

The Life of Zarathushtra

The Prophet

His Name:

Zarathushtra (*Ph.* Zaratusht — “he who manages/drives camels”).

His Date of Birth:

Circa 1500 B. C. (See Appendix 1)

His Birthplace:

Somewhere around the Aral Sea. (See Appendix 2)

His Family Background:

Zarathushtra was born into the Spitaman family.

Father : Pourushaspa (*Ph.* Pōrūshasp — “possessing grey horses”).

Mother : Dughdōvā (*Ph.* Dughdōv — “milkmaid”).

Brothers: According to the tradition he had four brothers — two elder, Ratushtar and Rangushtar, and two younger, Nodariga and Nivedis (*Zādspram* 15.5).

Zarathushtra's marital status has been a topic of much debate amongst scholars for many generations. There are three differing points of view that have been put forward by them.¹

No Wife:

Notable amongst the exponents of the “No Wife” theory is Taraporewala, who alludes to Zarathushtra being a Magian and therefore a celibate. In fact he claimed that Pouruchistā's name (which is mentioned in the *Gāthās*, Y.53.3) is merely an abstract attribute and not the name of the prophet's daughter as is generally believed. His interpretation of Zarathushtra's genealogy therefore is an abstract spiritual one.

1. For a detailed critical analysis of the subject, refer to mimeographed paper titled “Conflicting Theories About Zarathushtra's Marital Status”, prepared by Zoroastrian Studies, June 1981.

One Wife:

Other scholars hold the more traditional and socially acceptable theory that Zarathushtra had one wife Hvōvī who bore all his children. They however dismiss the prophet's genealogy referred to in the Pahlavi texts as being late, spurious and interpolated.

The Pahlavi Tradition:

The main sources for Zarathushtra's genealogy come to us from the *Dēnkard*, *Bundahishn* and *Zādspram* in which it is believed that the transmission of the tradition (*Ph. patvand*) has been maintained. In the *Dēnkard* and *Bundahishn*, there are clear references of Zarathushtra's children being borne by more than one wife.

According to the Pahlavi texts, the first wife was Urvij/Aurvij (*Dk.* bk. 7, 8.18 Vol. 14 pp 86, 87 fnl). She is said to have borne Zarathushtra one son, Isat. västra (*Ph.* Isadvāstar — “desiring pastures”) and three daughters, Freni (*Ph.* Frēn — “abundance”), Thriti (*Ph.* Srit — “the third one”) and Pouruchistā (*Ph.* Pouruchist — “very thoughtful”). (*In. Bd.* 32.5-6, *SBE* Vol. 5 p 142).

The second wife's name is not known for certain. However, in the *Dēnkard* there is mention of Arnij being the second wife of the prophet (*Dk.* bk. 7, 8.18 Vol. 14 p 87 fn 1). She is believed to have borne Zarathushtra's two other sons, Urvatat.nara (*Ph.* Urvatatdnar — “commanding men”) and Hvare.chithra (*Ph.* Khwarshēdchihir — “sun-faced one”). (*In. Bd.* 32.5-6, *SBE* Vol. 5 p 142 and *GBD.* 35.56 p 301).

Hvōvī (*Ph.* Hvōv — “possessing good cattle”) who is believed to be the daughter of Frash-aoshtra Hvōgva (*Dk.* bk. 9, 68.58 Vol. 19 p 66) and the niece of his brother Jāmāsp Hvōgva²

2. According to tradition, Jāmāsp Hvōgva is held to have been the minister and wise counsellor to King Vīshāspa. Jāmāsp is believed to have married Zarathushtra's youngest daughter Pouruchistā whose mother is said to have been Urvij according to the *Lānkard* (*Dk.* bk. 7, 8.18 p 87 fn 1) and the *Indian Bundahishn* (*In. Bd.* 32.5-6, *SBE* Vol. 5 p 142).



An early German portrait of Zarathushtra

(Yr.13.103, *SBE* Vol.23 p 107), is deemed to be the popularly known wife of the prophet. It is stated in the tradition that three posthumous sons will be conceived from the seed of Zarathushtra and Hvōvī, but will be borne by three virgins at thousand year intervals³. They will be called Ukhshyat.ereta (*Ph.Ushēdar* - "he who makes righteousness grow"), Ukhshyat.nemah (*Ph.Ushēdarmah* - "he who makes reverence grow") and Astvat.ereta ("he who embodies righteousness"), the Saoshyant. (*In.Bd.32.8, SBE* Vol.5 p 144).

3. See Ch.8 "The Creation Story", section on The Apocalyptic Tradition.

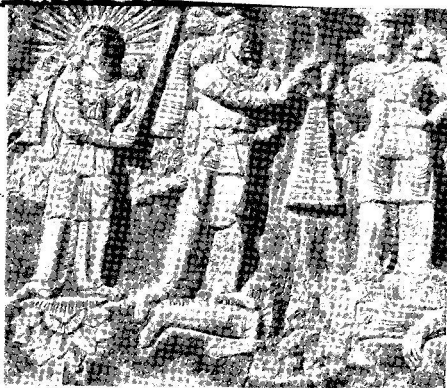
The Early Years

His Training

It seems that Zarathushtra was trained as a priest in an older unknown religion. He refers to himself in his own hymns the *Gāthās* (Y.33.6) as a priest (*Av.zaotar* - "he who invokes prayers"). He also refers to himself (in Y.48.3) as an initiate (*Av.vaēdemna* - "one who knows"). In the Younger Avesta (Yr.13.94) the term *āthravan* (priest) is used as his epithet.

His Search

According to tradition, when Zarathushtra was twenty years of age he left his parents' home against their wishes in search of truth (*Zādspram* 20.7).



▲ The above figure of Mithra has been wrongly mistaken to be that of Zarathushtra. It is from this relief that Parsi artists are believed to have been inspired to paint the different portraits of Zarathushtra.

His Thirtieth Year

During the spring festival Zarathushtra went to fetch water from the river Daityā for the strength-giving *haoma* ceremony (*Zādspram* 21.5). The Holy Immortal, Vohu Manah (the "Good Mind"), appeared before Zarathushtra as a bright, shining being in the form of "...a man, handsome, brilliant and elegant, who wore his hair curve-tailed, because the curved tail is an indication of duality;" (*Zādspram* 21.8).

The Enlightenment

Zarathushtra was taken to the celestial court of the Lord of Wisdom (Av. Ahura Mazda) and the other six Holy Immortals (Av. *Amesha Spentas*). When he came within twenty-four feet of these divinities, it is said that he could not see his own shadow on account of their brilliant light (*Zādspram* 21.13).

Zarathushtra asked Ahura Mazda a number of questions:

1. "In the embodied world, which is the first of the perfect ones, which the second and which the third?"

Ahura Mazda replied thus:

"The first perfection is good thoughts, the second, good words and the third, good deeds."

2. "Which thing is good, which better and which is the best of all habits?"

Ahura Mazda replied thus:

"The title of the *Amesha Spentas* is good,

the sight of them is better, and carrying out their commands is the best of all habits." (*Zādspram* 21.15 – 18).

Afterwards Ahura Mazda spoke of the duality of existence in the relative world. "...Of those spirits, he who was wicked preferred the practice which is iniquitous, and the spirit of righteousness, the propitious (Ohrmazd) prefers righteousness." (*Zādspram* 21.19).

Ahura Mazda further spoke thus:

"Neither our thoughts, nor desires, nor words, nor deeds, nor religion, nor spiritual faculties are in accord; he who is loving light, his place is with the luminaries; and he who is loving darkness, is with the dark ones." (*Zādspram* 21.20).

The First Disciple in Ten Years

His cousin Maidhyoi māngha was the first to give ear to the inspired utterances and teachings of Zarathushtra (*Yt.* 13.95).

The Royal Patrons

It seems that Zarathushtra won the confidence of Queen Hutaosā who in course of time, it is said, thought, spoke and acted according to the new religion (*Yt.* 9.26). It was probably through Queen Hutaosā that King Vishtāspa was influenced by the new faith. His conversion seems to have taken place in Zarathushtra's forty-second year (*Zādspram* 23.5 – 7).

Zarathushtra's Death

According to the Pahlavi tradition, Zarathushtra is believed to have lived for seventy-seven years and forty days. It is said that he was murdered by a Turanian named Bradrēs, on Khorshēd rōz Ardibehesht māh* (*Zādspram* 23.9).

4. The death anniversary of Zarathushtra is currently observed on Khorshēd rōz Daē māh due to calendar intercalations.

Appendix I

The Date of Zarathushtra's Birth

Confusion still persists amongst scholars about the date and place of Zarathushtra's birth. Regrettably, the ancient Iranians were not interested in chronology or history and, as such, scholars have had to piece together all the evidence gleaned from linguistic, archaeological, anthropological and literary sources to suggest a tentative date and place for Zarathushtra's birth.

7000 B.C. : Some Parsi scholars relying upon Greek sources push Zarathushtra's date of birth back to the 7th millennium B.C., not realizing that they are inadvertently ascribing Zarathushtra to a non-Iranian cave-man status devoid of any historical perspective.

700 - 600 B.C. : The other commonly held belief is that the prophet was born circa 7th-6th century B.C., which many western scholars today have rejected owing to recent archaeological findings as well as other information that has come to light.

The error seems to have primarily arisen due to the Middle Persian authors wrongly confusing the birth-date of Zarathushtra with the conquest of Babylon by "Cyrus the Great" in 539 B.C. The Middle Persian authors had gathered from the oral tradition that an important event had occurred 258 years before the end of the era of "Alexander the Accursed" (311 B.C.). This resulted in a wrong dating computation in which they thought that Zarathushtra was born around 569 B.C. (311 + 258). They then deducted another 30 years, which is held to be the age when Zarathushtra received his first revelation, and thus calculated a date of 539 B.C. to mark the birth of the religion.

Burrow⁵ has tentatively dated the *Fravardin Yasht* to be around the 8th or 7th century B.C. If his contention is accepted, then the *Gāthās*

must have been compiled earlier as the style, grammar and syntax of Zarathushtra's hymns are deemed to be much older than the ancient *Fravardin Yasht*.

Edujlee, in a well-researched article⁶, has given additional compelling reasons to reject the 7th-6th century B.C. date for the prophet's birth.

1800 - 1500 B.C. : Reputed scholars today place Zarathushtra's date of birth between 1800 and 1500 B.C. for the following reasons:

1. It is held that Zarathushtra could not have lived before the drifting apart of the Proto-Indo-Iranians in the 3rd millennium B.C., as his sacred hymns, the *Gāthās*, are in an ancient Iranian language called Avestan. There is no evidence for the existence of the Avestan language as far back as the 3rd millennium B.C., when the Iranian identity itself was in the making.

We know from linguistic evidence that Avestan and Sanskrit are sister languages, and that the *Gāthās* are held to be comparable in syntax, style and metre to the *Rigveda*, which scholars today date around 1800 B.C. Give or take a few hundred years for the development of each language, it is reasonable to postulate that the *Gāthās* and the *Rigveda* are the contemporary works of two groups of people who once shared a common source.

2. Neither could Zarathushtra have lived before 2000 B.C., because we know from archaeological findings that the use of chariots and carts was learnt by the Iranians sometime during the 2nd millennium B.C. From the *Gāthās* it is evident that Zarathushtra knew about the chariot (Y.50.6) and the cart (Y.51.12), both of which he allegorically refers to in his hymns. Hence, it is reasonable to assume

6. See H.E. Edujlee, "The Date of Zoroaster" in JCOI No.48, 1980.

5. See T. Burrow, "Proto-Indoaryans" in JRAS 1973.

that the prophet probably must have lived only after the use of the chariot and cart became commonly known to his people (i.e. after the 2nd millennium B.C.).

3. The imagery in the *Gāthās* is that of the late Stone/early Bronze Age period which developed circa 1500 B.C., when the Iranians living around the Aral Sea discovered copper and tin in that area.

We also know that the Andronovo culture, known for its skill of weapon-making in bronze, had hit the Iranian tribes living north of the Aral Sea sometime around 1500 B.C. The *Gāthās* reflect a pastoral society which according to recent research, was what the Iranians were in that early epoch.

It is therefore difficult to ascertain Zarathushtra's date of birth accurately. However, from the evidence available a tentative date of around 1500 B.C. may be postulated.

Appendix 2

The Place of Zarathushtra's Birth

Zarathushtra's exact place of birth is factually unknown. Textual references are misleading as some authors place his birth in western Iran (Azarbaijan/Rayy/Shīz), while in other sources an eastern Iranian lineage is suggested.

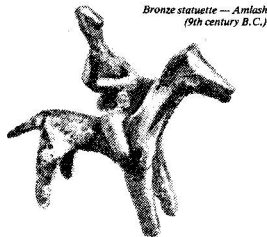
If we accept Zarathushtra's dating to be around 1500 B.C., then it is reasonable to postulate his place of birth to be in the eastern Iranian homelands (which include the areas north and east of the Caspian Sea), where the people were at the twilight of the Stone Age and the dawn of the Bronze Age. From archaeological evidence we know that one group of Iranians, as late as 1200 B.C., moved westwards onto the plateau which later came to be known as Iran. Western Iran, however, was ahead in cultural development as its inhabitants had begun to use iron due to the influence of the Mesopotamian civilization.

Zarathushtra could not have been part of this milieu as his hymns appear to reflect a Stone/Bronze Age period.

It is also important to bear in mind that Zarathushtra's hymns, the *Gāthās*, are in an eastern Iranian language which would not have been spoken or understood in western Iran during the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C. It is unlikely, therefore, that Zarathushtra could have been born in western Iran.

Finally, the geography of the Avesta can be identified with places stretching across the modern day provinces of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan with the river Volga and the Caspian Sea forming the western boundary. If the prophet was born in western Iran, it is reasonable to assume that in the Avesta there would have been some mention of western Iranian place names, which is not the case.

To conclude, there appear to be two likely areas where Zarathushtra may have been born—either north or south of the Aral Sea. The Andronovo culture north of the Aral Sea was sufficiently advanced for the nomadic pastoralists of that region to accept the teachings of Zarathushtra. It is equally possible for Zarathushtra to have been born south of the Aral Sea in the milieu of the Tazabagjap culture which spread in circa 1500 B.C. around an area which later came to be known as Khwarezmia with the river Oxus running through it.



Bronze statuette — Amlash
(9th century B.C.)