The principle of exposing the dead to birds and beasts of prey seems to have been a part of Zoroastrian life from earliest times. The Zend-Avesta commands the following procedure:

**From the Source**

> And two men, strong and agile, having changed their garments, shall lift the body from the clay or the stones, or out of the plastered house, and they shall lay it down at a place where they know that there are always corpse-eating dogs and corpse-eating birds.\(^{19}\)

Zoroastrian disposal of the dead occasionally runs into problems when the community is small and deaths are so infrequent that there are not large numbers of vultures about the dakhmas. On some occasions, non-Zoroastrian majorities protest against this procedure. In such situations, it is permissible to bury the body in a stone casket lined with lead to prevent contamination of the soil. Modern Zoroastrians sometimes live in cities where the practice of exposing the dead may be frowned upon. This has caused them to think of alternatives, such as cremation by means of electrical heat. In this manner, the flame may not be contaminated. Another alternative is to bury a body in a completely sealed casket so there is no chance of contaminating the earth.

**Historical Development of Zoroastrianism**

Apparently, Zoroastrianism was well-established as the religion of the Persian people by the sixth century B.C.E. It was therefore the religion of Cyrus the Great when he founded the Medo-Persian Empire and ruled from 558 to 530 B.C.E. Cyrus is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as the liberator of the Jews from Babylonian captivity in 538 B.C.E. However, Zoroastrian sources do not mention Cyrus or his contemporaries. The earliest sources of information on the religion of the Persian Empire are inscriptions from the time of Darius the Great (521–486 B.C.E.). Although they indicate that the people of that era worshipped Ahura Mazda, they do not mention Zoroaster.

**From the Source**

> A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this excellent work which is seen, who created happiness for man, who bestowed wisdom and activity upon Darius the king.

> Says Darius the king: By the favor of Ahuramazda I am of such a sort that I am a friend to the right, I am not a friend to wrong; it is not my desire that the weak man should have wrong done to him by the mighty; nor is that my desire, that the mighty man should have wrong done him by the weak.

> What is right, that is my desire. I am not a friend to the man who is a Lie-follower. I am not hot-tempered. What things develop in my anger, I hold firmly under control by my willpower. I am firmly ruling over my own [impulses].\(^{20}\)
Zoroastrian influence of people and religions other than the Persians is also a matter of some speculation. Many ancient Greek and Roman writers were apparently enamored of Zoroaster and his thoughts, and he is featured in many of their writings. However, the Persian emperors of the fifth century B.C.E. failed in several attempts to conquer Greece. Consequently, Persian influence was never strong there. Persia did conquer and hold the Middle East for two centuries, and its influence was very strong on the peoples of that area. The Jews came under Persian control in 538 B.C.E. when Cyrus conquered Babylon, where many Jews lived in captivity. According to the Hebrew Bible, Cyrus allowed the captive Jews to return to Jerusalem. Apparently, a minority of the Jews returned, but most stayed in Mesopotamia and became a part of the culture there. If the book of Esther is correct, a Jewish woman even became the wife of the king of Persia.

How much influence did Zoroastrianism have on Judaism during this period? We cannot be sure. However, there are certain changes in the theology of Judaism between the pre-exilic days of 586 B.C.E. and the post-exilic period beginning in 538 B.C.E. Biblical books that reflect the period prior to 586 B.C.E. have no Satan figure. However, the literature that was written after the exile speaks of a Satan figure four times. In the intertestamental literature, Satan and his demons are mentioned frequently; in the New Testament literature, they are accepted as a regular part of life. Jesus is confronted by Satan as he begins his public ministry, and a large part of that ministry is devoted to exorcising demons. Pre-exilic biblical books have no mention of a resurrection of the body, little concern for life after death in either a heaven or hell, no reference to God’s plan for bringing the earth to an end, only an occasional mention of angels, and no word about a day of judgment. Each of these themes, which were part of the teachings of Zoroastrianism, developed in Judaism after the exile, and each had become a vital part of the religion by the time of Jesus.

The early Christians incorporated these items into their religion. In later years, it was the eschatology of Judaism and Christianity that most deeply influenced the prophet Muhammad; judgment day, resurrection, heaven, hell, Satan, demons, and angels all became vital parts of Islam. It may be that all of these major religions drew their eschatology from Zoroastrianism.

The Persian Empire was conquered by Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C.E. In the years that followed, Zoroastrianism suffered a decline. The entire Persian culture was invaded by the pervasive Hellenistic culture. During the era of the Roman Empire, Zoroastrianism also was quiescent. All that seems to have been active in this period was the cult of Mithra. The Roman Empire became acquainted with Mithra in the first century C.E. Mithra, the god of light and obedience, appealed especially to the Roman soldier; thus, Mithraic cults were established throughout the entire Mediterranean world. The worship of Mithra became so popular that some suggest it was a major rival to early Christianity. When Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire, however, Mithraism was suppressed.

A revival of Zoroastrianism occurred in the third century C.E. under the Sassanid rulers of Persia. These rulers established official support for Zoroastrianism and had the ancient scriptures translated into contemporary language.