

## A Brief Introduction to Zoroastrianism

### *Zoroastrianism and Zarathustra*

Zoroastrianism has been called the “world’s oldest revealed religion.” The religion derives its title from the Iranian philosopher/poet/priest, Zarathustra, who is often referred to by the Greek version of his name - “Zoroaster.”

The consensus both within the Zoroastrian community today (which numbers around 125,00-140,000 individuals around the world) and among Zoroastrian scholars is that Zarathustra lived sometime around 1250 BCE on the Central Asian Steppes, perhaps in what is now central Kazakhstan.

Ancient Zoroastrianism is associated with the Iran. The name ‘Iran’ comes from an Old Iranian term *Airyanem Vaejah* – the ‘Aryan expanse’ or ‘the place where the Aryans lived.’ In Zoroastrian tradition, ‘Airyana Vaejah,’ comes to be regarded as the center of the world, a semi-mythical region where all great events of the past had taken place.

### *Textual Sources*

Early Zoroastrianism is understood from the ‘writings’ and hymns of Zarathustra. The works reflect an Indo-Iranian cultural and linguistic background. The Indo-Iranians were tribes that shared a common religious culture and drifted apart during the late 3<sup>rd</sup> /early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, with the Iranians moving towards the Iranian plateau, arriving there early in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE, and the Indo-Aryans settling in the Indian subcontinent around 1500 BCE.

The earliest Zoroastrian texts, the *Gāthās* – “songs” or “hymns” - were composed in *Old Avestan*, an Old Iranian language close in language and style to the Sanskrit of the Rig Veda. The *Gāthās* and later Zoroastrian scriptures (in *Young Avestan*) seem to be geographically localized in north-eastern/eastern Iran. The original audience for the *Gāthās* was apparently mostly nomadic cattle-herders, since there is frequent use of cattle imagery; for instance, herdsmen who tend their cattle well are praised, whereas those who cause injury or harm to the cow are castigated.

The *Gāthās* extol Ahura Mazda – the Wise Lord—as the one uncreated being, generator of all that is good, including humans. Key to this struggle is the maintenance of order in both cosmic and religio-social context. The word for this concept of order, *Asha*, is also linked with moral order, with its idea of rightness as concrete and knowable – the concept of ‘Truth.’ This is contrasted with the concept of *Druj* – the Lie, or cosmic deception, that brings chaos. In later (Young

Avestan) texts, the origin of chaos ('not-life') is identified as *Angra Mainyu* – the 'Destructive Spirit' (*Ahriman* in Middle Persian).

The person who follows *Asha*, the *ashavan*, exemplifies the Zoroastrian credo of good thoughts, good words, good deeds. In the *Gāthās*, the *ashavan* shall, at the end, be in the best dwelling, the "house of song." The one who follows the Lie - the *dregvant* - is one who utters untruthful statements about Ahura Mazda and the constituents of the ordered cosmos; the one who 'brings chaos.' The *dregvant* shall at the end have the 'worst existence,' in 'the house of deceit.' This seems to be an early conceptualization of what we now refer to as 'heaven' and 'hell.'

A few centuries after arrival on the Iranian plateau, one group of Iranians, the Persians, founded the first of three great Iranian empires, which spanned over a thousand years. These were the Achaemenid (550-330 BCE), Parthian (c. 250 BCE -224 CE) and Sasanian (224-651 CE) Dynasties. Under these three empires, and into the present day, the religion that is now known as 'Zoroastrianism' continued to develop both conceptually and ritually, as do all religions. Throughout the history of the faith, however, adherents have defined themselves primarily as 'Mazda-worshippers', members of the 'good religion.'

### *Zoroastrians In Iran*

For centuries after the Arab invasion in 651 CE, Zoroastrians (or Zarathushtis) in Iran practiced their faith in quiet seclusion, in the face of the pressure to become Muslim. They maintained their Zoroastrian faith and practice in isolated parts of Iran, principally the city of Yazd. The Iranian Zoroastrians' safeguarding of the faith maintained an authentic religious tradition since the fall of the Sasanians, in a humbler form. Iran, while acknowledged as the original homeland of the Zoroastrians, became secondary to the rise of the Zoroastrian community in India in terms of numbers of faithful and economic power. In the fifteenth century, ties between Indian and Iranian Zoroastrians were revived with the exchange of letters of religious matters. The Zoroastrians of India in the nineteenth century utilized their new-found economic and political influence to mount efforts to revive the fortunes of their Iranian co-religionists, with success in having invidious religious sanctions on non-Muslims lifted.

### *Zoroastrians in India – The Parsis*

A segment of the Iranian Zoroastrian community left Iran and eventually settled in India, by tradition, in the early eighth century. The Indian Zoroastrians came to be known as Parsis (Parsees), and over centuries both assimilated to the Indian

cultural milieu and preserved Zoroastrianism. The Parsis added their own characteristics to their religious and cultural practices. The Parsis also became an endogamous community, marrying only within their ranks, and abjuring the conversion of members to the Parsi Zoroastrian community. This both preserved the unique nature of the Zoroastrians of Iran, but would also eventually lead to a demographic crisis,

Under British rule of India, in the nineteenth century the Parsis prospered as major traders, business enterprises, and became a highly educated, Anglophile, and influential community, principally in the city of Bombay. Parsi history would be written as a history of accomplishments, reflecting the miniscule minority's achievements well out of proportion to their numbers. Noted for their integrity, philanthropy and pioneering spirit, Parsis founded hospitals, schools and other institutions, in service of the Parsi and larger Indian community.

The Parsis would also extend Zoroastrian communities to East Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Britain, North America, Australia and New Zealand. New diaspora communities would grapple with difficult community questions of religious belief, education, and inter-faith marriage and conversion. Many new diasporas have pioneered stances on these issues.

### *Present Day Zoroastrians*

The number of Zoroastrians in the world today is about 125,00-140,000 individuals, with the highest concentrations in the 'homelands' of Iran (24,000) and India (70,000). In the in USA (11,000), Canada (5,000), Great Britain (5,000), Australia and New Zealand (3,500), Persian Gulf (2,000), Pakistan (2,000), Europe (1,000), the Far East (400). Zoroastrianism has also been revived in the former lands of the Soviet Union; though the estimate of Zoroastrians there is undocumented.

### *The Future*

The survival of the Zoroastrian religion over 3,500 years, is remarkable achievement of both a community's perseverance, and faith's continuing pull on the hearts and minds of humans.

The demographic decline of the Indian Zoroastrian community is stark and entails the loss of individuals as well as a great cultural heritage. At the same time, there is a strong awareness among Zoroastrians around the world of the challenges they face. In North America, there are now eight Zoroastrian temples, twenty-four associations and one North America federation (FEZANA), providing a strong communal infrastructure. Zoroastrian presence is increasingly evident in the

interfaith arena, helping to restore the religion to its rightful place as a venerable and living member of the world's religious family.

Notwithstanding the vicissitudes of time and history, the essence of Zarathustra's timeless and universal message has been preserved and perpetuated, as new generations recognize the remarkable relevance of this ancient faith in today's world.

*With files courtesy of Jenny Rose, Rohinton M. Rivetna, and Jesse Palsetia*