RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD
AN INTRODUCTION TO CULTURE AND MEANING

Lawrence E. Sullivan, General Editor

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CHAPTER 15
Zoroastrianism
Anthony Cerulli

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Introduction

With a history dating back to the second millennium BCE in the steppelands of central Asia and eastern Iran, Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest world religions. In the twenty-first century, Zoroastrians continue their practices across the globe, as in the growing community of Burr Ridge, Illinois, in the western suburbs of Chicago. Yet Zoroastrianism is also one of the least well-known religions in the world today. Underlining the religion’s theology and ritual praxis is a cosmological vision of an ongoing battle in the world between the Truth and the Lie (in the Avestan language azi and dēzy, respectively). Humanity is embroiled in the struggle between these ethical poles, and Zoroastrian doctrine requires that people must choose sides in the conflict. One either follows Truth, the principal Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, the “Wise Lord,” or one follows the Lie, false gods and their ruler, Angra Mainyu, the “Destructive Spirit.” A follower of Ahura Mazda, like his prophet Zarathuṣṭra (see fig. 15.1), is said to be aîtreun, a “sustainer of Truth,” whereas the supporter of Angra Mainyu is drogoant, “possessed by Lie.” The Zoroastrian opposition of Truth and Lie extends to all areas of human activity, depicted as dichotomies of order and disorder, good and evil, light and
TIMELINE

BCE

ca. 1700–1200? The life of Zarathuṣtra is typically placed somewhere in this timeframe
ca. 1500–1000 Composition of the oldest books of the Avesta (or Old Avesta)
ca. 700–550 Period of finalization of the books of the Young Avesta
550–330 Achaemenid Empire (first Zoroastrian or Mazdean empire of Iran)
334–330 Alexander defeats the Achaemenids
247 BCE–224 CE Arsacid (Parthian) Empire (second Zoroastrian empire of Iran)

CE

224–651 Sasanian Empire (third Zoroastrian empire of Iran); during the sixth and seventh centuries, the books of the Avesta are written down
636 Muslim victory at Battle of Qâdisiyya, effectively leading to Muslim rule in Persia
ca. 800–1000 Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts collected and written down
916 Legendary year of the Parsis' emigration from Persia in search of religious freedom, eventually landing in Gujarat, India in 937.

The term Zoroastrianism is a nineteenth-century construct, and like other -isms, it suggests a tradition with teachings and practices that may be ascribed to a single founder—such as Buddhism and the Buddha and Manichaeanism and Mani. In Europe, for centuries the founder of Zoroastrianism has been known as "Zoroaster," from the Greek zoroaster, which is a translation of the Persian zarathuṣtra. Tradition recognizes Zarathuṣtra as a prophet and thus places Zoroastrianism alongside Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as one of the world's prophetic religions. Indeed, many Zoroastrians self-identify as Zarathushtris, "followers of Zarathuṣtra," rather than the traditionally used term in the West, Zoroastrian. In the last and present centuries, prominent religious events, such as the founding of Zoroastrian organizations, have given rise to a new understanding of the term. Ultimately, the term Zoroastrianism should be used to describe a religious tradition that has been practiced for over 3,000 years, rather than a single individual or their teachings.
institutions, such as the World Zoroastrian Organization (WZO), Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe, Inc. (ZTFE), and the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA), have advocated the use of the term Zarathushtri. Among Iranian Zoroastrians, the modern Persian form of the term is preferred, and so Zartoshti is also used to refer to someone who follows the teachings of Zarathuṣtra. This designation is prominent in the title of the important Zoroastrian organization World Alliance of Parsi and Irani Zartoshtis (WAPIZ). Historically, Zoroastrians have also been known as Mazdeans and Mazdayasnis, names based on the Old Iranian word mazdâ-yasna, which means “one who sacrifices to (Ahura) Mazda.” Naturally, then, in literature on the religions of ancient Iran, we also find references to Zoroastrianism as Mazdaism and Mazdayasnianism.

A 2004 *Ferzana Journal* survey estimated the number of Zoroastrians in the world to range from 124,000 to 190,000.² There are Zoroastrian communities all over the globe. A small Zoroastrian minority remains in Iran, where the tradition began, and where, over the last half-century or so, there have been significant movements to celebrate Zarathuṣtra as a homegrown religious reformer who predated the Arabians and Islam. Certain archaic Zoroastrian symbols, such as the winged figure in the sun disk (faravahar—fig. 15.2), have also been recovered from the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire, Persepolis, and recognized in Iran and elsewhere as an important marker of pre-Islamic Iranian religion. In a 2004 FEZANA survey, there were an estimated 25,000 Zoroastrians living in Iran.

By far the highest number of Zoroastrians in the world today live on the Indian subcontinent, where they have had a sizable presence since the tenth century CE. An estimated 70,000 Zoroastrians live in India, where they are known as Parsis. (See the section titled “Parsi” below.)
Apart from Iran and India, there are also small Zoroastrian communities in the United Kingdom, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Pakistan.

Living according to Truth

Zarathustra's teachings in the Gāthās and elsewhere in the Avesta offer insights into the theology and ritual duties of Zoroastrians. Above all, there is a distinct concern for accepting what is good and true and rejecting everything that is evil and false, as seen in the Zoroastrian "declaration of faith" (jivavārān): "I profess myself a Mazda-worshipper, a follower of Zarathustra, rejecting false gods, accepting Ahura's instruction. I am one who praises the Holy Immortals (Ameša Spāras), who worship the Holy Immortals. To Ahura Mazda, the good, rich in treasures, I ascribe all things that are good" (Yasna 12.1).³

To live according to the Truth in Zoroastrianism, one must cultivate an unwavering trust in and earnest commitment to Ahura Mazda, as well as an appreciation for one's spiritual descent from him. For instance, a Middle Persian Zoroastian text, The Select Precepts of the First Sages, explains that every Zoroastrian should be able to address a series of probing, self-reflexive questions by the age of fifteen, the traditional age of initiation into the Zoroastrian community as an adult (see below, "Ritual Practice"). The first five questions and suitable answers are as follows:

Who am I? To whom do I belong? From where have I come? To where shall I go back? From what stock and lineage am I?

I am from the conceptual world; I was not from the visible world. I was created, I did not (always) exist. I belong to Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda), not to Ahreman [Angra Mainyu]. I belong to the deities, not the demons; I belong to the good, not the bad. I am human, not a demon; I am a creature of Ohrmazd, not of Ahreman.⁴

The Select Precepts then recounts a mythological line of descent for humankind extending back to the first man, Gayōmart, the first male-female human couple, Mahre and Mahryane, and a divine mother, Spendarmad, and father, Ohrmazd. Furthermore, it establishes for Zoroastrians a primeval distinction between Ahura Mazda/the Truth and Angra Mainyu/the Lie. Zoroastrians should be attentive to Ahura Mazda at all times in thought, word, and deed, while actively railing against the influence of Angra Mainyu and the bad things he and his cohort of demons produce in the world. To do this, The Select Precepts advises the following mental discipline: "Think of Ohrmazd: that he is, always was, and evermore shall be, his undying sovereignty, his infinity and purity; [and to think of] Ahreman: that he is not and will be annihilated."⁵

Steadfast belief in Ahura Mazda forms the base of the Zoroastrian worldview, which in turn supports the day-to-day duties and practices of the Zoroastrian practitioner and religious community. Among the duties and practices mandated, The Select Precepts discusses marriage, procreation, cultivation of the land, and the respectful treatment of cattle. The faithful are to divide their lives into thirds: a third for religious instruction, a third for agriculture (or commerce), and a third for pleasure. The underlying principle of The Select Precepts is captured in a ubiquitous refrain many Zoroastrians regard as the basic message of Zarathustra's teachings: through good thoughts, good words, and good actions, one will be rewarded by Ahura Mazda and protected from Angra Mainyu.
Zarathustra taught that every person has concrete choices to make in life. Either take up a path of the good and order, the path of Ahura Mazda and aša, or follow the path of evil and disorder, the path of Angra Mainyu and dūrğ. These choices effectively guide Ahura Mazda’s ruling on judgment day, mythologized in the critical passage across Chinvat Bridge and thus the course of a person’s afterlife. The grand goal of the Zoroastrian religion is to equip all good men and women with aša in their thoughts, words, and deeds in order to fend off the forces of dūrğ. People who have lived according to aša cross Chinvat Bridge and go to Ahura Mazda’s “paradise” (pairīdēza), where they live in bliss; people who have lived wickedly fall off the bridge and go to hell, where they live in misery until the end of the world. The end of the world comes in an apocalyptic deluge of fire, at which point the good are rewarded with paradise and the wicked are scalded fiercely in hell for three days until the evil is burnt out of them. After those three days, Zoroastrian tradition says that everything will be forgiven, and a healing of the cosmos will commence. The world will become perfect, the Lie (dūrğ) will be banished forever and never again have power on earth, and humans will be immortal.

The notion of community in Zoroastrianism effectively underlies the pursuit of living according to Truth (aša). At its core lies the question of whether or not outsiders are allowed to convert, or become assimilated, to the tradition. Historically, Zoroastrian identity has been tied to ethnicity and determined strictly along patrilineal lines. Because of a number of factors over the last century, such as the growing number of interfaith marriages among Zoroastrian women and low birthrates in Zoroastrian communities, there has been a precipitous decline in the Zoroastrian population worldwide. In response, over the last century in India Parsee priests have quietly initiated the children of Parsi mothers and non-Zoroastrian fathers. Questions about insider-outsider status and ways to reverse the tide of decreasing numbers are often the most controversial and pressing questions contemporary Zoroastrian communities face today. There is no uniform way for every Zoroastrian community to approach these issues, since Zoroastrianism does not have a universally recognized authoritative body—such as a synod of bishops in Christianity or ulama in Islam—to mandate religious laws. Geopolitical and cultural circumstances each community faces have been and continue to be quite dissimilar, in response to specific needs, different religious institutions regularly take the lead in decision making. This has resulted in a rather broad range of interpretation of scripture and practice among Zoroastrians, which cover the ideological gamut from strict conservatism to radical liberalism. For example, today WAPIZ contends there was never a time in history when conversion to Zoroastrianism was condoned in any fashion, and thus it should not be allowed. Yet increasing numbers of self-identified progressive Zoroastrians call for leniency on issues of interfaith marriage and conversion.

Cornerstone Texts:
Avesta and Gāthās

Apart from countries where Zoroastrianism has been present for a long time, such as Iran and India, basic awareness of the religion is often limited to scholars, especially philologists and historians of religion. Perhaps the most famous European intellectual to bring attention to Zoroastrianism and Zarathustra in modern Western history was the German philosopher
Friedrich Nietzsche. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885), Nietzsche used the character of Zarathustra “as a philosopher and poet . . . to engineer an epistemic break in the received history of Greek philosophy and Christian morality” in Europe. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra ran up against Western religious and cultural giants like Plato, Jesus, Descartes, and Kant. Nietzsche famously had Zarathustra proclaim that “God is dead” (*Gott ist tot*) to advance a new way of thinking about the frontiers of human morality and the Judeo-Christian concepts of good and evil. For Nietzsche, Judeo-Christian morality was imprecise, hence problematic, and neatly juxtaposed with Zarathustra’s overdetermined socioethical worldview of contrasting light and darkness, Truth and Lie, order and disorder, and so on.

For non-Zoroastrians, knowledge of Zarathustra’s teachings come largely from extant translations of scripture and, to a lesser extent, scholarly writings and popular media. The Zoroastrian textual corpus is rather immense. The *Avesta*, and within it the *Gāthās*, are the textual cornerstones of the tradition. The *Avesta* is a collection of books that are written in a language called Avestan and that go back to the second millennium BCE. The *Avesta* also contains translations of and commentaries on the oldest sources, written in a Middle Persian language called Pahlavi, which are known as the Zand (*Avesta*).

The portions of the *Avesta* available today amount to about one-third of what was originally produced in ancient Iran. Our earliest description of the *Avesta* is in book 8 of the ninth-tenth-century CE Middle Persian text, *Dēnkard* ("Acts of the Religion"), in which twenty-one books are enumerated by name and category. The books are mostly liturgical manuals dealing with the *yasna*, "sacrificial worship." The *Avesta* is generally thought to have been composed in two historical stages of eastern-Iranian language development: Avestic or Old Avestan (in which the five *Gāthās* were composed) and Younger Avestan (the language in which the literature predominantly dealing with the *yasna* was composed). The Avestic portions of the *Avesta* are traditionally recognized as compositions of Zarathustra; most of the Younger Avestan literature is presented as direct revelations from Ahura Mazda to the prophet. Originally handed down orally through the ages, the *Avesta* was put to writing in the Avestan alphabet, which was invented solely for this purpose, around the fifth century CE. The following is a list of the various sections and books of the *Avesta*.

The *Gāthās* are the five “hymns” (also sometimes translated as "poems" or "songs") attributed to Zarathustra and addressed to Ahura Mazda. In total, they amount to seventeen different hymns, which are arranged in the *Yasna* (Y) in five categories according to their different meters. The *Gāthās* are not hymns of proselytization or a defense of the prophet’s religious vision but are, rather, a set of inspirational songs meant to inspire and evoke already known theological ideas in worshipers of Ahura Mazda. Many aspects of the *Gāthā* language, such as syntax and vocabulary, have for centuries defied scholars’ attempts at translation and interpretation. The discovery and decipherment of the Younger Avesta and the Pahlavi Zand (*Avesta*) provide some clues to its often cryptic meaning, and a handful of recent publications have made great advancements in revealing the meaning of Zoroastrian Scripture to modern audiences.

**Historical Development**

Nomadic Iranians arrived in southern central Asia and eastern Iran (around the north of present-day Afghanistan) circa 1500 BCE. The
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Avesta</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Yasna</strong></td>
<td>This is the name of the Zoroastrian texts used for recitation during religious rituals; this portion of the Avesta contains the Gāthās.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vispered</strong></td>
<td>(&quot;[Prayer to All the Patrons&quot;] This is a ritual text dedicated to the six seasonal feasts and the seven holy days of obligation; special attention is given to the master of all patrons, Ahura Mazda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Khorda Avesta</strong></td>
<td>(&quot;Little Avesta&quot;) This is a four-part miscellany of prayers to various deities: (1) introductory materials, citing portions of the Yasna; (2) five “Praises” or “Prayers” (Nyêdyêns) to the sun, Mithra, fire, moon, and waters; (3) five “Parts of the Day” (Gāths): hymns praising the deities associated with morning, midday, afternoon, and night; (4) “Blessings” (Afringâns) recited on behalf of the dead at the five days at the end of the year during festivals and to begin and end summer.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sirâzas</strong></td>
<td>“Invocations” to the deities associated with the thirty days of the month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yâsts</strong></td>
<td>An assemblage of twenty-one prose hymns to the central Zoroastrian deities (yazatas), such as the Amesha Spenta, Aša, Mithra, Haoma, the Fravâši, and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vidêvdâd</strong></td>
<td>(&quot;Law Repudiating the Demons&quot;) A twenty-two chapter text on purity and purification rituals; important mythological stories are also in this work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assorted Smaller Religious Texts</strong></td>
<td>On the afterlife and the soul; eschatology; law books on priestly activity and institutional organization of the religion; a catechistic manual; Zarathuštra’s instructions to his patron Vištāspa; and Vištāspa’s reply to Zarathuštra.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assorted Fragments</strong></td>
<td>These are fragments remaining from lost and existing Avestan sources in Middle Persian (Pahlavi) translations. A notable fragment is the Frâhang-i aîm ēk, which is a lexicon of Avestan words and phrases and their Pahlavi translations.</td>
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### The Gāthās

1. “Song of New Life” (Ahunavâlit Gâthâ)—Y. 28–34
2. “Song of Wishes” (Ustavâlit Gâthâ)—Y. 43–46
3. “Song of the Life-Giving Spirit” (Spštâmanyu Gâthâ)—Y. 47–50
4. “Song of the Good Command” (Vohušatru Gâthâ)—Y. 51
5. “Song of the Good Ritual” (Vâhistôiti Gâthâ)—Y. 53

earliest texts of the Avesta were originally composed among these people at this time. Texts in Young Avestan began to emerge around the ninth century BCE, continuing until approximately the fourth century BCE. Zoroastrianism was well established in central and parts of southern Asia by the time the Persian king Cyrus overthrew the Median Empire and founded the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550–330 BCE), which he ruled for nearly thirty years (see fig. 15.3). Since the nineteenth century CE, when the royal inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings were deciphered, scholars have vigorously debated about whether or not the Achaemenid kings and their subjects were
Zoroastrians. There is evidence in the inscriptions the Achaemenid kings commissioned that suggests the Achaemenids envisioned and actively sought to uphold a cosmology consonant with the *Avesta*. For example, the inscriptions refer to the *Avesta’s* dualistic vision of a world constituted by followers of the Truth or the Lie. Furthermore, the inscriptions portray the power and authority of the Achaemenid kings as entirely ordained by Ahura Mazda.

Inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings Darius and Xerxes clearly state that worshiping Ahura Mazda will bring rewards in the present lifetime and after death (see fig. 15.4). Iconography like the king standing before the sacred fire with the winged figure floating above (see fig. 15.2) suggests the Achaemenid kings envisioned themselves to be crucial intermediaries between humanity and Ahura Mazda, supreme sacrificers in their own right just as Zarathustra was.

For many people outside of academia, the idea that Zoroastrianism (or Mazdaism) was the official religion of three Persian empires—the Achaemenid Empire, the Arsacid (Parthian) Empire, and the Sasanian Empire—is far less controversial.\(^\text{14}\)

While Zoroastrianism was state-sponsored religion, because it was historically associated with Iranian ethnicity, many non-Iranian subjects did not convert to the religion. As a result, Zoroastrians across the three Persian empires coexisted alongside sizable groups of Jews, Mandaeans, Christians, Manichaeans, and, in eastern Persia, Buddhists. In 636 ce, at the
Fig. 15.5 Investiture of the first Sasanian king, Ardashir I, by Ohrmazd at Naqsh-e Rustam. Ardashir is on the left; his horse stands over the Arsacid ruler, Ardashir I. Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda), whose horse stands atop Ahreman (Angra Mainyu), hands Ardashir a circular ring, which symbolizes sovereignty.

Fig. 15.6 Map of Persia, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Beloochistan [sic] prepared by Samuel Augustus Mitchell in 1886. In Persia, note the three locations, from north to south, of Khurasan, Yazd (Yezd), and Kerman, which factor predominately in the emigration story of the Persis from Iran to India.
Battle of Qadisiyya, Muslims conquered Iran, forcing many Zoroastrians to hide their religious affiliation, convert, or emigrate.

Zarathuštra

Details of Zarathuštra’s life have been debated for centuries. Some people have argued that he was a poet by profession. Others have called him a prophet or priest. Still others refer to him as a merchant. In all likelihood, he occupied a combination of these professions during his lifetime. In the Gāthās, Zarathuštra is called a mantāra, “one who possesses sacred utterances [of Ahura Mazda].” While many Zoroastrian practitioners recognize Zarathuštra as the composer of the Gāthās, some scholars have suggested that he heard these hymns rather than composed them. The literature is quite clear that he was a gifted sacrificer to Ahura Mazda and that others should follow his example.16 A suffix on
the name of his father, Pourušāspa ("he who has grey horses"), naturally indicates that his father might have worked in an industry tied to horses. Zarathuštra's own name contains the word for "camel," uṣṭra. These nominal markers have led some to suggest that Zarathuštra was from a merchant or agriculturalist class, not a priestly class, and that he chose, rather than inherited, a poetic-priestly profession. A common (though contested) translation for the Persian zarathuštra is "golden camel." This name could be understood as a kind of foreshadowing of his prophetic career as the reliable and tireless carrier, qualities identified with camels, of Ahura Mazda's golden or dazzling message. Zarathuštra's family name was Spitāma, which William Malandra has translated as "brilliant or aggressive strength." 17

The dates of Zarathuštra's lifetime are unclear. Some place his life as early as 1700 BCE, while others place his lifetime a millennium later. Looking at the connected linguistic histories of ancient Iran and India, scholars have noted similarities of language, mythology, and ritual found in the Avesta and the Indian Rig Veda to posit that Zarathuštra lived around 1200 BCE. The Rig Veda has enjoyed more attention from scholars over the last two centuries than the Avesta has, for unlike the Avesta the entire ten books of the Rig Veda are intact today. It has therefore been dated, not to mention its meanings have been amply pored over and discussed, with more certainty than the Iranian materials. Indologists usually date the Rig Veda conservatively around 1400–1200 BCE.

Zarathuštra's homeland is also uncertain. He might have been from the Caucasus region, eastern Iran, or central Asian countries such as Bactria and Margiana. Details of his childhood are vague. His mother's name was Dugdówā, and a common story passed down through tradition states that when Zarathuštra was born he was laughing. There are some miracle stories from his childhood, which narrate his thwarting of demonic influences among humankind. Most accounts of his life focus on the years between ages thirty and forty when he relocated to the "land of the Aryans," or Iran. In the Young Avesta, Zarathuštra is said to have had a wife, Hwōwi, and several sons. After relocating to Iran, he had seven revelatory encounters with Ahura Mazda and other various divine figures that caused him to accept the Wise Lord's religion.

The Avestan term for "religion" is daēnā, which in the Gāthās means "good vision" and is closely associated with the Truth (aša). The term daēnā also refers to one's conscience or "self"; the term is also often mythologized as Daēnā, the goddess of religion. In the Yasna, daēnā is recognized as an object of veneration alongside the speech and doctrine of the prophet: "We worship Zarathuštra's words, we worship Zarathuštra's religion [daēnā], we worship Zarathuštra's choice and doctrine" (Y. 16:2). 18

After accepting the religion of Ahura Mazda, Zarathuštra proclaimed it publicly. In the course of his evangelization, he experienced many failures and setbacks. In time, a high-ranking "king" (kavi—also "patron") named Višāspa, mentioned in the Gāthās as someone of "good thought," converted to Zarathuštra's religion. As Zarathuštra's patron, Višāspa was instrumental in helping the prophet spread the message of the Wise Lord.

By most accounts, Zarathuštra lived until the age of seventy-seven. The manner in which he died, however, is debated. In some texts, such as the Saddar Bundahēi, he met a quiet and natural death in Iran. Other texts, such as the Dēnkard and Greater Bundahīšn, state that a
man named Bratrērēs, a member of the karapan priestly class from Tür, assassinated him.\textsuperscript{19}

**Zoroastrian Pantheon**

Ahura Mazda is the creator all things material and conceptual.\textsuperscript{20} The goodness and wisdom of Ahura Mazda are underscored in the sacred scripture far more than his omnipotence.\textsuperscript{21} Ahura Mazda’s first creations were the seven Amaša Spāntas, or “Holy Immortals.”

Curiously Ahura Mazda himself is also one of septet he created, namely, Spānta Mainyu. As seen in the chart below, each Amaša Spānta presides over and protects one of the seven universal creations in Zoroastrian cosmology. In the Gāthās, the six Amaša Spāntas other than Ahura Mazda are indistinguishable from the parts of creation with which they are associated. Each Amaša Spānta also represents an aspect of Ahura Mazda and an aspect of the good Zoroastrian devotee. These seven deities also operate as mediators between the faithful and Ahura Mazda. (See chart below.)

The primary symbol of Zoroastrianism is fire (āta). Fire is especially associated with the Holy Immortal, Aša Vahišta (the Best Order), who among the holy septet is the most connected to ritual activity, particularly the “offering to fire” (atav-zahr). After fire, water is the next most purifying substance in Zoroastrianism. The significance of fire in the tradition is possibly linked to ancient Iranian fire cults and Mithra, the god of covenants, oaths, and truths. Mithra was later incorporated into the Zoroastrian pantheon, where he had retained a place of importance.

**Ritual Practice**

At the core of Zoroastrian ritual practice is āta and its upkeep. The task of keeping āta in one’s every thought, word, and deed extends to every aspect of a practitioner’s life. Devotees demonstrate āta through: telling in interpersonal relationships and business dealings, non-violent engagements with nonhuman animals and the environment, as well as honest thinking in one’s private time. Zoroastrianism is in this sense a way of life. But there are also specific rituals and initiation rites that must be performed in special places and under the command of religious authorities. The primary place of worship is the fire temple, called an Agiary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Amaša Spāntas</th>
<th>Holy Immortals</th>
<th>Earthly symbol</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xšatra Vaiyra</td>
<td>Well-Deserved Command</td>
<td>sky; pestle and mortar; flint knife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haurvatāt</td>
<td>Wholeness</td>
<td>water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spānta Armaiti</td>
<td>Life-Giving Humility</td>
<td>earth; ritual enclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amaretāt</td>
<td>Long Life</td>
<td>plants (esp. haoma)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vohu Manah</td>
<td>Good Thought</td>
<td>cattle; sacrificial beast or offering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spānta Mainyu</td>
<td>Holy Spirit</td>
<td>the just man and Zoroastrian priest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aša Vahišta</td>
<td>Best Truth or Order</td>
<td>fire; ritual fire</td>
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in India and Atashkadeh in Iran. Specially trained priests look after these temples and their grounds. Their duties include the upkeep of the sacred fires housed in the temples, ensuring they burn in perpetuity. Today there are only eight fire temples that house the highest grade of consecrated fire, the “Fire of Victory” (Ataš Bahrâm): seven are in India (in Gujarat and Mumbai) and one is in Iran (in Yazd). To install the fire, thirty-two specially trained priests, called dasturs, perform a yearlong ritual that brings together and purifies sixteen different kinds of lower-grade fires.

Most archaeological evidence suggests that Zoroastrians constructed fire temples in all manner of sizes and shapes throughout history. Today fire temples are generally nondescript, with limited ornamentation on their exteriors. The principal purpose of a temple is not iconographical. It exists to lodge the sacred fire. In addition to the sacred fire, an active temple will almost always have a tank or stream of water on its grounds where the final act of the yarman (“sacrifice”) is performed in an “offering to water” (āb-zahr).

Zoroastrianism also has important rituals and prohibitions associated with the life cycle. For example, after giving birth, some Zoroastrian families require new mothers to refrain from all religious activities. New mothers are not allowed to go to the fire temple or funerals for a period up to forty days, when postpartum
bleeding is typically thought to have ended. Among Indian Parsis, a naming ceremony on the sixth day after a child is born is common. Iranian Zoroastrians do not observe this rite. Names for new children in all Zoroastrian communities are often taken from key figures in the Avesta, Shāhnāma (the national epic of Iran), and from prominent family members.

The Zoroastrian initiation ceremony marks the religious coming of age of a young boy or girl and is traditionally celebrated at the age of fifteen. Modern Zoroastrian initiation is called 
\textit{navjote} among Indian Parsis and \textit{sedreh pushi} among Iranian Zoroastrians. 
\textit{Navjote} often occurs at a younger age, sometime before puberty between the ages of seven and eleven, while \textit{sedreh pushi} occurs a bit closer to the traditional age of fifteen.\textsuperscript{29} The initiation ceremony is the same for boys and girls; it emphasizes a young person's ability to appreciate the pervasive presence of \textit{asa} and \textit{draj} in the world, and initiates make a commitment to take responsibility for their thoughts, words, and deeds. At an initiation ceremony, a priest welcomes the young boy or girl into the community publicly. He gives the initiate a sacred rope (\textit{kusti}), which should be wrapped three times around the waist over a white cotton undergarment shirt (\textit{sudreh}). The cotton material of the shirt is significant, for it is a marker of the Holy Immortal “Long Life” (Amarartāt), who is associated with plentitude and the constant cycle of life. The \textit{kusti}-rope must be made from the hair of a lamb, goat, or camel, and it is woven together in seventy-two strands, representing the sections of the \textit{Yasna}. A priest must consecrate the \textit{kusti}-rope and \textit{sudreh}-shirt, and both should be worn every day. The rope should be tied and retied seven times a day, each time accompanied by prayers. The daily multiple wrapping of the rope three times around the waist is seen as a reminder to perform good thoughts, good speech, and good actions day to day. When the \textit{sudreh} and the \textit{kusti} wear out, they should be replaced.

Over the past three centuries, Zoroastrianism's funerary rites for the disposal of a corpse have attracted a great deal of attention, especially from Western scholars and travelers in India and Iran. In Zoroastrian theology, corpses are regarded as highly polluting. Death is seen as “a triumph for evil,” when “the corpse demon

\begin{figure}[h!]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{The initiation ceremony, known among Parsis as \textit{navjote}, loosely meaning “new member of the religious community,” and among Iranian Zoroastrians as \textit{sedreh pushi}, “putting on the sudreh-shirt.” In this photo, a Zoroastrian priest officiates a navjote.}
\end{figure}
... was believed to rush into the body and contaminate all that came in contact with it."\textsuperscript{25} Since dead bodies are impure, they should be handled with great care so as not spread their contamination. This includes not interring bodies in the earth, which would contaminate the Holy Immortal linked to the soil, “Life-Giving Humility” (Spānta Ārmaitī). A well-known example of how to dispose of a corpse properly occurs in the \textit{Vidēvdād}:

"Where, O Ahura Mazda, shall we carry the body of a dead man, where lay it down?" Then said Ahura Mazda: “On the highest places, Spitāma Zarathuṣtra, so that most readily corpse-eating dogs or corpse-eating birds shall perceive it. There these Mazda-worshippers shall fasten it down, this corpse, by its feet and hair, [with pegs] of metal or stone or horn. If they do not, corpse-eating dogs and corpse-eating birds will come to drag these bones on to water and plants."\textsuperscript{26}

A ritually impure corpse should be disposed of in a manner that is least likely to corrupt the good creations of Ahura Mazda, which includes water and plants. After the flesh of the corpse has been eaten and picked over by dogs and birds (two animals mentioned often in the \textit{Vidēvdād} and other Middle Persian texts in this capacity), sunshine further purifies the corpse of its impure properties, including hair, nails, and bodily fluids. Afterward, the bones are collected and buried. The \textit{Vidēvdād} also mentions the use of a special rooftop location on a house
Fig. 15.11  A dakhma in Yazd, Iran.

Fig. 15.12  A dakhma in Diu, India.
called a *dakha*ma, which in 1832 Robert Murphy famously called a “tower of silence.”

Circular towerlike structures meant for laying out the dead for exposure to the sunlight and vultures, *dakha*ma are still used among Parsis in Mumbai, India, and Karachi, Pakistan. In recent years, some Mumbaikars have criticized the practice as epidemiologically unsafe, since the birds feeding on the corpses often transport body parts throughout Mumbai. Increasing development of high-rise buildings overlooking *dakha*ma rooftops has also brought much negative attention to the funerary practice. What is more, southern Asian vultures that have traditionally cleansed and disposed of the polluting parts of exposed corpses are no longer as common in greater Mumbai as they once were, leaving corpses left on *dakha*ma rooftops unsanitized.

**Parsi**

The Parsis in India constitute the largest population of Zoroastrians in the world today. There are Parsi communities all over South Asia, but the major centers are in and around Mumbai and the state of Gujarat. Mumbai is home to the Bombay Parsi Panchayat, a mostly charitable organization that also speaks on behalf of the worldwide Parsi community. Parsis in South Asia descend from the families of Iranian Zoroastrians who left Persia around the eighth to ninth centuries CE in search of religious freedom following the Muslim conquest of Iran.

The legendary story of the Parsi migration abroad is contained in Bahram K.Q. Sanjana’s late-sixteenth-century work, the *Story of Sanjan* (*Qesse-ye Sanjan*). According to Parsi tradition, in the early tenth century, a small band of Zoroastrians from the town of Sanjan in southwestern Khorasan (see fig. 15.6) decided to flee Iran and persecution at the hands of the then dominant Muslims. Following the guidance of an astrologer, they made their way to the port of Hormuzd on the Persian Gulf, where they obtained a ship that took them to the Indian island of Diu. They stayed on Diu for nineteen years before resettling on the coast of Gujarat in western India, where they became known as Parsis, which means “someone from Persia” (see fig. 15.7). Most Parsis believe the emigration occurred in 916 CE and that the Parsis landed on Gujarati soil in 937 CE.

According to the *Story of Sanjan*, a Gujarati king, Jadav Rana, met the Zoroastrians who emigrated from Iran. Jadav Rana eventually granted the Persians permission to settle permanently and practice their religion freely in Gujarat. Some legends about the encounter of the local Hindu ruler and the Persian Zoroastrians say that the Parsis had to abide by five conditions to stay in India:

1. Parsi priests would have to explain their religion to the king.
2. All Parsis would have to abandon their Persian language and adopt the local language.
3. Parsi women would have to give up their traditional dress for the Indian sari.
4. Parsi men would have to lay down their weapons.
5. All Parsis would have to follow local marriage customs.

In general, the history of the Parsis in Gujarat is relatively peaceful. Indeed, from quite early on in their new Indian homeland, the Parsis excelled in mercantilism, especially in textile trading. They coexisted rather well alongside the Hindus in Gujarat, and when the Mughals arrived in India (ca. 1526 CE)
and successfully ruled vast regions of the subcontinent, Parsis fought hard but in vain with Hindus against the Muslims. Yet Muslim rule in India was not as difficult on the Parsis as Muslim rule in Iran had been on Zoroastrians, and the Parsis in time thrived as a religious community and in business during the Mughal Empire.

To assist the newly established Zoroastrian communities in India, between the mid-fifteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, Zoroastrian priests in Iran (from Yazd and Kerman—see fig. 15.6) regularly sent letters to the Parsis in Gujarat regarding practical religious matters, such as ritual practices, marriage and divorce, purity and pollution, associations with non-Zoroastrians, and the like. These catechetical epistles are known as the Persian Ravayats.

Following the arrival of British traders in the seventeenth century, trade commerce in South Asia increased, and Parsis thrived as middlemen between Europeans and Indian agriculturalists, merchants, and landowners. The British established a base in Bombay (now Mumbai), and the Parsis too made this city the center of their community. They quickly became renowned especially for their shipbuilding abilities. A prominent Parsi shipbuilder from Surat, Lowji Nusserwanji Wadia (1702–1774), is seen as the architect of the Bombay dockyards, and the Wadia family of shipwrights and naval architects went on to control the docks until the nineteenth century.

Other Parsi families followed the Wadias’ lead, and in 1939 Hormusji D. M. Darukhanawala published Parsi Lustre on Indian Soil to document Parsi entrepreneurs and their achievements. Parsis have been influential in Bombay, western India, and on the world business market, particularly in commerce, banking, education, and industry of all sorts. Two of the most famous Parsi businessmen and Indian cultural leaders were Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata (1839–1904), the famous industrialist and founder of what became the Tata Group of companies, and Dadabhaj Naoroji (1825–1917), cofounder of the Indian National Congress, who famously coined the term swaraj, “self-rule,” that Mahatma Gandhi later deployed in India’s Independence Movement.

Factions developed among Parsis in the nineteenth century about how to best implement the teachings of Zarathushtra on the Indian subcontinent. For example, the Ilm-I Khshnoom movement adapted the teachings of Zarathushtra to the tenets of occult philosophy and Theosophy (with an emphasis on Tibetan esoteric Buddhism). These Parsis followed the teachings of Behramshah Shroff and the uniquely Indian religious principles of Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu design, such as vegetarianism, recognition of rebirth and redeath, among other things. Ilm-I Khshnoom especially gained adherents after the British left South Asia. At the same time, there are many Parsis who follow a more liberal, Protestant-style interpretation of Zoroastrianism. These Parsis were directly influenced by the presence of Western-style education in India brought by British colonialism.

**A View of Creation and Divinity**

We close this chapter with an excerpt from a hymn in the Gāthās (Yasna 44.3–16, from the “Song of Wishes,” Ustavaiti Gāthā). This passage deals with the Zoroastrian view of creation and the divinity of the world, and it highlights Zarathushtra’s directness and inquisitiveness before Ahura Mazda.
(3) This I ask Thee, tell me truly, Lord. Who in the beginning, at creation, was Father of Order (Aša)? Who established the course of sun and stars? Through whom does the moon wax, then wane? This and yet more, O Mazda, I seek to know. (4) This I ask Thee, tell me truly, Lord. Who has upheld the earth from below, and the heavens from falling? Who (sustains) the waters and plants? Who harnessed swift steeds to wind and clouds? Who, O Mazda, is Creator of Good Purpose? (5) This I ask Thee, tell me truly, Lord. What craftsman created light and darkness? What craftsman created both sleep and activity? Through whom exist dawn, noon and eve, which remind the worshipper of his duty? . . . (7) This I ask Thee, tell me truly, Lord. Who fashioned honoured Devotion together with Power? Who made the son respectful in heed to the father? By these (questions), O Mazda, I help (men) to discern Thee as Creator of all things through the Holy Spirit. . . . (16) This I ask Thee, tell me truly, Lord. Who will be victorious to protect through Thy teaching those who are the progeny in my house? As Healer of the world, promise to us a judge. Then let Hearkening come to him with Good Purpose, O Mazda—to him whomsoever Thou dost wish.29

**STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Who was Zarathushtra, and in which part of the world did he likely live? Discuss Zarathushtra's role in the history of Zoroastrianism, and explain why he is often compared to important religious figures in other world religions, such as Moses and Muhammad. Are such comparisons defensible? Why or why not?

2. Zoroastrianism presents a fairly clear view of the nature of reality, and the religion accordingly offers certain straightforward choices for Zoroastrian practitioners concerning how best to live in the world. Using some of the terminology presented in the chapter, how would you describe Zoroastrian cosmology and ethics?

3. Who are the Parsis? Identify two to three points in Parsi history that highlight some of the ways in which their experiences and practices of Zoroastrianism are different from those of Iranian Zoroastrians.

**KEY TERMS**

- Agiary
- Ahreman
- Ahura Mazda
- Armaš Sapatās
- Angra Mainyu
- aša
- ašāvan
- ātār
- Āta Bahram
- Atashkadeh
- ātāš-zōhr
- Avesta
- Dēnkard
- dragvant
- druj
- fravaši
- Gāthās
- gētīg
- kustī
- manthra
mēnōg
navjote
Ohrmazd
Parsi
Persian Rivayats
sasoṃa
Shāhnaṣma
sudreh
Yasna
Zarathushtra

† FOR FURTHER READING

† NOTES
1. The name Ahura Mazda has long been translated into English as “Wise Lord.” In his numerous pioneering works on ancient Iranian religions, Prods Oktor Skjæerva has argued that “All-knowing Lord” is a better and more literal rendering. See, for example, The Spirit of Zoroastrianism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 13.
3. This passage from the Yasna is a slightly edited version of Mary Boyce’s translation in Zoroastrians: Their Beliefs and Practices (London: Routledge, 1979), 35.

5. Ibid, 9.

6. The standard English translation of Avestan paitāda and Old Persian parynda is "paradise." Bruce Lincoln has convincingly shown, however, that the original Persian meaning of these terms was literally "walled enclosure" and, generally, "walled garden or game park." These enclosures held important religious significance, he argues, and they were built throughout the Achaemenid Empire. See Religion, Empire, and Torture: The Case of Achaemenian Persia, with a Postscript on Abu Ghraib (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 78–80, 83–84.


8. For a compelling radio documentary on in the dwindling population of Indian Zoroastrians, i.e., the Parsis, and how the community at the turn of the twenty-first century was struggling with the ebb and flow of its numbers, consult Michael Sullivan, "Parsis," All Things Considered, National Public Radio, 28 December 2000, available at www.npr.org. For a concise overview of the ambit of religious political views in Zoroastrian communities today, see Stausberg, Zoroastrianism and Zarathustra, 5–6.

9. For example, the work of Thomas Hyde, a late-seventeenth-early-eighteenth-century scholar of Oriental Studies at Oxford, especially Veterum Parsarum et Pathorum et Medorum religionis historia, presented many in the West with a first glimpse of the ancient religion of Ahura Mazda and Zarathustra. Not long after Hyde’s famous study, the work of A. H. Anquetil du Perron, a young French scholar who traveled to Gujarat, India, in the mid-eighteenth century to collect manuscripts and translate the Vendidad ("The Law Repudiating the Demons"), was very influential in bringing knowledge of Zoroastrianism and Zarathustra to people in the West.


12. Foremost in this regard is Skjærvø’s The Spirit of Zoroastrianism, which contains a number of masterful translations from the Avestan and Pahlavi sources.


14. Alexander the Great overthrew King Darius and the Achaemenid Empire, which ushered in Hellenistic rule (the Seleucid Empire) in Persia for almost a century (ca. 331–247 BCE).


16. That said, some scholars have suggested that Zarathustra is a mythical figure, and that a human founder of Zoroastrianism never existed. See, for example, the character analysis of Zarathustra in Jean Kellens, Essays on

17. On the possible etymology of Zarathustra’s name, see William Malandra, An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and Achaemenid Inscriptions (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 17–18.

18. Religion here and in later verses of the Yasna is something that, as Michael Stausberg has suggested, “can be ‘chosen,’ it can be ‘praised,’ it can be ‘confessed,’ one can ‘gird’ oneself with it, hear’ (or ‘understand’) it, ‘offer oneself’ to it, but also ‘renounce’ it. One has to think, speak and act according to the đēnā. And one also has to ‘remember it’.” (Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism, 32). An excellent study of the Middle Persian (i.e., Pahlavi) concept of đēnā in Zoroastrianism may be found in Yuhان Sohrab-Dinshaw Vavaina, “Enumerating the Đēn: Textual Taxonomies, Cosmological Deixis, and Numerological Speculations in Zoroastrianism,” History of Religions 50, no. 2 (November, 2010), 111–43.


20. The terms “material” (gēūg) and “conceptual” (mēnēg) are very important and much discussed in Zoroastrian theology and cosmology.

21. In the literature, in fact, Ahura Mazda’s power is frequently portrayed as limited by the forces, activities, and demonic cohort of Angra Mainyu, the evil principle in Zoroastrianism.

22. Initiation into the Zoroastrian priesthood among the Parsis can begin as early as age nine. There is a scholarly component to the process of becoming a Zoroastrian priest, involving the memorization of religious texts and purification rituals, and it can take up to three years to complete. After this initial stage, one is ordained with the title of Ervad. An Ervad priest is not entitled to work as a professional ritual priest, however. To perform professional ritual activities in the fire temples, a second ordination is required, at which stage one receives the title of Mobed. Above the level of Mobed is Dastur, which is the highest level of priesthood in the Zoroastrian tradition. Dastur priests are frequently consulted on issues of theology and ritual performance; on special occasions, they officiate marriage and funeral ceremonies. Dastur priests typically supervise the work of Mobed priests at fire temples with the Āta Bahārm fire. The New Persian term dāstur (MP. dstwr) has many meanings. Among other things, the term means “person with authority (or power).” It most often refers to authority or power of a religious nature and is frequently qualified by the phrase đēn āgāh, “well-versed in religious matters.”


24. Ibid., 148.


26. Ibid.,

27. The original meaning of the Avestan root dakhma- is unknown. Mary Boyce has suggested that “the Zoroastrian word ‘dakhma’ (coming through ‘dafa’ from an IE verbal root dhēmbh ‘bury’) meant originally, it seems, a grave.” Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices (London: Routledge, 1979), 13–14.
