

Who Were the Original Zoroastrians The Religion and Where It Spread How Did It Change After the Death of Zoroaster

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THE ORIGINAL ZOROASTRIANS

Geographical location:

In times prehistoric, it is believed that people who inhabited the steppe region of Asia were involved in three great migrations; one group, the Indians, moved south-east into India, another group, the Iranians, moved south-west into Iran, and the third group of Avestan people moved southward into Central Asia. It is believed that Zoroastrianism had its beginnings in the land called Airyanem Vaejaha, comprising of countries such as Chorasmia, Sogdiana, Bactria, in the north to Urva, Sistan and Hapta Hindu in the south. Scholars have debated its exact location; J. Marquart's theory points to Chorasmia, a cold place which lies around the R. Oxus and south of the Aral Sea, (modern Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), of a land that is both paradisaical and extremely cold with a long 10-month winter, a land not far from the "eternal ice". However, G. Gnoli on the other hand prefers to think of Airyanem Vaejaha as corresponding to the south-eastern part of the Iranian plateau, a region with 7 summer months and 5 winter months. We could safely deduce that the early Mazdayasni belonged initially to this region of Central Asia, (i.e. from Chorasmia, spreading southward to Sistan and eastward to the Hindu Kush initially and much later, westward).

Social Milieu:

We also have reason to believe that in all probability, Zoroaster lived between 1700-1500 BC, i.e., at the end of the Stone Age and the beginning of the Copper Age. This was the time when man learnt to make metal weapons, discovered the wheel and learnt to make chariots. A combination of power and mobility led to the emergence of the warrior/conqueror who was basically no more than a raider who plundering neighbouring tribes. Society being primarily pastoral, the booty from these raids was mainly cattle. This new figure of the "warriors" was held in esteem by the nomadic tribes.

The Prevailing Religion:

During this period the prevailing Mazdayasni religion was a form of cult worship wherein the elements of fire and water were venerated. Ritual offerings or 'zaotras' (Av) of milk, twigs and the sap of pounded leaves ('haoma'), prepared by the priests, was made to water, i.e. to local ponds and rivers. The embers of fire were kept smouldering throughout the day and were fed thrice. Offerings of wood (baresman), incense and animal lard were made to fire. Lard was symbolic of animal sacrifice, a practice since discontinued. These offerings made to these elements were intended to purify and energize them which would result in their bestowing even greater bounty on the earth. The veneration of water and fire as the two basic elements of life, are of Indo-Iranian heritage and are still followed by us as well as the Hindus, though with slight variations. The ceremonies were conducted by priests in a consecrated or 'pavi' place. All vessels used were cleaned and consecrated for the ceremony after which they could be freely handled by all - another element of the Mazdayasni religion which is preserved in modern Zoroastrianism. The religion with its great emphasis on purity, used cattle urine with its ammonia content for purification - the genesis of the use of taro in the religion.

Besides these two elements that were venerated, the Mazdayasni religion also preached the veneration of several gods and goddesses or daevas, all of whom symbolized nature, such as the sky and earth

(Asman and Zam), or the sun and moon (Mithra and Mah) or the wind, or were a personification of the attributes of the almighty such as justice (Arshtat), courage (Ham-vareti), obedience (Sraosha), and most important, victory (Indra). The number of daevas had increased and were propitiated for fulfillment of greed and selfish gain. Each act of worship performed by the Mazdayasni priest was dedicated to one of these deities. The ancient Mazdayasni religion was feudalistic in spirit in its interpretation of life hereafter; heaven/salvation was accessible to kings, warriors and priests but not to the laity. It was into such a socio-religious environment that Zarathustra was born.

Zarathustra, His Religion and the Reasons for Its Rejection:

There is enough evidence to point to the fact Zarathustra's tribe belonged to the north-eastern part of Central Asia, to the region referred to as Chorasmia, the Gathic dialect was the spoken language of this region, giving us another reason to believe that this region was his homeland. Zarathustra came from a priestly family, and as was the custom then (as it is now), was ordained to priesthood at the age of 15; he refers to himself as "Zoatar" (in the Gathas) and is referred to as an "athaurvan" (in the younger Avesta). However, he was not prepared to accept the prevailing beliefs. Disenchanted by the pagan traditions and rites he went off to seek higher knowledge. He wandered in quest of truth and witnessed the depravation of war, violence, cattle-stealing, animal sacrifice and the worship of aggressive daevas. He saw conflict in the social strata of the society, conflict between the great aristocratic warriors and the poor pastoral people. His search was for peace, justice and a moral order. He finally attained revelation through direct discourses on several occasions with Ahura Mazda. The Gathas, which are the sublime revelations are inspired thought in poetic form, they are the very divine wisdom which he gleaned in his direct discourses with Ahura Mazda. After attaining enlightenment he referred to himself as "Vaedemna" or "the one who knows" and made it his mission to teach the path of "asha". But his teachings were too divergent to the prevailing beliefs. The new religion had the alien concepts of monotheism and dualism—of the struggle for supremacy between the forces of good (Spenta-mainyu) and evil (Anghre-mainyu) — too complex for the simple pastoral people to comprehend. A highly ethical doctrine of free choice and following the path of asha or righteousness which would lead to the salvation, even for the laity (something denied them earlier) was too egalitarian and progressive for his time. Until then Heaven was deemed the preserve of priests and aristocrats, while hell was reserved for the laity. While accepting the 6 Yazatas (Beings worthy of worship) or Amesha Spentas (Holy mortals), who were more like personifications of the holy attributes of Ahura Mazda, he courageously rejected the daevas as amoral, especially the ones venerated for war, destruction, greed and acquisition. He condemned the sacrificial practice of destruction of the 'gav' (cow), (another proof of a cattle-raising community) as also the haoma cult. His basic doctrine was anti-ritualistic and anti-sacrificial. Zarathustra's reformed religion threatened the established practice and was rejected, partly because of his age, and partly due to his proximity to his tribe—he was too young (only 30 years old), too close and too familiar to be granted divine recognition and only received hostility. He was rejected by the kavis (kings), karapans (priests) and by the community, cut off from his family and clan and forced to flee. His first and only follower from his own tribe was his cousin Maidhyoimanha who we may say was the first Zoroastrian.

The Spread to Eastern Iran:

Rejected by his own people, Zarathustra moved on to countries far from his homeland. His first success was with the powerful Turanian princes of Fryanas and their descendants who accepted his teaching. This is especially telling since the Turanians lived north of Chorasmia and were the hereditary enemies of the people of the plateau in the south. Two years later (at age 42) he followed the great caravan route east to Raga and then southward on his great missionary journey to Zabol, the capital of the Kayanian kingdom where he was granted audience by Queen Hutosia. He convinced the Queen and her husband, King Vistaspa with his enlightened wisdom and they embraced his new religion along with their subjects. This angered neighbouring tribes and resulted in skirmishes. Luckily, King Vistaspa was victorious each time and after gaining supremacy and subjugating the tribes established Zoroastrianism as the prevailing religion, thus spreading it to Hharakhvaiti and Haetumant the entire area around L. Hamun in Sistan (Eastern Iran and Afghanistan) south of the Hindu Kush, eastward to Sogdia (Kyrgyzstan) and from there along the silk route to the Xianjing province (China), Bactria (Tajikistan). His son, Aspandiar and "other

royal sons" warred against Arum (Asia Minor) and Hindii (India) spreading the religion south-eastward to the Quandahar in the Kushan Kingdom (India, Pakistan and Baluchistan). There are even references to Sapta Sindhu, and it could have been that Zoroastrianism spread right into the Indus valley. May hundred years later the religions spread westward. In short, after Zarathustra's death, his religion was practiced in a large area from the Balkans to Asia Minor, across Central Asia from the Iranian Plateau to North China. However, Gnoli does make a point to mention that as poor pastoral nomads the people probably migrated and appear to have been unimaginative as most colonists, using traditional names for new mountains, streams and places that they either discovered or settled in. Interpretations of Avestan historical geography are further confused with mythical elements, making it impossible to distinguish places and locations. This adds to the complexity of identification. However, he does agree that Zoroaster travelled south from his native place (Chorasmia) which was hostile to him, to a country where he received friendship which is called Greater Sistan and which comprises the countries and areas outlined above in this paragraph. Rv. Hilmand and L. Hamun are minutely described in Avestan geography. A large part of the mythical and legendary heritage can be located in the Sistanic region. This region is also supposed to be the birth place of three the next Saoshyant. There are historical references to the Turanians constructing dams on the river Helmand which led to the great flood in L. Hamund and caused a severe drought in Eransahr. The geography of the Avesta, from the first chapter of the Vendidad to the Zamyad Yast and the Mihr Yast is entirely eastern Iranian. This Zamyad Yast is dedicated to the land 'zam', and mentions the mountains in the area, such as the Hindu Kush. We can safely conclude that the religion spread to the "greater Sistan" region where it maintained its stronghold for many years, even after the advent of Islam.

Another pointer to the fact that early Zoroastrianism was prevalent in the Sistan region is the fact that the people were supposed to be cattle-breeders 'fsuyant vastrryas', living in a land of "fattening pasture". A central feature of Gathic society was that it was a stock-raising and not a farming community. Sistan, and especially the Hamun/Hilmand region were cattle-raising areas. There is no historical or geographical evidence to point to modern or even ancient Iran as either the birth place of the religion or the place to which it initially spread.

The early adherents to the faith were staunch and zealous. In the Farvardin Yasht (13) the fravashis (souls) of those worthy of veneration are listed. These include the souls of Maidhyoimanha, the Turanian Frayana princes, Kavi Vishtaspa and his Queen Hutaosa, as also their advisor, Jamaspa (whose daughter Zarathustra married). Also listed are the names of the tribes that accepted Zoroastrianism - the Ariyas, Tuiryas, Sairimas, Sainus and Dahis, along with some clan kingdoms, all of whom inhabited this area. We can safely presume that these were the original Zoroastrians. In conclusion, Zoroastrianism was a reformist movement to establish a new monotheistic religion of moral values that contrasted sharply with the existing socio-religious system. Polytheistic believers and priests continued to offer resistance and there were occasional setbacks. The missionary zeal of the prophet and the first Zoroastrians triumphed and was manifest in the "fravarane" or the prayer uttered daily by the believers. It was a prayer of solidarity, required to be said by each new follower as a declaration of faith. (We say it today at the end of our kusti prayers: "Jasme avanghe mazda, mazdeyasno ahmi, mazdeyasno Zarathustrish..."). It translates as, "I profess myself, a worshipper of Mazda, a follower of Zarathustra, rejecting the Daevas, praising and worshipping the Amesha Spentas....." and ends with the pledge to follow the 3-fold path of humata, hukata, huvarastha.

Transformation of the Religion Over the Ages:

As we know acceptance and belief came halting and had to be won inch-by-inch. In fact, scholars have mentioned that the priests who lost some of their powers over laity were quick to revert to the old doctrines. The original Zoroastrian message was profoundly transformed by the first generations of the prophet's disciples. As Gnoli mentions in the Chapter 6 of his book, the use of haoma was reintroduced into the religion, although in the Gathas, Zoroaster is supposed to have condemned the use of all stimulants and hallucinogenic drugs. It is also believed that the pre-Zarathustrian daevas were re-introduced in the Kayanian period by the athravans (priests) as Yazatas and Amesha Spentas for socio-political reasons since there is no reference to them in the Gathas. In fact, by the time the oral tradition came to be

documented many centuries had passed and there is every possibility of it having got diluted along the way besides the fact that the religion itself needed to adapt to varying social and political changes in the region. Thus while the Gathas may be considered the divine words and teachings of the Prophet Himself, the Avesta (and this is not to discount it) is of much later vintage and would need the interpretations and deviations necessitated by the socio-political climate of the times. Zarathustra is supposed to have died at the age of 77, assassinated by a karapan, of the Turanian tribe, called Tur i Bradres (Pahlavi), thus bringing to an end the life of the greatest and earliest known prophet who advocated an inward religiousity and the right of the individual to choose his path and hence his destiny and who left behind one of the greatest religions known to mankind which is our great heritage.