



Inclusion and Diversity in Zoroastrianism and Ancient Persia

By Rebecca DesPrez

Around 471 BCE, Themistocles, the famed Athenian general who had led Greece to victory over King Xerxes at the Battle of Salamis a decade earlier, was forced to flee Athens. His downfall was caused by a mix of arrogance, political jealousy, and accusations of corruption and murder.

With no other option, Themistocles sought refuge with none other than Artaxerxes, the son of the Persian king he had once defeated. Landing safely in Ephesus, he wrote to the Persian monarch:

“I, Themistocles, am come to you, who did your house more harm than any of the Hellenes when I was compelled to defend myself against your father’s invasion—harm, however, far surpassed by the good that I did him during his retreat, which brought no danger for me but much for him.” (Thucydides)

Under cover of darkness, Themistocles traveled to the Persian court, possibly disguised as a woman in a covered wagon. His wife and children soon joined him in Persia. King Artaxerxes not only granted him asylum but also appointed him governor of Magnesia (modern-day Turkey), where Themistocles lived until his death in 459 BCE.

Foreigners in the Persian Empire

Themistocles was not the only foreigner to find opportunity in Persia. The Achaemenid rulers were renowned for generously rewarding their non-Persian allies, who often gained wealth, status, and access to the king.

One such ally was Artemisia, Queen of Halicarnassus, a Greek commander whose valor so impressed Xerxes that he reportedly exclaimed, “My men fight like women, and my women fight like men!”

Another was Scylax of Caryanda, a Greek sailor whom King Darius the Great sent on an exploratory mission around 519 BCE. Scylax’s journey took him across the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, the Oman Sea, and possibly as far as Sri Lanka.

The Persian court also welcomed Democedes, a Greek physician captured in 522 BCE. His medical skills earned him great favor; he was reportedly allowed to dine in the king’s presence—an immense honor. After treating Queen Atossa, Democedes was permitted to return to Greece, accompanied by fifteen Persian nobles and three Phoenician ships (Encyclopaedia Iranica).



The empire was also home to Ujahorresne, an Egyptian advisor to King Darius, and Nehemiah, a Jewish cupbearer to King Artaxerxes who was later appointed governor of Judea (Wikipedia).

The First Multicultural Empire

The Achaemenid Persians established what some scholars, like Dr. Richard Frye, have called the world's first "Unity of States, much like the United States today" (Jefferson and Cyrus, Dr. Frye). Within this vast empire, Persians, Medes, Elamites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Jews, Arabs, Scythians, Greeks, Egyptians, and Africans coexisted in relative harmony.

The Persians were noted for their magnanimity toward different cultures—even former enemies. Communities of Jews, Zoroastrians, and pagans practiced their faiths freely. The Greek historian Herodotus traveled widely through the empire, observing and recording its customs for posterity in *The Histories*.

Zoroastrianism: The Root of Persian Tolerance

But where did this remarkable inclusiveness come from? Its roots lie in Zoroastrianism, the dominant faith of ancient Persia. Zarathushtra (Zoroaster) preached a message of tolerance and welcomed followers from all backgrounds.

For example, the Zadspram, Chapter 20, recounts how young Zarathushtra befriended a Turanian man—despite the Turanians being the enemies of the Iranians—and together they set up a cauldron of bread and milk to feed the hungry. This act of cooperation underscores Zarathushtra's commitment to inclusivity.

The Faryana brothers, themselves Turanian, were among his earliest to accept Zarathushtra's message and later became staunch supporters of his faith (Gathas, Song 11/12). The Farvardin Yasht also names others who accepted the teachings from the Tanya and Sami lands, including the warrior Keresaspa, who defended Zoroastrianism against "dreadful brigands with straight spears" (Farvardin Yasht, Chapter 29).

The Farvardin Yasht ends by invoking blessings on the souls of men and women not only from Aryan lands but also from Turania, Sairimya, and Dahi territories—suggesting that Zarathushtra's message transcended ethnic boundaries. Indeed, Farvardin Yasht 94 expresses the hope that his teachings would "spread through all the seven regions of the earth."

Zarathushtra's vision of a universal faith is further highlighted by his concept of Ahura Mazda—not merely a tribal deity, but the god of all humanity. As Prof. Stephen Flowers writes in *The Mazdan Way*: "Ahura Mazda is not just the god of Zarathushtra's people, but of all peoples of the world." Unlike the gods of other ancient civilizations—each tied to a city



or nation—Ahura Mazda was a universal god, foreshadowing the idea of a single, all-encompassing deity.

Some scholars even believe this idea of a universal god influenced later faiths. The concept first appears in the Second Book of Isaiah, written during and after the Babylonian exile—a time of significant contact with Zoroastrianism. In this way, Zarathushtra’s vision may have shaped the foundations of monotheism in Judaism.

Inclusivity in Action: Class and Gender

This culture of inclusivity extended beyond religion to gender and class. In the Persian heartland, women participated in the economic life of the empire, receiving rations and working in administrative roles (as Persepolis archives show). The Achaemenid court also employed foreign laborers and artisans, integrating diverse peoples into the empire’s economic engine. Workers regardless of gender were paid fair wages depending on their trade, skill, and experience and women had paid maternity leave (Zargaran et al., 2012).

The First Missionary Religion

Zoroastrianism was also the first missionary religion because of its universal outlook. Those who traveled to share its message were known as Athravans, who memorized and recited the Gathas wherever they went. The Den Yasht prays for Athravans to have “good memory to preach the law and strength for their journey” (Den Yasht 17).

The Relevance of Zoroastrianism Today

Today, in the modern West, there is an opportunity to educate others about Zarathushtra’s inclusive legacy by welcoming anyone—regardless of nationality, race, or language—who wishes to join. Zarathushtra’s teachings affirm that every human being is equal and worthy of joining his path.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said: “Exclusion is never the way forward on our shared paths to freedom and justice.”

Zarathushtra would have agreed. His vision of unity and respect remains as relevant today as it was in the ancient Persian empire. Let us honor it by ensuring that no one is excluded from the path of truth and harmony.

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