

Major religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have roots in Zoroastrianism. Analyze the history and beliefs of Zoroastrianism, from its origin by Zoroaster, to its impact on other cultures, to its place in the modern world.

## Zoroastrianism: Definition, Beliefs and History

In ancient times, the modern country of Iran was named as Persia. The Persian Empire extended over much land from the Aegean Sea to the Aral Sea and to the south past Jerusalem. Although Islam is presently the most important religion of this region, its predecessor, Zoroastrianism, became the base for the organization of major religions, including Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

### Who Was Zoroaster?

Zarathustra, better known as Zoroaster (the Greek version of his name), was a prophet from Persia. He thought that he had sight of a god whom he called Ahura Mazda.

Ahura Mazda, according to the prophet, was the creator of all good things. He was the true god who should be worshiped. The worship of one god is called monotheism. Zoroaster's monotheistic belief were a new movement from the polytheistic religion earlier known in Persia. Zoroastrianism is also dualistic, which means it targets on a two fold nature of the world (good and evil or heaven and hell, for example). Zoroaster believed that the universe was always under the conflict between good and evil.

Zoroaster apparently lived around the sixth century BCE, after which his teachings were followed by the majority of the Persian Empire. Its popularity faded after 637 CE, when Persia was conquered by the Muslims.

### Zoroastrian Beliefs

Now that you understood about Zoroaster, let us learn a little more about his beliefs. In Zoroaster's view, he went to heaven and talked to Ahura Mazda. Ahura Mazda described that he had an enemy named **Angra Mainyu**, who was an evil being.

This is a good example of the religion's dualistic belief style. Zoroaster was told to motivate humanity to select between good and evil, between Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. Although Zoroastrianism isn't fully monotheistic as it allows more than one god, it does try to merge the worship of people under one most powerful god.

Zoroaster taught that each person had the freedom to select good or evil in the choices he or she makes. For example, opting to tell the truth rather than to tell a lie shows that a person has opted good over evil. The prophet also taught that there was an eternal afterlife, and the choices made by each person decided his or her destiny in this afterlife. If a person's good choices and deeds exceeded the bad, he or she would go to heaven. If a person made more bad deeds or did evil deeds, that person would go to one of the many levels of hell, depending on his or her degree of evilness.

Also within his religion, Zoroaster taught the existence of angels, demons and saviors, ideas that can also be found in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Zoroastrians use the **Avesta** as their sacred text. The Avesta contains hymns, rituals and spells against demons.

## What are the principle beliefs of Zoroastrianism?

Zoroastrianism is a monotheist religion i.e. belief in one powerful cosmic entity. That entity, in this case, is Ahura Mazda or 'Lord of Light' in Persian. Other important features of Zoroastrianism consists:

- **Messianism:** A belief in a 'messiah' or saviour who will liberate or save a group of people for eternal salvation.
- **Judgement after death:** It is believed that a soul upon leaving the earth will be judged by Ahura Mazda for reaching to heaven or hell.
- **Existence of heaven and hell:** Zoroastrianism explains well on the existence of heaven and hell.
- **Free will:** A concept that every individual has the freedom to select between different possible courses of deeds.

It is quite possible that the philosophical beliefs said above may have well influenced major religions such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism.

The most significant texts of Zoroastrianism are those of the Avesta. The Avesta also includes the central teachings of Zoroaster known as the Gatha.

A fire temple in Zoroastrianism is the place of worship for Zoroastrians, mostly known Dar-e Mehr (Persian) or Agiyari (Gujarati). In the Zoroastrian religion, fire, together with clean water, are agents of ritual purity.

## History of Zoroastrianism for UPSC

Under the patronage of the Achaemenid Empire in the 6th Century BCE, specifically under Darius I, Zoroastrianism bloomed in modern-day Iran and most of the Mesopotamian region under the control of the empire. The conquerors under Alexander the Great replaced the religion with Hellenistic beliefs even though it did exist in the regions of the former Achaemenid Empire mainly in Cappadocia (Modern-Day Turkey) and the Caucasus. It would not be until the origin of the Parthian Empire in the 3rd century BCE would Zoroastrianism would make a return in the land of its origins.

Zoroastrianism would be aggressively developed under the Sassanid Empire, later coming into fight with Christianised Roman Empire.

Zoroastrianism went into ultimate decline after the Arab invade of Persia. The decline was not sudden but took time over the centuries with the majority of the pre-Islamic population of Iran converting.

In spite of economic and social motives to convert, Zoroastrianism existed in faraway regions of the former Sassanid Empire, but continued discrimination by the populace as well as a deliberate state-policy compelled the remaining to shift to more tolerant lands, particularly

India. Today, though they are very less in number in Iran, India is host to the largest concentration of Zoroastrians in the world.

There are only about 70,000 Parsis in India because the community has a diminishing growth rate, because of low birth rates and migration. Although less in number, they are a highly successful group with many remarkable contributions towards Indian society ranging from the freedom struggle in the field of business and military. Dadabhai Naoroji is famous for laying the foundations of the Indian Independence movement with the creation of the Indian National Congress. Even their military contributions are notable, with the most famous one being that of Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw, who led India to success in the 1971 war with Pakistan.

## About Zoroastrian Fire Temple

Zoroastrian Fire Temple or Yazd Atash Behram and also known as Atashkadeh-e (Fire Temple Yazd) is a 21-meter high building with a lovely pool in the middle of its yard. Every ancient fire temple has to be constructed near a pool. Also, around the yard, you can enjoy the lovely shade of fruit trees. On the front of the building, you can see a beautiful Farvahar statue (a winged deity of the Ahura Mazda). The building itself is a similarity of the Achaemenid architecture style. This place is the main temple of Zoroastrians in Iran and they practice their religion besides this holy fire.

Zoroastrian Fire Temple is situated on the Ayatullah Kashani Avenue and is 6 kilometers (3.7 mi) away from Yazd Airport. As you are in the heart of the ancient city of Yazd, you can reach other tourist attractions like Markar Clock Tower, Dolat Abad Garden, and Amir Chakhmaq Complex.

Fire Temples are places of worship in the Zoroastrian religion. They were also known as *ataskada* ("house of fire") by the Persians but are best known today by their Greek name *pyratheia* (fire temple). They are thought to have derived from the practice of keeping the hearth fire burning throughout the life of the head of a household.

This tradition then grew into the ever-burning flame kept alive in honor of and representing the divine in a place of worship. Early Iranian Religion worshipped a god of fire, Atar, who was the fire itself but transformed earthly fire as a divine entity created by the king of the gods, Ahura Mazda.

## Iconography: Zoroastrianism Art

There is no Zoroastrian art. Be it in the Achaemenid, Arsacid, or Sasanian period, Iranian art was mainly royal. Only one god is described during the first period: Auramazda, as a winged disk drifting above the king. However it is known that Artaxerxes II invented statues of Anahita into her temples, after the Greek fashion. In the Arsacid period, Greek models also served for the representations of Iranian gods ordered by the kings on reliefs or coins. In the Sasanian period, deities were symbolized only in the giving of the royal investiture, as is the case with Ormazd and Anahita at Naqsh-e Rostam, or Ormazd and Mithra at Taq-e Bostan. The frequency of the bullman in Achaemenid and Sasanid iconography may be because of the obviously royal character of this personage: on seals he wears a crown, and the Pahlavi text calls him Gopatshāh, "King of Gopat."

