**Zoroastrianism**



Zoroastrianism, an influential religion combining elements of dualism and monotheism to form its complicated cosmology, developed in [Persia](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi) in ancient times. Although it has suffered tremendous decline over the centuries, Zoroastrianism continues to have fervent adherents today.

**Zoroaster's Teachings**

The religion of Zoroastrianism takes its name from the sixth-century-[BCE](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi) founder and [prophet](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi) of the religion, [Zoroaster](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi). Although initially a priest in the ancient polytheistic religion of the Persians, Zoroaster began to preach against that tradition. According to Zoroaster, [Ahura Mazda](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi), the primary god of the Persian pantheon, had revealed himself to be the only deity worth worshipping. On receiving those revelations, Zoroaster began to compose the Gathas, which was part of the canon of sacred scriptures called the [Avesta](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi).

The Gathas were 17 hymns that reflected Zoroaster's new teachings and lay the foundation for Zoroastrian ideas about the nature of the universe. In the Gathas, Ahura Mazda is portrayed as the sole creator of all, including heaven and earth. Ahura Mazda, who created morality, nature, light, and dark, also created the Amesha Spentas, or "beneficial immortals," who worked to do his bidding. As angelic reflections of Ahura Mazda, the Amesha Spentas included Spenta Mainyu, the holy spirit; Vohu Manah, righteous spirit; Apenta Armaiti, devotion; Haurvatat, wholeness; Asha Vahishta, truth and justice; Ameretat, immortality; and Khshathra Vairya, desirable dominion. The attributes of those beings are considered to be the moral compass for Zoroastrian believers striving to emulate them. By achieving those behaviors, Zoroastrians believe that they are closer to Ahura Mazda himself and to realizing the desirable dominion reflected in Khshathra Vairya.

**Important Concepts**



By framing Ahura Mazda as the sole creator of the universe, Zoroastrianism moved away from [polytheism](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi) of the ancient Persians. However, there is a strong dualism in Zoroastrian theology, reflected in its origin story and cosmology. According to the Gathas, at the beginning of time, Ahura Mazda gave birth to two diametrically opposed spirits, Ohrmazd and [Ahriman](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi). (Some traditions contend that Ahura Mazda and Ohrmazd are the same being, with the latter name being a corruption of the former.) Ohrmazd chose to follow the path of good and light, while Ahriman chose to support all that was evil in the universe. The two forces are thus pitted against each other in a battle between supreme good and supreme evil. Humans, through their ethical and moral decisions and actions, also take part in the struggle; according to Zoroaster, those who fought for all that is good were members of a kingdom of justice and truth, while those who promoted the cause of evil were members of the kingdom of the lie.

The cosmic war of Zoroastrianism is richly spelled out in scriptures that are highly suggestive of the end of the world. Upon death, the soul of every human will pass over a bridge that leads to Ahura Mazda, who will judge a person according to his/her position taken during life in the battle between good and evil. Those who fought on the side of Ohrmazd will spend the afterlife in bliss, while those who sided with Ahriman will be tortured.

The scriptures also explain that, when the battle between Ohrmazd and Ahriman reaches its conclusion and the evil forces are destroyed forever, the world and universe as it had previously existed will be purged. In its place, a renewed world will emerge, and evil will no longer exist. Then, the souls of those who sided with Ohrmazd will be reunited with their restored bodies in a form of resurrection. Humans will live in a timeless earthly splendor, without the fears of evil that had plagued them before the end of time.

**Rituals**

Zoroaster also established new ideas about ritual and daily life. One of the notable aspects of Zoroastrian ritual was a strong reverence for the four elements: earth, air, water, and fire. Zoroastrian life became highly ritualized in an effort to avoid corrupting those elements, viewed as sacred creations of Ahura Mazda. For example, Zoroastrians were careful not to bury dead bodies or to cremate them, so as to avoid contaminating the earth and polluting the fire, respectively.

Of all of the natural elements, fire was crucial to Persian religious rituals even before Zoroastrianism and Zoroaster revered fire. Fire represented Asha, the light of all that is good in the universe. As such, sacred fires burning in Zoroastrian temples were tended by the [Magi](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi), the ritual priests of Zoroastrianism. Throughout the centuries, many have misunderstood the Zoroastrian reverence for fire as worship. More to the point, fire is revered for its symbolic value as the spark of animation, as well as the power of goodness. Indeed, fire became a central focus for Zoroastrian ritual in the centuries after the death of Zoroaster. Even today, some Zoroastrian temples have fires that the Magi claim have been burning for centuries, suggesting the deep respect Zoroastrians hold for fire's symbolic energy.

**History and Legacy**



During Zoroaster's life, his new religion spread through parts of northern Persia and into the territory of modern Afghanistan. Although the community of Zoroastrians grew across the Persian lands and the theological framework of the faith expanded, Zoroastrianism was not recognized as the official religion of Persia until 224 [CE](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi). In that year, the shah of the [Sassanid Empire](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi) declared Zoroastrianism the state religion. As a result, Avestan scriptures were widely translated into [vernacular](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi) forms of Pahlavi, and Zoroastrianism flourished. Temples were busy with adherents who prayed for the guidance of Ahura Mazda, and festivals and holidays of Zoroastrianism were celebrated lavishly.

However, with the [Muslim](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi) conquests of Persia in the seventh and eighth centuries, Zoroastrianism began to decline. By the 10th century, [Islam](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi) was the dominant religion in the region, and Zoroastrians were relegated to a minority status, along with Jews and Christians. While a substantial community remained in Persia, some Zoroastrians migrated to [India](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi), where they flourished, primarily in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), and became known as Parsis.

Today, Zoroastrianism is still practiced by a very small community. Scholars estimate that there are about 140,000 believers in the world, with more than 90,000 living in India. The remaining communities are in Iran, Europe (particularly in the United Kingdom), and North America. One of the reasons that Zoroastrianism is not a growing religion is that it does not accept converts.

Despite its small numbers today, Zoroastrianism is recognized by many scholars and theologians as an extremely influential force on the [monotheistic](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi) faiths of [Judaism](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi), [Christianity](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi), and Islam. Its insistence on one creator god, as well as its highly ethical theological framework, echoes the ethical monotheism of the traditions of [Abraham](https://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/574840?terms=zoroastrianism&sType=multi). Its belief in the ultimate triumph of good over evil and resurrection of the good are other points of interest for those looking for links between Zoroastrianism and other monotheistic traditions.