

Zarathushtra and His Message

The founder of the Zoroastrian religion was Zarathushtra Spitaman. The ancient Greeks pronounced his name as Zoroaster and that's the name adopted by later Europeans, who called the religion Zoroastrianism.

No one knows for certain when Zarathushtra lived. Some scholars place him as early as 6500 BCE and some as late as 600 BCE. However, current archeological and linguistic evidence suggests that he may have lived during the Bronze Age probably around 1700 BCE.

His place of birth is also unknown. However, since his language, the Old Avestan, belongs to the eastern Iranian languages, it's probable he lived somewhere in today's Central Asia among the Iranian pastoralists.

Zarathushtra called his religion *Daena Vanguhi* meaning Good Conscience and those who practiced the religion called it *mazdayasna* which means the worship or celebration of wisdom. Zoroastrians today, however, call their religion *Din-e Behi* which literally means the Good Religion because of its emphasis on good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.

Zarathushtra conveyed his message through poems and songs. He composed 17 poems which are called the Gathas or Songs (Hymns) today.

The Gathas teach us about the Divine but also advocates for freedom of choice, equality, importance of personal responsibility, peace, and preservation of the environment as well as the importance of truth and justice.

Zarathushtra lived in a violent time when cruelty and tyranny were rife, a time when priests and princes used their power to control people through fear and lies.

Zarathushtra was profoundly disturbed by the injustices he saw, and he rose up to speak against it. As a result, he and his few followers were threatened and harassed, and he was forced to leave his clan.

He along with a few disciples left their clan and met a powerful king named Vishtaspa and his wife Queen Hutaosa who joined Zarathushtra and accepted his religion.

His poetic message from the Gathas was transmitted orally by many young men and women, called *Athravans*. Zarathushtra's Good Religion was spread all over the region and eventually found its way to the Iranian plateau. Centuries later it became the majority religion of the Persian Empire.

In 330 BCE, Alexander III invaded Iran destroying and burning libraries, Zoroastrian places of worship (fire temples) and many Zoroastrian scriptures. It was not until the establishment of the Sasanian Empire around 240 CE when the Zoroastrian canon was compiled and codified.

Zoroastrianism took another major blow in 640 CE when the Arab tribes invaded Iran and destroyed the Sasanian Empire resulting in persecution and mass conversion of Zoroastrians to Islam.

Today, Zoroastrians live all over the world. The largest group (roughly 60,000) live in India. Iran has the second largest population of Zoroastrians followed by the USA, Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

Zoroastrianism has no official branches. Zoroastrians do not follow a supreme religious leader like a Pope, but Mobeds (Zoroastrian priests) and lay teachers offer knowledge and guidance.

Zoroastrians believe in one God whose name is Ahura Mazda (Divine/ Omnipresent Wisdom and Wise creator).

There are no images of the Divine. When Zoroastrians pray to God, they stand in front of fire or any other source of light because light is a symbol of Divine, Truth, and Enlightenment.

The concept of monotheism in the Abrahamic religions has roots in Zoroastrianism as well as the concept of good and evil.

Zarathushtra's philosophy has influenced the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers. Plato, Pythagoras, and Plutarch to name a few, knew and admired Zarathushtra. He was also admired by such prominent European philosophers as Voltaire, Hegel, Emerson, and Nietzsche who cherished Zarathushtra's commitment to freewill, equality and humanism.

Central to Zarathushtra's thought is Truth or what he calls *Asha*.

He encourages us to use our wisdom to make every decision. We have freedom of choice and there are no prescriptions to follow; we reap what we sow as actions have consequences. In material existence, Truth or *Asha* includes the factual truths of our universe such as physical laws in mathematics, physics, biology and chemistry. In spiritual or mental existence, *Asha* is equated with being beneficial and righteous. The concept includes honesty, kindness, generosity, compassion, and justice.

Gender equality is an integral part of Zarathushtra's thought. Human beings are created equal and have equal rights and responsibilities. In other words, everyone's salvation is in his or her own hands.

Zarathushtra's focus is life in this world. He urges us to be active in the world's affairs by eliminating poverty, standing up to injustice, advocating for peace and by nurturing Mother Earth and renew this existence. In his Gathas, he teaches us to use our knowledge and wisdom as well as logic and reasoning to solve this world's problems and make it a better place to live for everyone.

Audio recording accompanying this document was read by:

Ms. Sarah Kasravi

Material compiled by:

Public Relation Committee of California Zoroastrian Center (CZC)

Approved by: CZC Moobedan Group and CZC Board of Directors

Avestan and music on the audio:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pKwrgw-PWk>

Date: 5/2022