

# LETTER TO JOSHUA – MARCH 31, 2007

(As many will find this old communication quite illuminating, I'd like to have it have a wide readership.)

Dear Joshua:

Your letter of December 13, 2006 reached me on March 28<sup>th</sup> and I was so impressed and enthralled by your interest in Zoroastrianism as depicted in the high quality of the ten questions you have asked of me, which I'll try to answer as best as I can with the caveat that they may not represent a general view as we do not have one common authority in our religion to which everyone adheres. Thus, my views will pertain more specifically to my own liberal views and to the North American milieu.

## 1. According to Zoroaster, what is a good life and why is life good?

A good life is one in which we emulate all the good qualities of God, Ahura Mazda, in full measure (Yasna 34.1) – By whatever actions, words and worshipful acts the good Lord has attained Immortality, Asha (righteousness), Holy Sovereignty and Perfectness, let us deliver it in full measure to Him, the Lord.” In other words, as the Bible says “Be ye perfect as they Father in heaven is perfect.” Life is good because God is good and created life that is good for us. But God also gave us free will – Yasna 30.2 and 31.11. All those who make the right choice in life, will find life good for them. Unlike Job in the Old Testament, Ahura Mazda, the All-Knowing, life-giving God, has entered into a covenant with mankind, not to hurt us in any way if we make the right choice in life. So life will be good ultimately for us if we opt for good and make the right choice. If not, we will be our destiny. - Yasna 49.11, etc.

## 2. What are the core tenets of and religious practices of Zoroastrianism?

The core tenets are to be God-like in every way, as explained in No. 1 above, and be a *Ham-kaar* (collaborator) of God and bring about *Frasho-kereti* (progress and renovation of the world) so that the world will be free of all evil and *Frasho* – fresh – as God had first intended it to be – sans all evil so that the material world will be as good as the spiritual world.

The religious practices as originally propounded by the prophet Zoroaster in his Gathas (Divine Hymns) are few but they require

making an earnest and free attempt to choose the religion willingly by a free choice and thus an initiation ceremony was a prerequisite and it continues to this day – for both men and women. Zoroaster refers to women three-even four – times in his Gathas and makes it clear that “whatever truth and revelation he expounded hold true – equally for men and women.” (Yasna 53.6).

Such an emphatic statement rendered at least 3200 years ago in prehistoric times may explain why women enjoyed a special status in Zoroastrianism through the ages, for instance, why a woman is mentioned as an employer of so many male laborers in a 2500 year-old Achaemenian inscription recently brought to light. Besides the Initiation ceremony called *Navjote* or *Nojut* (New Birth), there is marriage ceremony, death ceremonies, and post-death ceremonies, various festivities celebrating natural milestones such as spring (Vernal Equinox), summer, fall and winter solstice (Christmas being a pre-Zoroastrian celebration) as well as six communal celebrations (called *Gahambars*) marking each state in nature and cultivation of crops.

### 3. What are the core rituals?

The core rituals are daily prayers after taking a bath, praying five times a day (hardly practiced in our busy times) but practiced regularly by priests in fire-temples along with Yasna 9 (or *Yajashna*) in addition to the above.

### 4. What other religion in the U.S.A. is comparable to yours?

Zoroastrianism could be comparable to Judaism in the United States – both are ancient-most faiths, sharing some common history and ideas since the time of King Cyrus as well as enjoying friendly relations. Because they are so ancient and so persecuted over the centuries and had to rely on traditions and conventions in absence of real familiarity with their ancient languages, both survive well by following a tradition-based religious system and a “closed” society. Both emphasize strong ethics, good deeds, caring for other members, not denouncing this world in any way but regarding it as a basis for ensuring a place for oneself in the next and thus working for progress and innovations in any way one can. Both share strict purity laws, ritual purity, hereditary priests, belief in life after death, initiation ceremonies (Bar mitzvah and *Navjote*), respect for women, wearing caps and certain white shirts, etc., during worship at least, praying in the original ancient languages even when not always understood, absence of any idols in temples and homes except light as form of spiritual life, annual days of repentance on the last day of their respective year, etc.

### 5. How similar is Zoroastrianism to other monotheistic traditions?

Many scholars believe Zoroastrianism is the source of the Judeo-Christian tradition and one scholar (Dr. Wm. Oxtoby) has even placed it among the Abrahamic religions and proudly told me so. Zoroastrianism expounds that there will be three Messiahs, the last one will bring about renovation and resurrection. One may see Jesus as one if one wants to. But the Messiah is not the manifestation of a Supreme Deity but a fully realized higher soul. Nevertheless, God of Zoroastrianism is closer to the God of Christianity in so much as both are compassionate, loving and beneficent, never failing man if man does not fail God in any way. Thus, the Book of Job will be inconsistent with if not contradictory to Zoroastrian theology as Ahura Mazda binds Himself with the rule he lays down for mankind: “Good will come to the good and bad to the bad.” However, the main difference between Zoroastrianism and Judaism and Islam and Christianity is while Ahura Mazda is Omnipresent and Omniscient since He designed free will for mankind, He has by design made us his *Hamkars* (collaborators) so we could realize our full potential and become one like Him – only then mankind by its proper use of free will conferred on him by God will chose to restore His Omnipotence. But by the same token God remains Omnipotent in actuality and over other planets because He has on his own merely delegated his power to us by creating free will for us by His own choice out of His love for us for making us as good and perfect like Him. Ahura Mazda is an ally, a brother and a father to us, (Yasna 45.11).

### 6. How was Zoroastrianism founded?

It is such a prehistoric religion that few facts are available except what we can cull from the Gathas which are his own actual words preserved by the priests until they learned to write and even thereafter – rather to this day. It seems in his day nomadic people were raiding on the Aryans trying to settle down to farming as they were migrating to Iran and making life impossible for the good people. Does it sound familiar today? That’s when Zoroaster (Zarathushtra) had a revelation and shared it with his people in the Gathas, which means Divine Hymns. It must be at the same time, more or less, when the other branch of the Aryans, the Indus were migrating to India as their ancient languages and religious beliefs are very similar to those prevailing before Zoroaster's Reform which dealt away with many of them.

We are left with few historical facts except the Gathas – Zoroaster had a hard time getting disciples until he secured the adherence of King Vishtaspa who spread the religion.

7. If you could hold a conversation with one historical figure, who would be and what will you talk about?

Very hard choice. Maybe I'll choose King Darius and ask him what really all happened when he became King/ Is it really true a Magus (or a bunch of Magi) killed Combyes' brother and usurped power disguising and looking like him? Or was it just a ploy to usurp power like many scholars since Olmstead has pointed out? If not, why is the genealogical evidence he gives in his inscriptions for his being an Achaemenian rejected by many, if not most, scholars? Did his being Persian, belonged to Zoroastrianism? Were the Medes and their priests – the Magi – pre-Zoroastrian and tried to reassert their beliefs on Achaemenians? If so, did Darius see the need to intervene at any cost as a defender of Zoroastrianism that his inscriptions make him out to be. (See my forthcoming book on this subject.) If so, why did he not spread Zoroastrianism beyond the borders of Persia? What really made him attack Greece? Is Herodotus right about what he says about Darius – He asked his men to remind him every day of attacking Greece because they killed his envoys?

8. How would you describe Ahura Mazda?

I've already described Him above – loving, generous to the point of choosing to share his omnipotence with us so we could be god-like and stay with Him in *Garothman* (House of Songs) forever. He has six divine qualities he likes us to emulate – Good Mind, Best righteousness, Beneficent Sovereignty, Holy Right-mindedness, Humility, Perfection, and Immortality.

9. What aspect of your religion do most people misunderstand?

Mostly it is about fire. Because we are positively against any idol worship, we keep fire only as the symbol of God, as his all-pervading light and energy that sustains our planet and us. Even the prehistoric Gathas bear testimony to it: Zoroaster says: “When Ahura Mazda asked me, “Whom dost thou wish to serve?” I then responded: “Thy fire. As long as shall be able, I respect that truth is to have a gift of reverence.” (Yasna 43.9) Since fire is regarded by us as an embodiment or representation of cosmic truth, the worship of fire is nothing more and nothing less than getting in tune with the cosmic truth, cosmic reality/law (*Asha/Ruta*) governing the universe. However, the Arabs branded us as fire-worshipers, among many other things, to disparage us once they conquered us. But the history belongs to the victor.

10. Zoroastrianism is not one of the most mainstream religions in

the U.S. Would you rather more people be Zoroastrians or do you prefer to remain small in number? Can people even convert to become Zoroastrians?

Like the Jews, we have conservatives and reformists among us. The conservatives are against conversion – they may be still in majority in India but in North America and Iran they are not. The latter would welcome truly sincere converts and there have been many. Our scriptures say that all humanity will be Zoroastrian in the end. The current (2007) Zoroastrian representative to the Iranian Parliament, a priest, when asked by Ayatollah Khomeini “how many Zoroastrians are there in the world?” said “two billion” and justified it on the ground that as long as they all followed the Zoroastrian dictate of practicing good thoughts, good words, and good deeds they were indeed Zoroastrians, to which the great Ayatollah had no answer. Who would?

--- Kersey H. Antia, Ph.D.

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