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ZOROASTER

c. 628 B.C.- c. 551 B.C.



The Iranian prophet Zoroaster was the founder of Zoroastrianism, a religion that has endured for over 2,500 years and still has adherents today. He was also the author of the *Gathas*, the oldest part of the Avesta, the sacred scriptures of the Zoroastrians.

Our biographical information concerning Zoroaster (Zarathushtra, in old Iranian) is sketchy, but it appears that he was born about 628 B.C., in what is now northern Iran. Little is known of his early life. As an adult, he preached the new religion that he had formulated. It met with opposition at first; however, when he was about forty, he was successful in converting King Vishtaspa, the ruler of a region in northeast Iran, to his new religion. Thereafter, the king was his friend and protector. According to Iranian tradition, Zoroaster lived to the age of seventy-seven; his death can therefore be placed somewhere around the year 551 B.C.

Zoroastrian theology is an interesting mixture of monotheism and dualism. According to Zoroaster, there is only one true God, whom he calls Ahura Mazda (in modern Persian, Ormuzd). Ahura Mazda ("the Wise Lord") encourages righteousness and truthfulness. However, Zoroastrians also believe in the existence of an evil spirit, Angra Mainyu (in modern Persian, Ahriman) who represents evil and falsehood. In the real world there is a constant struggle between the forces of Ahura Mazda on the one side, and those of Ahriman on the other. Each individual person is free to make his own choice of whether to side with Ahura Mazda or with Ahriman. Although the struggle between the two sides may be close at present, Zoroastrians believe that in the long run the forces of Ahura Mazda will win. Their theology also includes a strong belief in an afterlife.

In ethical matters, the Zoroastrian religion stresses the importance of righteousness and truthfulness. Asceticism is opposed, as is celibacy. Zoroastrians practice various interesting religious rituals, some of them centered about their reverence for fire. For example, a sacred flame is always kept burning in a Zoroastrian temple. However, by far their most distinctive religious practice is their method of disposing of the dead, who are neither buried or cremated, but put out on towers to be eaten by vultures. (The birds normally strip the bones bare within a couple of hours.)

Although Zoroastrianism has various elements in common with the older Iranian religions, it does not appear to have spread widely during Zoroaster's own lifetime. However, the region in which he had lived was incorporated into the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great in the middle of the sixth century B.C., about the time that Zoroaster died. In the course of the next two centuries, the religion was adopted by the Persian kings and gained a considerable following. After the Persian Empire was conquered by Alexander the Great, in the last half of the fourth century B.C., the Zoroastrian religion underwent a severe decline. Eventually, however, the Persians regained their political independence, Hellenistic influences declined, and there was a revival of Zoro-

astrianism. During the Sassanid dynasty (c. 226-651 A.D.) Zoroastrianism was adopted as the state religion of Persia.

After the Arab conquest of the seventh century A.D., the bulk of the Persian population was gradually converted to Islam (in some cases forcibly, although in principle the Moslems

A Parsee fire-temple in Bombay.



tolerated the older religion). About the tenth century, some of the remaining Zoroastrians fled from Iran to Hormuz, an island in the Persian Gulf. From there, they or their descendants went to India, where they formed a small colony. The Hindus referred to them as Parsees, because of their Persian origin. There are well over one hundred thousand Parsees in India today, most of them living in or near the city of Bombay, where they constitute a fairly prosperous community. Zoroastrianism has never died out completely in Iran; however, only about twenty thousand followers remain in that country.

Today, there are fewer Zoroastrians in the world than either Mormons or Christian Scientists. But Mormonism and Christian Science are of fairly recent origin; over the course of history, the total number of followers of Zoroaster has been far larger. That is a major reason why Zoroaster has been included in this book while Joseph Smith and Mary Baker Eddy have been omitted.

Moreover, the theology of Zoroastrianism has influenced other religions, such as Judaism and Christianity. Even greater was the influence of Zoroastrianism on Manichaeism, the religion founded by Mani, who took over the Zoroastrian idea of a struggle between good and evil spirits and elaborated it into a complex and compelling theology. For a while, the new faith that he founded was a major world religion, although it has since died out completely.

Zoroastrianism, of course, though one of the oldest religions extant, has always been basically a local religion rather than a major world faith. It therefore cannot compare in importance with religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.