

IT IS BETTER TO  
LIGHT A CANDLE  
THAN TO  
CURSE THE  
DARKNESS



# THE MAZDAYASNIE CONNECTION

## Should Parsis Celebrate Christmas?



**W**hy not? Parsis are always celebrating - this, that and the other; we need only an excuse to celebrate! But, jokes aside, let us seriously consider this question which I am often asked: Should we, Zarathushtis, celebrate Christmas?

### What is Christmas?

Christians consider it the day their Prophet, Lord Jesus Christ, was born. A great *Saoshyant* or Savior, possessing divine authority, descended on earth to guide and lead a group of people to peace, joy and love. And who travelled all the way from Iran to Bethlehem to receive and bless baby Jesus?

**“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod, behold there came Wise Men from the East to Jerusalem, saying where is He that is born King of Jews; for we have seen his star in the East, and we are come to worship Him.” - Gospel of Matthew (2.1-2)**

The wise men of the East were the Magi - highly advanced Zarathushti priests, well learned in astronomy, who had seen a new star appear in the eastern skies. Realizing the high spiritual status of the child born as Prophet, they had travelled a long distance to welcome him.

Drawing attention to the words, “wise men”, Prof. Jackson says:

**“Allusions to the religion of Magi, the faith of Avesta, are indeed to be found in the Bible. The Wise Men from the East who came to worship our Savior, the babe in Bethlehem, were Magi.”**

### **Who are the Magi?**

The term *Magi* has confounded even the best of writers and it has become a term of wide application ever since its first use by Asho Zarathustra (Gatha Y. 51.15 and Y. 33.7). For instance, Greek historians have applied the term incorrectly to mean all Zarathushti priests, irrespective of their grades. Sometimes the term Magi has also been wrongly used to mean the entire Zarathushti fold.

The term *Magi* is the English or rather Latin plural of *Magus* derived from *Magnus* – great. It is the literal rendering of *Magus* in Persian, which is a translation of the Avestan *Magavan* from *Maz* = greatness, meaning ‘sublime personage’ or a ‘person par excellence’ or more literally a ‘protector of moral and spiritual greatness.’

The Pahlavi renderings are sometimes *Magih*, meaning spiritual and moral excellence or sublimity and sometimes, *Magopat* i.e., master of divine exaltation, which has given the Persian word, *mopat* or *mobed*.

The *Magavan* or *Magus* has been referred to in the Gatha, the Yasna and the Vendidad. The *Magavan* is the highest grade of Zarathushti priesthood. The *Uziran Gah* prayer lists all eight grades through which a Zarathushti priest must pass in his upward progression to becoming a *Magavan*. In the Gatha (Y.33.7), Zarathustra himself is regarded as a *Magavan*, proving this to be the highest designation for a person advanced in purity and spiritual development. The *Magavs* were the descendants of Prophet Zarathushtra and possessed great wisdom and spiritual powers.



Thus, the words *Magavan* or *Magopat* or *Maga* refer to the pious class of priests who used to preserve their spiritual worth and greatness by a practical life of purity and who possessed certain spiritual powers such as, divination and exposition of dreams.

There are no Magi living in our society anywhere in the seen world, today. However, during the last Zoroastrian dynasty in Iran, the Sasanian Dynasty, Magavs were the supreme advisors to the kings, who always consulted them before any major decision. These wise priests, who could predict the future, realized the need to isolate themselves from the existing disorder and go into seclusion, from where they could not only practice the religion but also better serve humanity at large. So, about a hundred years before the downfall of the Empire, they retreated to a secret location near the Caspian Sea in an area called *Chaichast*. About fifty years later, another group settled in the precincts of Mt. Damavand.

When they retired to seclusion, these two groups of Magavs, the cream of the Zoroastrian priests, took with them their accumulated treasure of the centuries, which included the complete set of the original 21 Nasks, along with their explanations (something that we could well use now to unravel the original teachings of Asho Zarathushtra), thousands of exegetical manuscripts known as the *Nikiz* (the inner exposition of our sacred manthras), many other literally masterpieces, and an incredible collection of precious gems and jewelry. These treasures, exist even today, in Damavand, in a place called *tangistan*.

Therefore, we can say that the secluded dimension of Damavand is a spiritual sanctuary of the Zoroastrian faith. It also serves an important function of being a repository of knowledge, arts, crafts, culture and literature of the Iranian civilization from the earliest times till today.

In his book, *A Mazdaznan Mystic*, Nanabhoy Mama gives a fascinating account of the life-style of the Magavs in their secret abode of Damavand. Another such book, is, *Wondrous Life* by Ervad Marzban J. Hathiram. I shall be happy to share both books with anyone who wishes to learn more.

Going back to that *mubarak* incident of such great Zarathushti sages welcoming a Savior of Christians - what did they do?

*The Magi, who were well versed in sciences like astronomy, prophecy, etc. understood that the appearance of the star was a mark of the great birth, hence they journeyed to Bethlehem to pay their respects to the Savior of the Christians.*

**Edgar Cayce**, who explains the mystical side of Christianity, tells us that after waiting forty days until Mary's cleansing period was over (as is customary with the Zarathushtis), they gazed upon baby Jesus, blessed him by reciting prayers and presented him significant gifts. They gave a message to his mother, Mary, who is known as Virgin Mary (because of the purity of her entire lineage) - that the child born to her was an exalted soul whose breath came from the heavens. He possessed God's Light and was bestowed with Divine Authority to save men!

### **What about the Star?**

The stars that we see in the sky are the reflections of the luster of the Yazads and Ameshaspands. Every entity in the Creation has its own star. We humans have our stars too, but they cannot be seen. However, when a spiritually advanced, emancipated soul comes to earth to fulfill God's mission, his star can be seen in the sky, during his birth.

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This should not be surprising, because the very essence and spirit of the Zarathushti Daena is to lift, aid and support all religions. Asho Zarathustra is known as "*Vakhshur-e Vakhshuran*" - the Prophet of Prophets. Not only did he establish the Zarathushti Religion, he also sowed seeds for the other religions to follow. There are references in Avesta to indicate that Zarathushtra was aware of the advent of the other great prophets and religions after him. The Avesta word for religion is *daēnā*; its plural form being *daēnāo*, which means religions. (The great orientalist, K. R. Cama, *Paigambar Asho Zartoshtnā Janmārā no Ahewāl*, ed. 1870, p. 143).

**Oh Mazda! When in the beginning you made the physical world and its populace and religions (*daēnāoscha*) through Thy divine Consciousness then (Thou) bestowed on us the wise intelligence and the physical life, for which are established for us different Faiths, desires (devotions) and the related *tarikats* (deeds, works, duties, injunctions, prescriptions) and doctrines (principles). - Gatha (Y. 31.11).**

**Dasturan Dastur Dinyar**, a.k.a. *Behzad* ('the well-born'), the high priest in the Sasanid Empire of **King Khosrow I, Anushirawan** (501-579 CE), taught Prophet Mohammed the secrets of Nature; hence he is fondly remembered in the Koran as *Salman-e Fars* or 'the Solomon (wise man) of Fars'.

When the Achaemenid King **Cyrus the Great** (559-530 BC) marched into Babylonia (539 BC), people opened the city gates and received him as their deliverer. He liberated

the Jews from captivity, allowed them to return to their own lands and gave them freedom to practice their religion and culture. Cyrus also rebuilt their cities and temples. He restored to the Jews all the gold and silver sacred vessels which had been taken away from their temples by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. He also gave them facilities and monetary assistance to rebuild their destroyed temple of Solomon.

For this, Cyrus the Great has been eulogized in the Old Testament of the Bible. He is mentioned 22 times in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) - 15 in Ezra, 2 in Chronicles, 2 in Isaiah, 3 in Daniel.

Both Second Isaiah and Ezra portray Cyrus as an ideal ruler, who is concerned with the welfare of the people, the sacred city of Jerusalem, and the land. In Isaiah 45.1, Cyrus is even entitled a *mashiach* - t“one who is anointed by God.”

The edict issued by Cyrus, liberating the Jews from their captivity, is a landmark in history. Cyrus laid the policy of allowing the conquered people to continue ruling their own countries and to follow their own religion. This benevolent policy was followed even later, by Darius and other Zarathushti kings of the Achaemenian and Parthian Dynasties.

Cyrus and other Zarathushti kings left behind a rich tradition that we, his descendants have carried on the spirit of religious tolerance, peace and friendship with others, in our adopted motherland - India. That a Parsi will extend his hand to help - whether it be Zarathushti or non-Zarathushti - can be proved from all our charitable institutions for the others in India.

Do you see the link with the past in our temperament and thought? The same applies to our religious policy and outlook. If the great Magi not only rejoiced but traveled miles through deserts - why can't we celebrate the coming of a great Savior on earth?

**Nevertheless, it is strange and regrettable when Parsis celebrate Christmas with great enthusiasm and pomp, but forget, or are indifferent to their own Prophet's birthday! Khordad Sal Day is spent like any other day if it falls on a week day. When asked to come for a celebration, the excuse is that it is a working day. Don't we ever take a day off when we have a dentist's appointment or to attend our children's school function or for any other reasons? Then, why can't we, no matter what day Khordad Sal falls on, consider the mubarak day as a great *hingaam* (festival) and get together and celebrate as it should be celebrated? Khordad Sal Day observed on the following weekend is not proper. Never heard of "Christmas Day Observed!"**

Let us make this our New Year's resolution. Happy New Year! ■