



# ZOROASTER VII. AS PERCEIVED BY LATER ZOROASTRIANS

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## ZOROASTER

### vii. AS PERCEIVED BY LATER ZOROASTRIANS

This entry treats the development of the concept and image of Zoroaster among the Zoroastrians of Persia and India after the Islamic conquest (10th century onwards). The name “Zoroaster” is derived from the Greek, not the Iranian, tradition (see [ZOROASTER i. THE NAME](#)). Nowadays, most Zoroastrians prefer the Iranian form, Zarathuštra, and refer to themselves as “Zarathušti” or “Zardušti.” Since this article is about the Zoroastrian perception, the form Zarathuštra has been used.

*Introduction.* The period immediately following the Islamic conquest of Iran was referred to over a thousand years later by a Parsi priest as “a period of decadence” for the Zoroastrian community, about which information is sparse, and comes mostly from Muslim writers (Dhalla, 1938, p. 322).

For a couple of centuries after the downfall of the Sasanids, both priesthood and laity continued to write and read Middle Persian and would have had access to Middle Persian works concerning the life of Zarathuštra, such as the



*Dēnkard* (see particularly bk. 7), *Būndahišn*, *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram*, and the mantic text *Zand ī Wahman Yašt* (see Boyce, 1988, p. 49). Such works reflect a legendary, rather than historical, representation of Zarathuštra (Dhalla, 1938, p. 310). The late 9th- or early 10th-century *The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* refers to Zarathuštra anachronistically as *Mobadān Mobad* (high priest), the most senior ecclesiastical office in late Sasanid times (47.21; Williams, II, pp. 79, 226). This text and the earlier Pahlavi books celebrate such qualities of Zarathuštra as “wisdom,” “compassion,” and “the performance of good deeds.” He is perceived as one who advocated moderation—*paymān* “the right measure”—in all things, emphasizing justice and morality, rather than extremist revolutionary or ascetic behavior (62.18; Williams, II, p. 108; I, p. 17).

*New Persian.* From the 10th century onwards, Iranian Zoroastrians wrote mostly in New Persian, using Arabic script, but relying on Pahlavi writings, particularly instructional or devotional materials. The transcription of the late Sasanian *Xwadāy Nāmag* “Book of kings” (see [HISTORIOGRAPHY ii](#)) from Pahlavi into Arabic, subsequently rendered into Persian prose, became the basis for Ferdowsi’s *Šāh-nāma*. The dynasties, events, and chronology of the *Šāh-nāma* are placed within a Zoroastrian framework (Boyce, 1988, p. 58). The section narrating the story of Zarathuštra, composed largely by the poet [Daqīqi](#) (d. ca. 976), was instrumental in setting his role as messenger of the faith and mentor to King [Goštāsp](#) (Av. Vištasp) in the struggle between the forces of good and evil. Zarathuštra is described as the one “who slew Ahriman the maleficent” and who advocated wisdom and the religion of goodness, without which kingship is worthless (Ferdowsi, *Šāh-nāma*, tr. R. Levy, pp. 191 f.).

The *Zardošt-nāma*, a 13th-century New Persian work in verse from within the Zoroastrian community, was also based on a Pahlavi book containing hagiographic materials consistent with *Dēnkard* and *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram* and including some additional legends (de Blois, p. 174). *Zardošt-nāma* has endured as the principal source of information and inspiration for Zoroastrians concerning the birth, childhood, and early mission work of Zarathuštra, culminating with the conversion of Goštāsp. It provides significant testimony to the divine mission of the prophet, incorporating the concept that Ohrmazd pre-ordained his birth as a means of releasing the world from the grip of Ahriman (see [AHREMAN](#); Rosenberg, ed. and tr., pp. 4 f.). In *Zardošt-nāma*, Zarathuštra’s biography is perceived as beginning long



before his actual birth; issuing from the “glorious stock” of King Faridun, he inherits the *farr* (“divine fortune or glory”) through his mother, *Dugdōw*, and is thus portrayed as a hero of equal standing with his legendary precursor, although his agency is spiritual rather than feats of arms (Geiger, II, p. 190 f.).

The *Zardošt-nāma*, while including much of the material found in the earlier texts, incorporates additional legends relating to the birth of Zarathuštra (Rosenberg, pp. 5 f.) and places particular emphasis on the miracles he performed, both as a child and as an adult. The narrative elaborates on the account of Zarathuštra’s cure of Goštasp’s favorite black horse, indicating that this incident was a crucial factor in persuading the king to convert (see Molé, pp. 374 ff.).

The fact that the *Zardošt-nāma* was written in Persian meant that it remained accessible to Zoroastrian laity in both Iran and India at a time when the Middle Persian texts were no longer available to them. Several groups of Zoroastrians had emigrated to India in the 10th century, settling mostly in *Gujarat*. Under the influence of Muslim rule in the 15th century, New Persian became the literary and theological language of the Parsis. In the intervening centuries, there had been no new writings alluding to Zarathuštra, but the *Zardošt-nāma*, with its focus on the miraculous nature of Zarathuštra’s life and early actions, continued to inform Zoroastrians’ understanding of his person. Oral transmission of religious knowledge from generation to generation also continued to keep much of the tradition alive, particularly stories about Zarathuštra as an embodiment of actions and teachings which prescribe beliefs and practices.

The New Persian *Rivāyats*, collections of questions and answers on practical and ritual observances exchanged between the Iranian priesthood and the Parsi community from the 15th to the 18th centuries, provide some insight into the theological beliefs of both communities. It appears that the Parsis, although uncertain on some religious matters, remained convinced that the “one path of righteousness” revealed by *Ahura Mazdā* to Zarathuštra, was the only way to salvation (*Persian Rivayats*, tr. Dhabhar, pp. 277 f.). Zarathuštra’s *fravaši* (“protective or guardian spirit”) was venerated on a daily basis through the liturgy, and each year, the whole community commemorated the anniversary of his death (*Persian Rivayats*, tr. Dhabhar, p. 423). One belief gleaned from the *Rivāyats* was that *yasna* offerings in the name of Zarathuštra or “other sainted, dead persons” could counter the evil plots of enemies, rout demons (*divs*; see *DĒW*) and fairies (*peris*), oppose tyrannical rulers, withstand



famine and disease, prevent the evil consequences of bad dreams, and secure various other advantages (see Dhalla, 1914, p. 308).

*European accounts.* Alongside the later *Rivāyats* are 17th- and 18th-century reports by Europeans who lived among Zoroastrians in both India and Iran. Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1605-89) recorded miraculous stories about the prophet that he had heard from the Zoroastrians, including well-informed priests, in Kerman. Many elements in his account of Zarathuštra's life correspond to earlier Middle Persian texts, such as the *Dēnkard* (Firby, p. 42): his mother glowed "with a celestial light" during her pregnancy; he laughed at his birth; he healed Goštāsp's horse prior to the king's acceptance of the faith; his three miraculously conceived sons would continue his mission and bring about the final overthrow of evil (Rose, p. 90).

Such European accounts were influenced by their own, often deistic, view of theology, emphasizing "reason," natural theology, and morality (Firby, p. 174). This approach may later have influenced the way Zoroastrians perceived their own tradition, but contemporary European reports make it clear that it was the life of the prophet and the stories of his miracles, rather than the spiritual philosophy of the *Gathas*, which was the focus of popular religion (see Hinnells, 1978, p. 22; Dhalla, 1914, p. 308). This perspective was remarked upon by A. H. Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805), whose encounters with Parsi priests and his reading of *Wizīdaghā ī Zādspram*, *Zardošt-nāma*, and *Šāh-nāma* revealed the emphasis the prophet's followers placed on "the miraculous aspect," concerning the mission of Zarathuštra (Anquetil-Duperron, p. 62).

During this period, Parsi mystics composed several treatises in Persian, asserting that Zarathuštra had couched his teachings in figurative and enigmatic language, which hid the deeper truths of the religion from the ignorant, but were understood by the adept (Dhalla, 1914, pp. 314 f.; this notion was continued by Parsi theologians). The 17th-century *Dābestān-e maḍāheb* (see also *ĀZAR KAYVĀN*) summarizes such mystical teachings. The *Desātir*, another "Parsi" mystical text (now generally considered to be inauthentic; see Boyce, 1979, p. 197), alleges that Zarathuštra was preceded by fourteen prophets named Mahabad (Dhalla, 1914, p. 311) and that, in the Avesta, he had taught using allegorical references.

*The missionary challenge.* In the mid-19th century, the Parsi community was galvanized into examining its own beliefs and practices through the influence



of Christian missionaries, particularly the insidious attack by Rev. John Wilson, a Church of Scotland missionary, who was also president of the Bombay branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. In his book *The Parsi Religion* (1843), Wilson repudiated the authority of Zarathuštra, challenging Parsis to prove “that Zoroaster had a divine commission and that his doctrines were in every respect pure and holy” (p. 40) and to seek for certain evidence for the miraculous works associated with Zoroaster. The Parsis themselves did not always know the textual sources for their information about Zarathuštra, reporting to Wilson that they had heard it from their parents or read about him “in books” (ibid., p. 65).

By that time only a few Parsi priests could read and understand Avestan and Pahlavi, and the community was, therefore, generally unable to counter the translations and exegeses of the texts utilized by Wilson. Instead, concerned Parsis quoted from *Zardošt-nāma*, and *Šāh-nāma*, as well as *Dabestān* and *Desātīr*, in a bid to prove the miracles and mission of Zarathuštra (see Wilson, p. 408; an early 19th-century Gujarati translation of *Zardošt-nāma* was accessible to the Parsis, and Wilson included Eastwick’s English verse rendition at the end of *Parsi Religion*).

Such missionary attacks on the person and teaching of Zarathuštra (particularly on the concept of dualism) pushed many Parsis towards an approach to their religion that was more consonant with Christianity (Henning, p. 47). They claimed that the miracles of Zarathuštra were as authenticated as those of Christ (Wilson, p. 70), and could conceive of Zarathuštra as the first “prophetic revolutionary” to reveal the way to paradise, beginning the millennium that ended with the advent of Jesus (see Dhalla, 1938, pp. 25, 150, 166).

Beginning in the 19th century, iconography of Zarathuštra resembles Victorian Sunday school portraits of Christ, depicting him with a beard, flowing robe, and halo (FIGURE 1). But he is also often garlanded like a respected Hindu *swami*, or coroneted with a rayed nimbus. Sir John Malcolm records that Zarduštis in both India and Iran informed him that the majority of paintings or sculptures depicting Zoroaster distinguish him by a crown of rays, or glory (Malcolm, p. 545). The particular image shown in ART IN IRAN v, p. 588; for an analysis of this and other imagery of Zarathuštra at the turn of the century, see Jackson, p. 289).

Eastwick described the prophet’s appearance in *Zardošt-nāma*, “with dazzling



wand” and “lustrous glory” around the head (Wilson, p. 481). This image, with variations, is still frequently replicated. The front of the recent *Legacy of Zarathushtra* (see Rivetna, ed.) shows a stained-glass depiction, in which Zarathuštra wears similar clothing and carries a metallic staff; his right index finger points upwards in an ancient gesture of salutation (for historical antecedents and significance of this gesture, see Shahbazi, pp. 166 f.).

A significant response to the missionary challenge was the development of a Gujarati Catechism, initially translated into English by Dadabhai Naoroji, then D. C. E. Pavry (1901), and J. J. Modi (1911). The emphasis is on worship of Ahura Mazdā, and on “Zarathuštra Spitama of the Immortal Soul” as the great prophet who taught the Mazdayasnan (Mazdā-worshipping) religion to the people of ancient Iran (Modi, p. 4). In the Catechism, Zarathuštra is presented as a wise man, admitted into the presence of the divine, but not himself divine in any way. The reference to followers of the religion as “Zoroastrians” is not because Zarathuštra was perceived as the son of Ahura Mazdā, or as a savior (since “every man is his own savior” through his own deeds; Modi, p. 15), but because belief in Mazdā accords with Zarathuštra’s teaching (Modi, p. 4).

A Gujarati *Khordeh Avesta* of 1880 includes a *monajat* (religious hymn) “in praise of the holy prophet Zartosht.” The later English translation declares Zarathuštra “a true prophet, whose religion is brighter than the Sun, [who] is the best among the Saints of God and the most perfect amongst all the prophets and the indicator of the path of religion to all deviating people. [He] removed from the world all pollution and made the world brilliant like the sun” (*Khordeh Avesta*, ed. and tr. Kanga, pp. 416 f.).

*The “Gatha-only” school and the reformers.* In the mid-19th century, philological research by European scholars brought other startling ideas to the Parsis, who, until then, had attributed all Avestan compositions to Zarathuštra (Dhalla, 1914, p. 336). The elevation of the Gathas to a position of theological, as well as ritual, prominence was influenced by [Martin Haug](#), who maintained that Zarathuštra’s doctrines “untouched by the speculations of later ages,” were to be learned only from the older Yasna, primarily the Gathas (Haug, p. 300). Some Parsi scholars now claimed that the Gathas alone contained the true teachings of Zarathuštra, and that later texts distorted the purity of his words, attributing doctrines and rituals that the prophet never taught (Dhalla, 1914, p. 336). This “Gatha-only” school was resented by many priests and laity alike, who admitted the significance of other scriptures in the canon.



The most extreme reformists (sometimes termed “Parsi Protestants;” Dhalla, 1914, p. 350) maintained that, in the Gathas, Zarathuštra had preached a simple monotheism with few rituals, and that modern Zoroastrians should return to this approach, which was worthy of respect in the modern world. They felt that, in order for Zarathuštra’s teachings to continue to be meaningful for the modern community, prayers should be recited in the vernacular, rather than Avestan, which was by then an unintelligible, dead language. In contrast, traditionalists maintained that Avestan was the sacred language through which Zarathuštra had taught the religion, and that, as such, it possessed “inherent magical efficacy” (Dhalla, 1914, p. 345). This approach was supported by the occultists (see Boyce, 1979, p. 206).

Towards the end of the century, disparagement of the religion, by outsiders and from within, led to a determined educational drive amongst the Parsis. Several, such as [M. N. Dhalla](#) (later high priest in Karachi), went to study abroad. Dhalla pursued Ancient Iranian Studies under A. V. W. Jackson at Columbia University, New York City. There, he had access to the most recent philological scholarship, which he was concerned to make accessible to his co-religionists. He subsequently wrote several books, including *Zoroastrian Theology* (1914) and *History of Zoroastrianism* (1938), combining some of the prevalent ideas of Western academia with his own blend of ritual reform and traditional beliefs.

In both texts, Dhalla traces the person of Zarathuštra from the Gathic period down to “the revival” of the 19th century, maintaining that, although the prophet’s mission and teaching remained the same, aspects of his life were expanded upon or introduced as time progressed; in the Pahlavi works the historical author of the Gathas has been transformed into a myth, and his personality magnified by miracles and extravagant legends (Dhalla, 1938, p. 322; 1914, p. 195). Although Dhalla himself continued to venerate the *yazatas* (“beings worthy of worship”), he refers to Zarathuštra as the earliest revolutionary prophet, who introduced a new spiritual order based on monotheism (Dhalla, 1938, pp. 26, 150).

*Modern Zoroastrian perceptions.* In the late 1920s, translations of the Gathas and Yašts into Persian by an Iranian (Muslim) patriot, Ibrahim Pour-Davoud (Ebrāhim Purdāwud; see [HISTORIOGRAPHY ix](#)) were printed in Bombay (see [IRAN LEAGUE](#)). Pour-Davoud presented Zarathuštra as the bearer of “a grand message to humanity”—that of adhering to the principle of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds (see Boyce, 1979, p. 220; see also Pour-Davoud). In



promoting the image of Zarathuštra as one of the brave and just ancestors of Iran as part of his attempt to regenerate the glory and greatness of ancient Persia, Pour-Davoud engendered an increased respect amongst liberal Irani Zoroastrians for their own religion, and a renewed interest in the words of Zarathuštra.

Individual Zoroastrians, influenced since the 1860s by European attempts to understand the language and religious expression of the Avesta, have sought to voice their own understanding of the Gathas and of the intention of Zarathuštra. In *The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra* (1951), Irach Taraporewala produced a literal translation (based largely on the work of his mentor, the German lexicographer [Chr. Bartholomae](#)), followed by a free interpretation inspired by his position of faith. This approach has been adopted by other Zoroastrians, with the assumption that the words of the Gathas were spoken by the historical Zarathuštra.

Dhalla's perception of Zarathuštra (1938, p. 13 ff.) as a "paragon of reason" and a "practical common-sense thinker" clothed in divine wisdom, who was his own teacher, learning through observation and thinking, is echoed in the writings and understanding of many modern Zoroastrians, who seek to emulate those qualities. They regard Zarathuštra as a great religious teacher, whose ideas "do not belong to any single period and to any single people, but to all ages and to all peoples" (Dhalla, 1914, p. 369), and whose legacy of beliefs and practices have influenced "the religious and philosophical precepts and paradigms of the larger world" (Rivetna, ed., p. 10).

The Zoroastrian conception of Zarathuštra incorporates multiple identifications, and debate continues as to his person. Some view Zarathuštra as an enlightened philosopher and scholar, but clearly mortal. Those of a more mystical persuasion claim that Zarathuštra is an incarnate Amesha Spenta (see [AMEŠA SPĒNTA](#)) possessing thaumaturgical, supernatural abilities. These conflicting perceptions were evident in the reactions to the 1986 film about the history of the religion, *On Wings of Fire* (for an account of the ensuing debate, see Luhrmann, pp. 73-76). There are now many children's and adult books by Zoroastrian authors about the person and teaching of Zarathuštra. He is generally depicted as special even before birth, growing up to be a "fine and clever young man" and going off by himself to find the answers to his questions (see, for example, Mehta).

There also remains a diversity of opinion amongst Zoroastrians as to what



their prophet originally taught. Present-day “reformists” in both India and Iran tend to accept the teachings of Zarathuštra based exclusively on the Gathas. They focus on the metaphysical message of the prophet, maintaining that he was a monotheist who eschewed ritual (see Hinnells, 1996, p. 242). “Traditionalists” view Zarathuštra as the priestly authority for many of the religion’s rites, and therefore recognize the continuing power of ritual (see Mistree, pp. 60 ff., 65). Both groups accept that the prophet was an ethical dualist (that is, that he urged humans to make the right choice between that which is good and that which is evil), but individuals differ as to their understanding of his teaching on cosmic dualism (see Rivetna, ed., pp. 15 ff.).

Despite internal differences, there has never been any question amongst Zoroastrians as to whether Zarathuštra actually existed or not. Recently, however, some Zoroastrians have expressed concern about a trend amongst non-Zoroastrian scholars to challenge the view that a historical individual named Zarathuštra composed the Gathas. This approach was first suggested in the 1960s by the young French scholar Marijan Molé, and has subsequently been developed by Jean Kellens and P. O. Skjærvø. The Zoroastrian community, alarmed by this departure from its own understanding of the authenticity of Zarathuštra, staunchly maintains its allegiance to him as the founder of the world’s oldest revealed religion, and to his innovative vision for the transformation of the world. The name “Zarathuštra” is still often translated as “He of the Golden Light,” indicating the concept that his spiritual and moral vision was a turning point in history, which continues to illuminate the way towards the renovation (see [FRAŠŌ.KĒRĒTI](#)) of creation. Modern adherents recognize that Zarathuštra’s teachings and philosophy are ideal in addressing the discontent, restlessness and suffering of today (see Nadjmi, p. 23). For Zoroastrians, Zarathuštra remains a powerful, central figure, whose image as a determined force for Aša (“order,” “right,” “truth”) presents the ultimate role model.

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