

## Zoroastrianism: The Oldest Religion in the World

"Zoroastrianism is the oldest of the revealed world-religions, and it has probably had more influence on mankind, directly and indirectly, than any other single faith." Mary Boyce, a scholar in Zoroastrian Studies.

The Zoroastrian Religion was founded in Ancient Iran 3500 years ago by the prophet Zarathustra. Zarathustra was born in 660 BC and died in 583 BC. Zoroastrianism was one of the most powerful religions in the world from 558 BC to 650 AD. The persecution of the Zoroastrians in Iran by the Muslims from the 7<sup>th</sup> Century made many of them flee and migrate to India and other parts of the world.



The Zoroastrian Religion survived through the rise and fall of many civilizations. It was the official religion of the three Iranian Empires: The Achaemenian, The



Sassanian and The Parthians for over 1000 years. One of Zarathustra's first followers was Iranian King Vistashpa. The Religion spread through Persia and was followed by Cyrus the Great in 558 BC. Cyrus

brought Zoroastrianism to all the people he conquered but didn't force them to convert. He controlled parts of Greece and Egypt along with the Middle East. Cyrus' son Cambyses who conquered Egypt in 525 BC continued to introduce Zoroastrianism into the world. Cambyses son, Darius the Great, reigned from 522 – 486 BC. Darius extended the Persian Empire the furthest, all the way up to Macedon

in Greece. His Empire encompassed Asia Minor, parts of Greece, Egypt, Persia, Afghanistan, Northern Arabia, Palestine, Syria, Turkestan, parts of Russia and Pakistan. Cyrus and Darius were liberal and tolerant rulers, allowing their people to worship their own God, speak their own language and retain their own culture. The



Persian Empire survived many revolts for another 150 years. It was only in 340 BC when Alexander the Great managed to drive out the

Persians from Greece, and in fact conquered parts of Persia<sup>1</sup>. According to the New York Times, “While Zoroastrians once dominated an area stretching from what is now Rome and Greece, to India and Russia, their Global Population has dwindled to 190,000 at the most and perhaps as few as 124,000.”

The Zoroastrian religion has two main teachings<sup>2</sup>. The first is “Humata, Hukhta, Huvarashta” – when translated into English stand for “Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds”. The second is “Happiness unto him who gives Happiness onto others”. Zoroastrians believe that Ahura Mazda (God) is: Omniscient (knows everything), Omnipotent (all powerful), Omnipresent (is everywhere), the creator of life and the source of all goodness and happiness. The sacred fire in the Zoroastrian Temple symbolises the body of Ahura Mazda. Zoroastrians believe that God is formless, and so is the fire. Fire, sun, earth and water are the four sacred elements so humans should do nothing to pollute them<sup>3</sup>. Zoroastrians pray two to three times a day. They can pray at home,



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/MESO/PERSIANS.HTM>

<sup>2</sup> The Zoroastrians of India PARSIS – Sooni Taraporevala

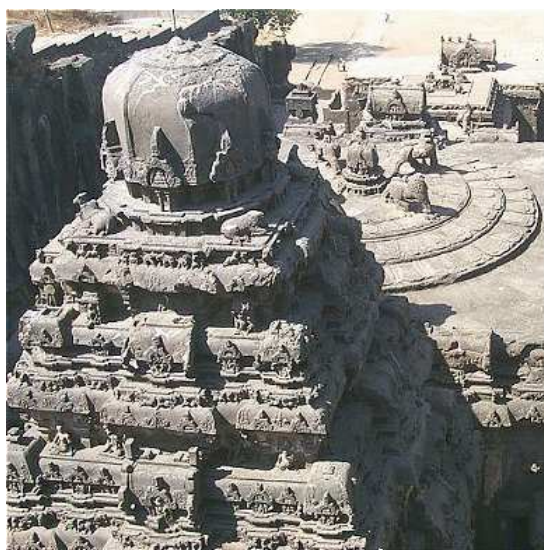
<sup>3</sup> [http://www.s-a-i.info/sai\\_religion/sai\\_religion\\_6.html](http://www.s-a-i.info/sai_religion/sai_religion_6.html)

or go and pray at a Fire Temple known as an Agiary. Zoroastrians don't accept converts; one has to be born into the religion<sup>4</sup>.

The initiation of a child into the fold of the Zoroastrian religion is known as Navjote. The Navjote takes place between the ages of seven to eleven for both boys and girls. They are made to wear the sudreh (thin shirt made of Muslin cloth) and kustī (a sacred cord made of 72 threads of lamb's wool). This is to be worn by a Zoroastrian daily to remind them of their basic teachings "Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds"<sup>3</sup>.



The Wedding Ceremony is a time for rejoicing. The wedding is performed by priests who recite prayers from the holy book called "The Avesta", and bless the couple showering them with rice and rose petals. The Ceremony is followed by food and dancing by friends and family<sup>3</sup>.



The funeral ceremony, the last journey of a Zoroastrian, happens in the Tower of Silence. Zoroastrians always dispose their dead by leaving the corpses in the open air to be eaten by birds and beasts. This is a very unusual and a unique tradition of the Zoroastrians, because even in death, they want to give back to the world what they

received when they were alive. Because they worship the natural elements, they feel that burying the body would pollute the earth. Alternatively to burn it would be to desiccate fire. After death, if the good thoughts, words and deeds outweigh the bad

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian/beliefs/humanity.shtml>

during the lifetime of the person, then the soul is taken into heaven. Otherwise, the soul is led to hell<sup>5</sup>.

Over the centuries, the Zoroastrians have made tremendous contributions to many things that we take for granted today. During the rule of Cyrus and Darius the Great the first international army of about 10,000 men was established. An international system of government was introduced and the economy flourished. It was often said that to this day there was nothing to beat the pomp, pageantry and wealth of the Persian Empire.

Darius created a network of roads which are still possible to trace today. Examples include The Royal Road, a 1677 miles long road that is divided into over 100 post stations. These roads linked the Capital Cities of the Persian Empire. Darius also introduced the first judicial method of ruling, by creating the “House of Lords”. He handpicked Royal Judges with decided the fate of many people.

Darius introduced the system of coinage into Persia. He made gold and silver coins. The gold coin was called ‘Darik’ and it weighed 8.4 grams. The silver coin was called ‘Siglos’ and it weighed 5.6 grams. Both coins had a picture of Darius engraved on the coin.



Darius launched an efficient postal and courier system with a system of fire signals that kept the Royal Court in touch with every corner of the Persian Empire<sup>6</sup>.

However, with the Arab conquest of Persia in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, tens of thousands of Zoroastrians had to convert to Islam or risk being killed. Some of the more devoted Zoroastrians fled to India by boat and arrived on the western coastal state of Gujarat. The Hindu ruler Jadhav Rana agreed to give shelter to the Zoroastrians provided they adopted the Hindu customs and traditions, and lived peacefully in his land. As one

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.religioustolerance.org/zoroastr.htm>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.iranvision.com/darius.html>

myths goes, a Zoroastrian priests agreed and told the King to get a bowl of milk and a spoon of sugar. He then stirred the spoonful of sugar in the bowl of milk and said “Does any man see the sugar in the bowl of milk now?” When all the Indians shook their head, the priest continued, “We shall sweeten your land and mix with your people, just as the sugar has with the milk”. These Zoroastrians hence forth came to be known as the Parsis to denote where they came from, Pars (Persia)<sup>3</sup>.

The Parsis, despite having lived in India for twelve centuries have maintained their religion, culture and traditions. Prosperous, enterprising and literate they denominated the business community of Mumbai (Bombay). Under the British rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Parsis became the earliest industrialists in ship building, steel, aviation, textiles and chemicals. They also excelled in the arts and sciences. Noted for their integrity, charitable nature and pioneering spirit they founded hospitals, schools and other institutions to help their people. The contributions made by the Zoroastrians in both Ancient Persia and Modern India are vast, and the impact it has had on the world is huge.

The world is indeed grateful to them for what we have today.



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