

PERSIAN RELIGION – Ancient Period

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Overview Several religions shared the salvational hopes of the Persians of the classical period: 600 B.C.E.-650 C.E. As Indo-Europeans, the Persians belonged in their earliest beliefs to the language and belief family of the Aryans of India. Between the fifth century B.C.E., however, and the middle of the 7th century C.E., at the time of the Islamic conquest, the principal religious force in Persia was Zoroastrianism. That religion predominated during the great Persian centuries, while passing on its own remarkable influence to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. It is essential, in interpreting the religion of classical Persia, to understand Zoroastrianism, for it is the unique characterizing trait of the Persia of the classical period.

Who was Zoroaster? Zoroaster--we surmise through the shaky evidence--probably lived in the late 7th and early 6th centuries B.C.E. He seems to have come from an aristocratic family, and probably served as a priest in an already existent cult, which he found in need of reform. In any case he, a little like the Buddha, left his familiar religious setting, and home, and went wandering in search of wisdom. After some ten years of travel he came to a place in religious maturing, in which he began to see visions, and to make contact with his Supreme God, whom he called Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord.) His faith in this deity qualified him, in later interpreters' eyes, as perhaps the first monotheist, or, in the perspective of a noted scholar, 'in the full sense of the word, *the first theologian*.'

What is Zoroastrianism? The religion given to Zoroaster yielded his series of hymns of praise, and discussions of moral and theological issues, now largely lost, which were gathered together under the descriptive name of *gathas*, and ultimately compiled in a sacred scripture called the *Avesta*. The materials collected there contained the groundwork of a religious conception which will in many ways seem familiar to, say, the believer in the Abrahamic religions today: a strong belief in a single male god; a marked awareness of the struggle between good and evil; a belief in heaven and hell; a belief in the free will that permits us to choose life actions which lead us after death into either bliss or punishment; and, in the moral realm, much stress on care for 'God's world, the environment,' and a vivid respect for the good things in life--the 'pleasures of life' and prosperity--the enjoyment of which was a way of showing respect to God.

The Place of Zoroastrianism in Ancient (and modern) Culture By the end of the millennium in which it dominated four potent dynasties of ancient Persia, and riveted the adoration of great kings like Cyrus and Darius, Zoroastrianism was by and large replaced by the Islam that was sweeping over Persia. While the Zoroastrian religion won great adherence in its millennium, and has survived continuously in pockets of the Middle East and India, to this day, at its best it served as a creative precursor movement in a world where monotheisms were about to become the dominant cultural triggers.

Reading

Solomon, Alexander, *The Zoroastrian Faith*, Toronto, 1993.

West, Martin Litchfield, *The Hymns of Zoroaster: A New Translation*, New York, 2016.

Discussion questions

Is Zoroastrianism, like the Abrahamic religions, a 'revealed' religion?

That is, does God speak directly with Zoroaster as though he is an inspired prophet who is capable of co-existing with Him on His level?

What was the administrative structure of the Zoroastrian religion? Who were the *magi*, and how did they function in this system? Was there a spiritual leader, a 'Pope'?

The Greek historian, Herodotus, remarked that the Persians were much more spiritual than the Greeks, because the Persians worshipped a God who was pure spirit, not an embodiment in mortal forms, like the gods of Greek polytheism. Was Herodotus right?