA?

Personal Conduct - Individuals are expected to live truthfully, act ethically, and strive for justice. This includes honesty in speech, fairness in dealings, and compassion in interactions.

Social Justice - Asha extends to societal structures, advocating for justice, fairness, and the well-being of all members of society.

Environmental Stewardship - Since Asha governs natural order, Zoroastrianism emphasizes respect for nature and the environment. Preserving the earth's resources and living in harmony with the natural world are seen as acts of alignment with Asha.

Asha as a Guiding Principle - In Zoroastrianism, the ultimate goal is to align one's life with Asha, thereby contributing to the cosmic battle against Druj (falsehood, lies) and advancing the world toward Frashokerati (the final renovation or perfection of the world). Through righteous living, humans help Ahura Mazda defeat evil and bring about a state of eternal truth and harmony.

The Significance of Fire in Zoroastrianism

In Zoroastrianism, **fire (Atar)** holds profound symbolic and ritual importance. It is revered as a sacred element and is often seen as the physical manifestation of **Ahura Mazda's (God's)** divine presence. Fire is central to Zoroastrian worship and symbolizes purity, enlightenment, truth, and the eternal light of wisdom.

Symbolism of Fire

Divine Presence and Light - Fire is considered a direct symbol of **Ahura Mazda's** light and wisdom. Its ever-burning flame represents the eternal nature of God and the presence of divine truth in the world.

Purity - Zoroastrianism places a strong emphasis on purity, both physical and spiritual. Fire is seen as a purifying force that cleanses and sanctifies, reinforcing the battle against **Druj** (falsehood and chaos). It symbolizes the purity required in thought, speech, and action.

Spiritual Illumination - Fire embodies enlightenment and spiritual clarity, guiding individuals on the path of **Asha** (truth and righteousness). It serves as a reminder of the human responsibility to seek wisdom and live righteously.

Cosmic Energy - Fire is associated with life and energy, representing the sustaining power of the universe. It reflects the cosmic order upheld by Asha and the vitality of creation.



Environmental Significance and Respect - Zoroastrians hold a deep respect for natural elements, and fire, as one of the sacred creations, must be treated with care. Pollution of fire is strictly prohibited, and rituals are conducted to ensure its purity. This respect extends to other elements like water, earth, and air.

Fire as a Unifying Element - In Zoroastrianism, fire serves as a unifying symbol across different communities and sects. It connects followers to their ancient heritage and provides a tangible link to the divine, fostering a sense of continuity and identity. Example: The Olympic flame.

How is Zoroastrianism practiced?

Zoroastrianism, though one of the world's oldest religions, continues to be practiced today by communities primarily in **Iran, India** (Parsis), and smaller diaspora groups worldwide. Its practices emphasize worship, ethical living, and communal rituals. Here are the key elements of how Zoroastrianism is practiced:

Zoroastrianism is practiced through a combination of daily prayers, rituals, and communal worship. Its teachings emphasize ethical living, environmental care, and reverence for the divine, offering a timeless framework for living a meaningful and righteous life.

Scriptures and language?

The **Avestan language** is an ancient Iranian language in which the sacred texts of **Zoroastrianism**, collectively known as the **Avesta**, were composed. It is a member of the **Eastern Iranian branch** of the Indo-Iranian languages, closely related to the Old Persian and Vedic Sanskrit languages.

The Avestan language holds great historical and cultural importance as it provides valuable insights into the religion, culture, and worldview of ancient Iranian societies. It is also a crucial resource for linguists studying the development of Indo-European languages.

A large portion of the Avesta is believed to have been lost to history. What remains is a complex collection of writings and fragments, divided into several individual works, each complete in itself.

The fountainhead of the Zoroastrian religion lies in the hymns or teachings of Zarathushtra - the **Gathas**, the oldest linguistic section of the Avesta, which are reputed to be his own utterances. Divinely inspired and revealed, the Gathas are in the form of exalted poetry, within which lies a myriad of esoteric truths. Zarathushtra thus, was the recipient of a revelation which when accepted by the ancient Iranians, became a religion, making him the first prophet-priest of the oldest revealed religion in the world.



Modern Use and Preservation

While the Avestan language is no longer spoken, it remains a liturgical language for Zoroastrian rituals. Zoroastrian priests recite and study the Avesta as part of their religious training, and modern scholars continue to analyze its texts for historical and linguistic research.

The creation of the Avestan script ensured the accurate preservation of Zoroastrian sacred texts, which were previously transmitted orally. It highlights the importance of maintaining the purity and correctness of religious recitations, a cornerstone of Zoroastrian worship.

In summary, the Avestan script is a highly specialized and phonetic alphabet that serves the crucial role of preserving the ancient Zoroastrian sacred texts.

What is a place of **Worship** - Zoroastrians can pray anywhere in front of any source of light. Zoroastrians congregate in **fire temples** (Atash Behram, Atash Kadeh, or Atash Adaran), where a sacred fire burns perpetually. There are places of worship in North America - Toronto, Vancouver in Canada, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Dallas, San Francisco Bay Area. Worshippers offer sandalwood or incense to the fire and pray before it.

Rituals and Ceremonies

Navjote/Sedreh Pooshi (Initiation Ceremony) - The ceremony marks a Zoroastrian child's formal initiation into the faith, typically between ages 7 and 15, similar to a Bat Mitzvah. During the ceremony, the child is given a **Sadre** (white cotton undershirt) and a **Kushti** (sacred cord). These are worn daily as a symbol of commitment to Zoroastrian values, a practice not followed by many today.

Marriage and Family Rituals - Zoroastrian weddings are elaborate ceremonies that emphasize the couple's union under the blessings of Ahura Mazda and Asha. Family life is central, and many rituals involve prayers for health, prosperity, and harmony.

Funeral Rites - Zoroastrians have unique funeral practices, avoiding cremation or burial to prevent polluting fire or earth. Traditionally, bodies are placed in **Towers of Silence** (Dakhmas) to be exposed to sunlight and consumed by birds, symbolizing the soul's release and the body's return to nature.

In modern times, burial or cremation is more common in some regions due to legal and societal constraints.

Festivals and Celebrations

Zoroastrians celebrate several festivals that honor the seasons, nature, and historical events. Key festivals include:



Nowruz: The Zoroastrian New Year, celebrated at the spring equinox. It symbolizes renewal, hope, and gratitude for life.

Gahambars: Seasonal festivals celebrating creation and the natural elements.

Tirgan: Summer Solstice dedicated to the source of all life - water.

Mehregan: Autumn Equinox, a festival of gratitude, particularly for the harvest.

Shabe Chelle (Yalda): Winter Solstice after which days start getting longer symbolizing the triumph of light over darkness.

Sadeh: Celebrated in winter, it honors fire and marks the anticipation of Spring.

Community and Charity - Zoroastrians emphasize the importance of community and collective well-being. Acts of charity, known as **Daena** (faithful acts), are seen as a way to uphold Asha. Community members support one another through education, healthcare, and social services.

Dietary and Environmental Practices - Zoroastrians generally do not have strict dietary restrictions, but they encourage moderation and respect for all forms of life. Environmental stewardship is a vital aspect of the faith. Practitioners are mindful about preserving the purity of the natural elements (fire, water, earth, and air).

Modern Challenges and Adaptations

Zoroastrians today face challenges such as dwindling numbers and maintaining traditional practices in modern societies. Despite this, many Zoroastrians continue to uphold their faith through:

- Maintaining cultural and religious traditions.
- Building community centers and fire temples in diaspora communities.
- Educating younger generations about Zoroastrian values and practices.

Zoroastrianism principles given to us by our prophet Zarathushtra or Zoroaster over 3500 years ago resonate even today. The divine outpourings of Zarathushtra show the depth of his vision, his intellectual quest, his spiritual seeking, and above all, his longing to understand the workings of the world from a specific source whom he perceived to be the Lord of Wisdom – Ahura Mazda.

• **Freedom of choice:** Free will, freedom to choose one's own destiny and path is fundamental in Zoroastrian belief. Our own religion is a religion of choice since Zarathushtra too chooses to follow the progressive mentality of Ahura Mazda.



- **Conflict resolution:** Using reason, resolution of differences should be facilitated through reason rather than simply faith. Good decisions are made when we listen first, then reason and act accordingly.
- **Ferashem or Renewal (Frashokerati)** – making the world fresh, renewed, and improved is of great importance in Zoroastrian religion. It is not enough to just have a good mind; our good thoughts must be transformed into good words and into good deeds or actions for the progress and perfection of the living world.
- **Equality and progression for all** – reaching a good dominion (state), a living world that is beneficial for everyone is achieved through a prosperous community with everyone, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity participating in the improvement. The only thing that distinguishes one is one's good deeds and benevolence.
- **Reward and Consequence** – Zarathushtra's way of defeating evil is through changing minds, a slow evolution of humanity's mental state to a benevolent way of thinking and acting. It gives us humans a system that enables evolution, an ongoing search for truth within ourselves (trueness); hence there can always be a course correction from wrongful deeds.
- **Stewardship of nature and living things** – Taking care of the environment, air, water, earth, fire are extremely important. Especially today with global warming and climate change.

Around 2500 BCE, in a world that was in turmoil, for the first time in human history, man was shown a new path – a path based upon the Truth (Asha) and perceived through the use of the Good Mind. The importance of the mind and its pivotal role in the life of a Zoroastrian with a view to reflect and to think are undoubtedly unique attributes of Zarathushtra's teachings.

Today, the world is still in chaos. We can choose to do the right thing for the right reasons, be a kind and compassionate human being, and have gratitude and respect for all existence. A timeless universal message that remains relevant in any given day and age.

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