

## ZOROASTRIANISM

Introduction: Zoroastrianism is the smallest of the world's great religions, currently with fewer than 200,000 followers world wide. It originated in the high and arid Iranian Plateau and was the religion of ancient Iran from the mid first millennium B.C.E. to the end of the first millennium A.C.E. For a number of obscure reasons it has been largely replaced by Islam.

### 1. Geography

The most prominent community of Zoroastrians lives in Bombay, India and a few towns and villages to the north. They are not native to the Indian sub-continent, having originated in Iran and emigrated to India to escape persecution following the Moslem conquest. As of 1970 there were about 115,000 Parsees, as these Zoroastrians living in India are called.

Before the revolution against the Shah of Iran under the direction of Ayatollah Khomeini there were about 10,000 Zoroastrians still living in Iran, mainly in the regions of Kerman and Yazd. Other than knowing that they have suffered severe persecution in the wave of dislocation during and following the Iranian Revolution I have no idea how many remain.

Zoroastrianism, therefore, presents the remarkable picture of a religion that is significantly uprooted from its geographic homeland, its center of gravity having migrated to a place totally strange to the founders of the faith. Among the significant religions of the world Judaism used to share this characteristic until the foundation of the State of Israel.

### 2. History: A. Pre-Zoroastrian Iranian Religion

The Indian Parsees originally came, as their name shows, from Iran. The first glimpses we catch of Iranian religion show a group of immigrants from the Asian steppes, originally nomadic, but settling down in their new home to horticultural and city life. It is not possible to date their advent in Iran precisely, but we find their names in northern Mesopotamia and eastern Asia minor by 1600 B.C. Their religion originally developed from a polytheism very similar to that of the Vedic Aryan tribes that invaded the valleys of the Indus and Ganges Rivers in India and provided the religious foundation for the first written documents of Indian religious history, the Vedas. The nature of the relationship between the two groups is obscure, but they shared the same gods, both used the extracted hallucinogenic juice of a plant in their religious ceremonies (Soma in India, Haoma in

Iran) and various forms of sacrifice which were the chief rituals in both Vedic India and in early Iran.

There is every reason to believe that both groups originated between the Caspian and Aral Seas sometime around 2000 B.C. and, for reasons that are lost in the obscurity of the past, one went east to India the other south and west to Iran.

In Iran, making the transition from nomadic/herding life to settled agricultural/urban life created a time of extraordinary religious stress. This settlement process is normally a time of extreme ethical dislocation in religions as there are no rules to govern extensive commerce in nomadic societies and no tradition of how to deal with accumulated wealth and the possibilities for extreme differentiation between society's richest and poorest members. The earlier prophets of Old Testament Israel are responding to similar social conditions. The animal sacrifices normal to nomadic societies became increasingly burdensome and expensive to agricultural settlers with limited numbers of livestock. Zoroaster was a reformer, corresponding to the Upanishadic reforms of late Aryan India and to the reforms proposed by Amos, Hosea, first Isaiah and Micah in the Hebrew tradition.

## B. Zoroaster

We know practically nothing for certain of the life of Zoroaster. He was probably (?) the son of a an Aryan landowner. We do not even know for certain what his name means. Zoroaster is the Greek corruption of the old Iranian word Zarathustra, of which the last element, "ustra" means camel. One suggested derivation is "He who plows with camels."

The traditional date of his birth is 660 B.C. Most modern scholars accept this, with reservations, while others argue for a date as early as 1000 B.C. We are not even sure where he was born, the best guess is Media. He spent much of his adult life in Bactria. (Ancient Media is modern Azerbaijan, located west of the southern end of the Caspian Sea in the foothills and valleys of the Caucasus Mountains. Bactria is the ancient province east of the Caspian Sea between the Oxus River and the Hindu Kush Mountains. It marked the north-eastern boundary of the influence of Greek civilization carried into central Asia by Alexander the Great.)

The traditional story of Zoroaster's life follows the usual form for the founders of great religions: around 20 he left father and mother and wife to wander in search of answers to his deep religious questionings. After ten years of instruction from various sources in all the religious forms traditional in his

culture, he had a revelation in which a heavenly guide (Vohu Manah, "Good thought") bid him ascend into the presence of Ahura Mazda (the supreme being, the words mean "Wise Lord" in ancient Persian.) Ahura Mazda is holding court with his attendant angels in a manner reminiscent of Isaiah's call vision of the heavenly court (Isaiah 6.) Ahura Mazda then instructs Zoroaster in the doctrines and practices of true religion.

Tradition elaborates on this original vision, saying that during the next eight years Zoroaster met each of the six archangels, each of which elaborated on the original revelation. He then preaches and engages in missionary work for 10 years, before gaining his first convert. Traditionally, this was a time of discouragement and severe temptation, when the spirit of evil, Angra Mainyu bade him renounce the worship of Mazda. The future of Zoroastrianism was assured with the conversion of an Aryan prince, Vishtaspa. With this royal backing the new faith spread rapidly.

We know little of the death of Zoroaster. A late source, over 1000 years after the event, has it that Zoroaster was slain before the sacred fire by invading Turanians.

### C. Teachings

The core deity of the Zoroastrians, Ahura Mazda, has the same roots as the Vedic Varuna, the god of the moral and natural orders of the universe. Ahura Mazda is an honorific title that was later altered into a personal name. Zoroaster elevated him into sole deity and demoted the other gods of the ancient Iranian pantheon into demons unworthy of human worship. Humans owe all their worship to one god, Ahura Mazda.

Zoroaster claimed to have been called to his prophetic mission by Ahura Mazda himself, therefore the religion he taught was final and perfect. Mazda was the supreme deity -- it is not clear to me in what sense he could be said to be the only deity -- and as such he would eventually crush all evil and establish right and truth eternally. (Thus Zoroastrianism is the first western religion to conceive of a final judgement.)

A kind of shell of the old Iranian polytheism was preserved by creating a heavenly court for Ahura Mazda made of the Amesha Spentas. These bear the names of modes of ethical activity such as Asha (right), Kshatra (Power or Dominion, not the similarity to the Kshatrya or warrior and ruling class in India.), Ameretat (Immortality) and many more. It is an open question whether in early Zoroastrianism these were abstract states through which god worked or true independent gods with personality and individuality.

This early Zoroastrianism had a semi-dualistic structure. Over against Asha (right or Truth) is Druj, the lie. The good spirit (Spenta Mainyu) is opposed by Angra Mainyu, the bad spirit. This sense of cleavage, is shot through the oldest Zoroastrian documents:

I will speak of the spirits twain at the first beginning of the world, of whom the holier thus spake to the enemy:  
"Neither thought nor teachings nor wills nor beliefs nor words nor deed nor selves or souls of us twain agree."

and again:

Now the two primal Spirits, who revealed themselves in vision as Twins, are the Better and the Bad in thought and word and action, And between these two the wise ones choose aright, the foolish not so. And when these twain Spirits came together in the beginning, they established Life and Not-Life, and that at the last the Worst Existence (Hell) shall be to the followers of the Lie, but the Best Thought (Paradise) to him that follows Right. Of these twain Spirits he that followed the Lie chose doing the worst things, the holiest Spirit chose Right."

It is important to explore this tension between good and evil and to recognize that Zoroastrianism is primarily a religion of moral choice. The question is the same as in Christianity. How can there be evil in the world without God having created it? There are three possibilities.

1. True philosophical dualism. The Evil Spirit (Angra Mainyu) always existed from the beginning alongside Ahura Mazda.

2. Ahura Mazda in some sense created evil, but the good was made more powerful and will triumph.

3. Ahura Mazda discovered that it is just the natural thing to find evil along with good, darkness with light? This seems to be the position of earliest Zoroastrian Documents.

Thus we come to the basic principle of Zoroastrianism. Each person's soul is the seat of a conflict between good and evil. The object of religion is to open the soul to the influence of Ahura Mazda in order that the soul may choose Him. Human beings have been given true freedom of choice. In fact, contemporary Parseeism still emphasizes this freedom over against what they see as Muslim fatalism, Hindu despair, and Christian original sin each of which corrupts true freedom of choice.

We know very little of the ethical structure of early

Zoroastrianism. Practically the only literature of this period that has come down to us are devotional hymns called "Gathas." One does not usually look in devotional hymns for developed ethical structures. The following positions, however, are clear:

1. Good is identified with eschewing the old religion of polytheism and worshiping Ahura Mazda.
2. Great emphasis is placed on telling the truth.
3. One is not to help those who worship the old gods, or give them gifts or do them favors.
4. Agriculture is good: weeding, plowing, reclaiming waste land, irrigation, and the care of animals.

#### D. Ceremonial

"At every offering to thy fire, I will bethink me of Right so long as I have power."

To Zoroaster, fire was a symbol of Ahura Mazda. It functions like sacraments in Christianity, as a visible sign of the god's presence. Fire also purifies and, in pre-Zoroastrian times was the means by which sacrifice was taken from the earthly realm and presented in the heavenly. In this, as in much else, pre-Zoroastrian religion in Iran was parallel to Vedic religion in India. There the fire god Agni was the connecting link between heaven and earth. Zoroastrian temples have eternal fires, carefully tended by priests. To let the fire die was criminal. Later Zoroastrianism developed a complicated ritual of purification of the fire and different fire temples had fires of different importance. Zoroaster forbade animal sacrifices and the use of the intoxicant haoma in religious ceremonies. Both of these actions were characteristic of pre-Zoroastrian Iranian and Vedic religion in India.

Today, Zoroastrian temples appear outwardly no different from other buildings on a street. The priesthoods are hereditary. The sacred flame is fed at least five times a day and burns in an urn on a four legged stone pedestal. The main ceremony is the Yasna, a sacrifice before the sacred flame of bread and milk. There is no organized community worship to correspond to the Christian Sunday. Worshipers comes in families or small groups, wash the exposed parts of their bodies, take off their shoes (CF.. Moses before the burning bush.), give offerings of money and sandalwood to the priests, recite prayers and then leave the sanctuary without turning their backs on the sacred flame.

The most unusual Zoroastrian religious practice concerns funeral customs. Dead bodies are considered unclean, since death is a thing against nature and an effect of the presence of the evil spirit. Therefore they will not contaminate the pure elements of fire (cremation) or earth (burial) by contact with a dead body.

Shortly after death the family gathers for a period of formal mourning, following which the body is borne on a bier to a dakhma or "tower of silence." These dakhmas consist of a circular stone wall with sloping inner sides making three different levels; one for men, one for women and one for children. The body is then placed in its appropriate position inside the open tower and left for the vultures to eat. Following this, the remaining bones are placed in a sealed stone well in the center of the tower. It is important to see this practice in terms of its origin as a rite of purification, and not as an expression of oddity or morbid attitudes toward death.

Finally, the question arises as to whether Zoroaster was a true philosophical dualist, believing that good and evil would both subsist forever. The answer is certainly no. Zoroaster invented the concept of eschatology, of the study of "last things" or endings. He proclaimed a general resurrection at the end of this world. At this time all people will be tested by a fiery ordeal which will reveal their worth and their fate will be accordingly declared. The righteous will find the fire kindly and healing as milk, while the evil will burn horribly. (Remember that this is all pre-Christian.)

There was also individual judgement before the general resurrection at the end. The state of the soul is then fixed by that judgement until the general resurrection. Each soul faces judgement at the bridge of the separator (the Chinvat Bridge) which spanned the depths of hell and ends at the gate of heaven at the far end. As the soul begins to cross the bridge the record of its life is read. If good predominates over evil, the "pointing hand" is toward paradise. If evil predominates, the hand points toward the abyss of hell below the bridge. As the Gathas put it,

Their own Soul and their own daena (the daena is the moral center of personality or what we would call the conscience.) shall torment them when they come to the bridge of the Separator. To all time they shall be guests in The House of the Lie.

Thus it is the accusation of a person's own conscience that condemns him or her in Zoroastrianism. Hell is pictured as a place of utter loneliness, where voices cry but each sufferer is

forever alone. Paradise is described in contrary terms as the place where there is the best possible companionship.

This sums the core of Zoroaster's religion. Let every person choose the good!