

## Religions

The majority of Kurds practice Sunni Islam, with many belonging to the Sufi orders of Naqshabandi and Qadiri. However there are Kurds who follow Shia Islam as well as Kurds who are Alevi, Christian, Jewish, Kakai, Shabak, Yezidi, and Zoroastrian. Religion is fundamental to Kurdish history and culture but the Kurds' multiplicity of faiths and their persecution in the name of Islam and Christianity have contributed to their tendency to be more moderate in their religious beliefs and accepting of other religions. Some of the less well-known religions are described below. Yezidism and Zoroastrianism are Kurdish in origin.

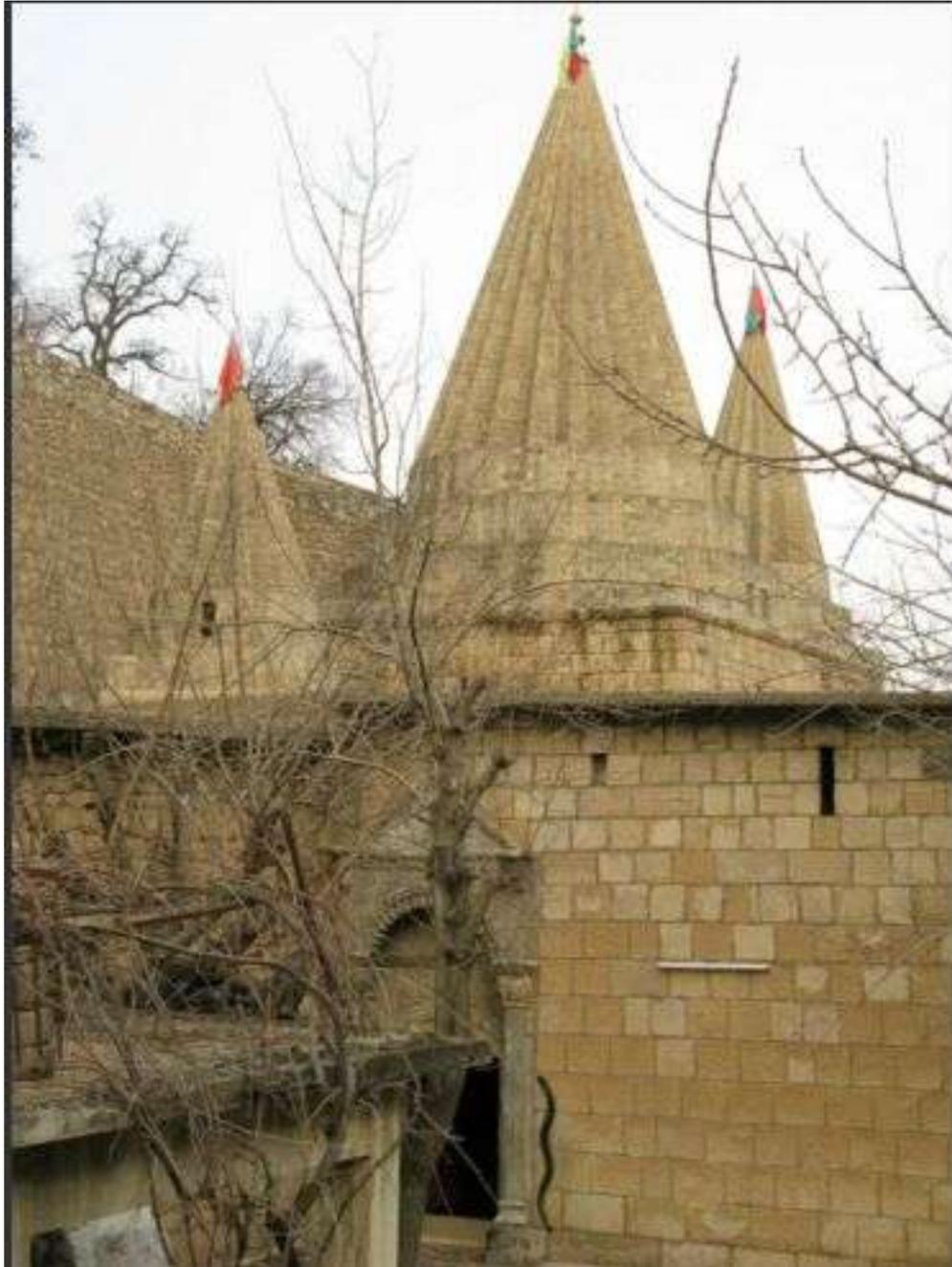
### Yezidism (Ezidi in Kurdish)

The Yezidi (like the Mandaeans) consider they were the first monotheists whose religion was practiced by Noah and Abraham. The Yezidi call God *Khodeh* or *Shams* (sun): the creator, sustainer and keeper of all. Yezidi believe in being absorbed in God, the transmigration of the soul, timelessness and the original 'sin' being the ability to choose (to eat wheat) rather than temptation.

Yezidism is sometimes referred to as the 'cult of the angels' because they believe in seven archangels, each associated with a day and a planet. Followers have been labelled Satan worshippers because Yezidi believe the Peacock angel, *Malak Tawis*, breathed a soul into Adam but refused God's instruction to bow to Adam, instead following a previous instruction to bow only to God. It was a test and God rewarded *Malak Tawis* by making him chief among the archangels. Yezidi believe the snake is a symbol of wisdom and protection, the snake being similarly described in the Akkadian legend, *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Yezidi beliefs, symbols and ceremonies were practised by the Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes, Mittanites, Kassites and the Indo-European language people who migrated to India.

Until the twelfth century the religion relied on oral tradition. It was revitalised under the sufi, Sheikh Adi ibn Mustafa, who is buried in Lalish in south Kurdistan (Iraq).



Yezidi temple in Lalish, Dohuk, south (Iraqi) Kurdistan. Source: Gina Lennox, 2013

Sheikh Adi claimed to have the spirit of Malak Tawis, and to be present when Adam lived in paradise and when Nimrod tested Abraham by throwing him into a furnace. He wrote the Yezidis' first holy book, the Book of Revelations (*Kitab e-Jelwa*). His nephew wrote the second holy book, called the Black Book (*Mes-haf-e Resh*).

Yezidi are baptised by sacred water from Lalish and pray facing the sun. To be Yezidi both parents have to be Yezidi. At least since the time of Sheikh Adi, the Yezidi are divided into three castes, with the Sheikh caste further divided into three ranks (descendants from Sheikh Ali, sacred singers and seers). At the top is the *Mir*, which is an inherited position. The *Mir* is the official representative of *Malak Tawis* on earth, and the official representative of the Yezidi people. He appoints the spiritual leader, *baba sheikh*, who presides over the religious ceremonies at Lalish. The caste below Sheikh, and above the common people (*Murid*) is the *Pir*, who are the custodians of local shrines to village-specific angels and holy men and women. Yezidi families from all three castes must choose a male or female *Sheikh* and *Pir* to be their spiritual guides. Both the *Sheikh* and *Pir* oversee marriages, circumcisions and funerals, and act as family advisors<sup>1</sup>.

Yezidi celebrate six festivals a year. The mythological god-king, Jamshid, the founder of civilisation, named in the *Vedas* as Yama and in the *Avesta* as Yima, translated in Middle Persian as Jamshid, is the inspiration for the ceremony of *Jemayi* which was practiced by the Sumerians and Babylonians and continues to be practiced by Yezidi, followers of Mithras (whose birthday is the same day as *Malak Tawis*, the 25 December) and Zoroaster. For Yezidi, *Jemayi* is conducted in Lalish over seven nights, beginning on 6 October. One of the ceremonies involves 14 Yezidi Sheikhs and *Pirs* performing the *Sama* ritual around seven small fires, fire being the symbol of the sun, the bringer of warmth, happiness and new life. Another *Jemayi* ceremony involves a bull, with echoes of Mithra.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.yeziditruth.org/yezidi\\_religious\\_tradition](http://www.yeziditruth.org/yezidi_religious_tradition)

**The religion of Zoroaster / Zarathustra / Zaradosht / Zardust**



Relief depicting symbols of Zoroastrianism, Dohuk, southern (Iraqi) Kurdistan. Source: Gina Lennox, 2013.

Zoroaster has been variously described as a priest, prophet, poet, philosopher, reformist, astronomer, astrologer, magician, herdsman and warrior.

It is thought that he was born into a family of priests in Media at a contested time. Greek historians wrote that he lived around 6,000 BC. Some scholars think he lived between 2,000 and 1,000 BC, in accordance with the language of the hymns in the *Gathas*, one of five surviving sections of the *Avesta*, the Zoroastrians' holy book, which was compiled between 1400 BC to 650 AD. Others claim he was born in 628 BC and died in 551 BC, a year after Cyrus the Great established the Achaemenid Empire<sup>2</sup>. Zoroastrianism was the first religion adopted by a state. There is controversy over whether Cyrus the Great, who released the Jews from captivity in Babylon, and his successors, Cambyses II, Darius I and Xerxes I, were exclusively Zoroastrian, although they gave relatives Zoroastrian names, venerated fire-holders and their tombs, covered with Zoroastrian symbols, were consistent with the tombs of later Achaemenid kings<sup>3</sup>, from Artaxerxes 1 on, who adopted Zoroastrianism as the state religion of Persia. While Zoroastrianism co-existed with other religions in Persia, it remained preeminent until the invasion of Islam.

Legend tells that on retreat to a mountain at the age of 20, Zoroaster had a revelation about the uncreated eternally good, wise and all powerful creator, *Ahura Mazda*. Zoroaster taught that people can choose between life and non-life, and that only through good thoughts, good words and good deeds can an individual ward off evil or non-life. Every thought, word and deed has consequences in this life and the after life, when souls must traverse a bridge. Some fall into gloom, others are trapped on the bridge but those whose good thoughts, words and deeds outweigh their bad ones reach a communion with *Ahura Mazda*. The oldest segments of the *Avesta* are thought to be closest to the teachings of Zoroaster. Later writings in Middle Persian describe *Ahura Mazda* as spawning the Wise Lord, *Ohrmazd*, and an eternal uncreated evil lord called *Ahriman* or *Angra Mainyu*, the source of all wrath, idolatry, lies and destruction. To overcome this dualism, theologians interpreted the duality as asymmetrical: evil was illusion, obscuration and parasitic, an absence of being rather than a being of itself. Evil cannot destroy the souls that *Ahura Mazda* created, and will eventually be defeated.

It is said that it took Zoroaster ten years to make a single convert. From Media, he travelled to Persia and Afghanistan, teaching, being persecuted, receiving visions, performing miracles before dying at the age of seventy-seven. The Parsi of India are followers of Zoroaster.

Zoroastrians pray before the hearth fire. In ancient times they prayed before a fire on a mountain summit. From the fourth century BC, they prayed in fire temples, the fires tended by priests. Zoroastrians celebrate the Spring equinox of Newroz on 21 March. They have six irregularly spaced annual festivals and feasts that celebrate the creation of sky, water, earth, plant life,

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<sup>2</sup> Kreyenbroek, P.G. (2003). Review of Gnoli, G. (2000) Zoroaster in History, Biennial Yarshater Lecture Series No. 2, New York: Bibliotheca Persica, *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 36, 1, p. 121 - 124

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/achaemenid-religion>

animal life and people. Other feasts celebrate fire and Mithra. Zoroastrians do not believe in defiling the earth by burying the dead, or defiling fire by cremating the dead. Although dead Zoroastrian kings were entombed on solid stone, which raised their tomb above the earth, the corpses of most followers of Zoroaster were left on a platform to be consumed by birds. In the Sassanian period, the bones could be subsequently interred in a stone or ceramic ossuary.

After Cyrus the Great released the Jews from enforced exile in Babylon, many Jews decided to stay in Babylon and Media. Their exposure to the teachings of Zoroaster may explain later Jewish texts that moralise an afterlife, and describe an apocalyptic end of time and the coming of a Saviour or Messiah. Exodus 27:20 describes a continuously burning flame at the temple altar. Whilst early scriptures describe angels, it was only when the Jews lived in exile that the seven archangels were given names. The Dead Sea Scrolls of the Essenes describe the Spirit of Light and the Spirit of Darkness.

Another explanation for these convergences is that both Judaism and Zoroastrianism originated in Yezidism. Thus, in the Book of Job, Satan is an adversary, but also a loyal servant of God, whilst in Christianity, the description of Satan is similar to that of *Ahriman*.



Zoroastrian fire temple, Dohuk, southern  
Kurdistan (Iraq). Source: Gina Lennox, 2013

## Alevism

Alevi are diverse in their ethnicity, religious beliefs and practices. Alevi can be Arab, Azeri, Kurd or Turk. Non-Kurdish Alevi tend to identify as Sufi or an offshoot of Shia Islam, whereas Kurdish Alevi tend to claim they are not Muslim, unless under pressure from the authorities, and do not practise the five pillars of Islam<sup>4</sup>. Kurdish Alevi men and women pray side-by-side and do not face Mecca. They fast for 12 days but not in Ramadan and it is customary for Alevi women to not cover their hair.

Kurdish Alevi are influenced by pre-Islamic oral traditions, combining ancient rituals associated with Shamanism as well as Yezidi and Zoroastrian beliefs and practises related to fire, light and angels with being followers of Ali ibin Abi Talib, Mohammed's nephew, the fourth Caliph and the first of 12 Shia imams, the last, *Al Mahdi*, yet to be revealed. Alevi beliefs are also influenced by Christianity in that each of these twelve imams are believed to be divine incarnations or a gate through which an incomprehensible God transmits messages, but also, God can incarnate in three dimensions: the gate, the meaning and the signifier or veil. Jesus and Ali were incarnations, Ali being the last before the coming *Al Mahdi*. Some Alevi Kurds believe Ali dwells in the sun. Others believe Ali dwells in the moon. Alevi Kurds believe God dwells in every human.

People cannot convert to Alevism, they must come from an Alevi family. On winter nights Kurdish Alevi gather to play music, dance and sing Alevi songs. In their households, the fire must never go out and one must never douse fire with water. Another tradition is lighting candles in respect for the dead, or when the family moves between their winter and summer residence. A major Alevi ceremony is *Jem*, which involves men and women performing a ritual dance called the *Sema*, with much twirling and music. The ceremony is led by a *Dede*, a spiritual and community leader from a *Dede* lineage, with each Alevi community owing allegiance to a *Dede* from a particular lineage. In return the *Dede* is obliged to look after his community. The *Jem* ceremony was banned under the Ottomans and is banned in modern Turkey, where there is pressure on Alevi to convert to Sunni Islam. Many modern Alevi Kurds are secular.

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<sup>4</sup> The five pillars of Islam are sincerely professing the faith, praying five times a day, going to Haj, fasting in Ramadan and giving zakat (charity).

## Kakai

The Kakai faith is related to the faith known as *Ahl-e Haqq*. Kakai is the label given to *Ahl-e Haqq* in south Kurdistan (Iraq). In Iran *Ahl-e Haqq* are called Yar(e)san, although there are some differences between Kakai and Yarsan. To make distinctions more obscure, the Kakai share some but not all religious beliefs with Shabak and sometimes Kakai and Shabak intermarry. Most Kakai (and Shabak) identify as ethnic Kurds.

The Kakai religion is often classified as a Sufi offshoot of Shia Islam, but many Kakai deny this connection given they retain pre-Islamic beliefs and traditions, including a hereditary class of religious guides, within which there are four ranks, with every family associated with a *pir*. Kakai do not adhere to the five pillars of Islam, although they have parallel practices: devout Kakai pray at dawn, fast for three days in a year, and make the Haj to the tomb of Sultan Ishaq (who is said to have lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> century but whose lifespan was 300 years). Moreover, Kakai practice monogamy, with adultery being the only valid ground for divorce.

Possibly to avoid persecution, Kakai are highly secretive about their beliefs and practices. They even have their own language, Macho, used in ritual and called Gorani in Western literature<sup>5</sup>. Kakai believe God created a set number of human souls in the inner world before creating Adam in the outer world of human experience. Like the Yezidi, they believe in the transmigration of souls. Kakai believe these souls are tested in the illusionary outer world over 1,001 life times. They also believe in successive incarnations of the Divine Essence, of which Ali was one and Sultan Ishaq another. Another echo of Yezidism, is that to Kakai believe Satan was an angel forgiven by God after this angel refused to bow to Adam. Reminiscent of Zoroastrianism, Kakai believe people are entirely responsible for their own choices in thoughts, words and actions<sup>6</sup>. Kakai have their own places of worship and holy books, the main scripture, *Kalam-e Saranjam*, having been written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Among the rituals are seven communal suppers held each year to celebrate the four seasons.

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<sup>5</sup> Leezenberg, M. The Shabak and the Kakai: Dynamics of ethnicity in Iraqi Kurdistan. *Kurdish Academy of Language*. Retrieved from <http://www.kurdishacademy.org/?q=node/133>

<sup>6</sup> Edmonds, C.J. (1969). The Beliefs and Practices of the Ahl-I Haqq of Iraq. *Iran*, British Institute of Persian Studies, Vol. 7, p. 89 – 101.

## **Jewish Kurds**

Research has established a genetic relationship between Jews and Kurds, and the Torah identifies Haran in northern Mesopotamia (northern Kurdistan/eastern Turkey) as where Abraham's relatives lived. From Mesopotamia the ancestors of Jews migrated to Judea but during the Assyrian Empire of the eighth and ninth century BC several thousand were forced into exile and brought to the cities of the Medes. During the Babylonian-Chaldean Empire of the sixth century BC, thousands more were brought to Babylon in southern Mesopotamia. Those who remained in the region are the ancestors of modern day Jewish Kurds. Some evidence suggests that the royal family of Adiabene in Erbil were Jewish in the first century AD. About 100 Aramaic-speaking Jewish Kurd population centres existed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, with Mosul Jews having some autonomy. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a Jewish Kurd community flourished in Amadiya. In the city of Dakho there is an island in the Khabur River known as Little Jerusalem. A Shrine to the Prophet Daniel is located in Kirkuk and the tomb of Jonah was located in Mosul, until ISIS destroyed the tomb in 2014. In 1948, there were 30,000 Jewish Kurds living in 187 communities in Kurdistan. Twenty thousand lived in 146 communities in South Kurdistan (Iraq). Others were dispersed among 19 communities in East Kurdistan (Iran), 11 communities in North Kurdistan (Turkey) and 11 communities in West Kurdistan (Syria).

In the 1950s, Jews were encouraged to leave Kurdistan and settle in Israel, where there is an estimated 200,000 Jewish Kurds. The most famous of these are Moshe Barazani (a freedom fighter during the British mandate of Palestine), Zvi Bar (mayor of Ramat Gan 1989 – 2013), Yosef Shiloach (an actor), Yitzhak Mordechai (general, politician, Minister of Defence 1996 – 1999), Itzik Kala (a singer) and Mickey Levy (member of the Knesset since 2013).

## **Christian Kurds**

From the fourth century, some Kurds converted to Christianity. For instance, in the fifth century the royal family of Adiabene in Erbil converted from Judaism to Christianity. Christian Kurds use Aramaic for their archives and ecclesiastical texts. During the Sassanian Empire most Christian Kurds were Nestorian. After the invasion of Islam, many Kurds were forced to convert to Islam, but under the Byzantines, the Kurds in western Cappadocia converted to Christianity and those in eastern Cappadocia, who resisted, were punished with war and deportations. In 1272 Marco Polo reported a presence of Nestorian and Jacobite Kurds around Mosul. Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century missionaries made some converts and in 1908 a Sykes report estimated there were 2,100 Kurdish Christian families in Hakkari (western Kurdistan/northern Syria). Over the centuries, many Christian Kurds were assimilated into the Assyrian or Armenian communities.