

Jainism

By Dr. Brady Blevins

Founder: Vardhamana Jnatrputra, better known as: Mahavira (599-527 BC)

Founded: 550 BC

Texts: Purvas (now lost), Shatkhandagama, Pravachansara, Tattvarth Sutra, Prasamarati Prakarana, Samaysar¹

Key Terms: Tirthankaras, Karma, Moksha Samsara (Reincarnation), Jina

INTRODUCTION

Jainism is an ancient religion that was founded in the sixth century BC; by Vardhamana, who is better known as Mahavira, which means “Great Hero.” He was born in 599 BC in Kundagrama, near Patna, in northern India and was a contemporary of Buddha. There are many similarities between Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism.² Adherents view Jainism as an everlasting religion with time rolling in eternal cycles of rise and decline. Followers of Jainism are called Jainas and are taught by **Jinas** who are supreme souls (*devapuja*) that are completely free from all defilements. “A *jina* is a spiritual conqueror, a title given to twenty-four great teachers known as Tirthankara.”³ Mahavira was the twenty-fourth **Tirthankara** (Ford-Maker) because he was the one, according to Jaina tradition, who found the path to liberation and showed it to others. The twenty-four Tirthankaras function, in Jainism, as one who discovers a ford (or path) “across the sea of suffering to the realm of liberation.”⁴ “Tirthankaras are also called Arihantas, Jinas, Kevalis, and Vitragi. Each of these names carries a meaning that describes the way a tirthankara overcame negative karma. Arihant means ‘destroyer of inner enemies,’ Jina means ‘victor of inner enemies,’ and vitragi means ‘one who does not have anymore attachment or hatred towards anyone.’”⁵

The life of the founder of Jainism, Mahavira, is described as a life of opulence in an upper class Hindu family. Tradition reports that when he was born he had five nurses and “grew up enjoying the fivefold joys of sound, touch, taste, sight, and smell.”⁶ Mahavira, around the age of thirty after the death of his parents, rejected the pleasures he grew up with and lived the remainder of his life under strict asceticism and nonviolence (*ahimsa*). Mahavira’s strict asceticism led him to not wear clothes, bathe or even ward off the attacks of animals.⁷ This mindset is foundational to the way Jainas approach life. Their motto, “Live and Let Live,” highlights the idea of living peaceably with all living things. This dedication to a nonviolent lifestyle is due to a belief that all living things have a soul. Therefore, Jainas are vegetarians because they do not wish to kill animals. They do acknowledge that vegetables are living things but justify this by saying it is the least conscious level of life. Some Jainas monks, especially those of the Digambaras sect, will not wear clothes because of the violence necessary to make the fibers for clothing. Some adherents will even go as far as to wear masks on their face to avoid the possibility of swallowing an insect.

HISTORY

Jainism originated in the region of the kingdom of Magadha in the northeast state of Bihar in modern India. Jain scriptures tell of missionaries that went to the regions of Nepal and Kashmir to establish the religion. Jainism also spread to southern India and even to the west to Rajasthan and Gujarat.⁸ Famine in northern India is also said to have influenced the movement of Jainism.

About six centuries after the death of Mahavira’s a major schism occurred within Jainism. There two groups that formed due to the split, Shvetambaras (white-clad) and Digambaras

(sky-clad). The main differences between the two groups are that the Digambaras believe “that liberation requires renunciation of all possessions, including clothes.”⁹ Digambaras monks do not have any earthly possessions other than a small broom used to brush insects out of the way before they sit or lie down. Shvetambaras believe that the Mahavira did not wear clothes but assert that this is currently a down cycle or degeneration, so nudity would be inappropriate at the present time. Each group believes that the Purvas, teachings from each of the twenty-four Tirthankaras, were the earliest religious texts. However, since the Purvas are lost there is debate over which texts are to be considered scripture. The earliest teachings, known as sutras, were composed in Ardhamagadhi and are were placed in collections called *agama*.¹⁰ Dissension between the two groups originated in that “Shvetambaras maintain that their canonical literature was preserved and compiled during various councils in the centuries after Mahavira’s death.”¹¹ Digambaras, believe that the *agama* (used as a generic term for scriptures) was lost; therefore, they hold to other texts written by Jain scholars; the main two being: *Shatkhandagama* and *Kashayaprabhrita*. In the 1600s there was a schism within the Shvetambaras and a group emerged called the Sthanakvasi, whose main issue was opposition to the use of temples and images for worship.

Today there are approximately 6 million Jainas, the majority live in India but there is a presence living throughout the eastern portion of the United States and Canada.¹² Since Jains do not actively proselytize their numbers are stagnate. The geographical spread of Jainism has been primarily due to emigration over the past few centuries.¹³

DOCTRINE

Jainism is described as “an ascetic, pacifistic religion with many similarities to Hinduism and some to Buddhism.”¹⁴ Jainism does not hold to a personal creator god. In fact, within this philosophy there is no need for a creator god, because it is believed that the universe consists of mental and material factors that have been and will always be eternally present. Jain tradition goes as far as to say “the belief that the cosmos was created by a god is a false and ‘evil doctrine.’”¹⁵

The main components that comprise the belief system in Jainism are: karma, and *samsara*.¹⁶ Samsara (also known as reincarnation) is the idea that there is a cycle of death and rebirth. This is similar to Hinduism and Buddhism.¹⁷ The reason or need for *samsara* is the problem of karma (the idea that actions done in this life have future consequences).¹⁸ Jainism teaches “souls (*jiva*) and non-souls (*ajiva*) are fundamentally pure, endowed with bliss, consciousness, energy, and omniscience.”¹⁹ The problem for the soul is the effects that karma has and the entrapment into a constant cycle of rebirth is the result. Reincarnation is not viewed as a favorable activity. Hinduism and Jainism teach that *moksha* is liberation from the endless cycle of rebirths. The major difference is that in Jainism one is personally able to achieve the ultimate goal, which is “the highest state of isolation . . . [as] one is freed from all bonds of karmic particles.”²⁰ “Once freed from the weight of bad karma, each *jiva* ascends to the height of the universe and there enjoys eternal bliss and knowledge. This state is called nirvana.”²¹ This is the desired end for the adherents of Jainism.

There are other beliefs that are fundamental to eliminating bad karma such as the nine fundamentals, and the five great vows. The Nine Fundamentals or ***Nav Tattvas*** is the Jain theory of karma. Following the Nav Tattvas is believed to lead one down the path of liberation from the karmic build up on the soul and ultimately to the soul’s liberation (*moksha*) and reaching the state of nirvana. Jains use an analogy to illustrate the need for following this path of liberation. The illustration is about a family with a farmhouse. They have all the windows open, enjoying a cool breeze, then a storm quickly comes upon them blowing dust in the house. They close all the windows but now must get rid of the dust inside the house. Once they shut the windows they cleanse the home by removing the dust.²² The dust in the illustration is karma and the first of the Nav Tattvas is *jiva* or soul, which is represented by the people in the house. The house, because it is nonliving matter, would be considered *ajiva* (not living) this is the second Nav Tattvas. The third is *punya* (or merit), which is the enjoyment of the cool breeze before the storm. This is the acquisition of good karma that comes from doing good deeds. The fourth is *pap* (results of bad deeds). In the illustration this would be the suffering brought to the person by the storm blowing dust inside the house. The fifth Nav Tattva is *asrava*, which is the arrival of karmic matter into one’s life. In the illustration it is represented by dust coming

through the doors and windows of the house. Jains teach that asrava can enter one's life through mental, physical and/or verbal activities. The sixth Nav Tattva is *samvar*, which is stopping karmic buildup. In the illustration the shutting of the doors and windows represented this action. Jains would exercise this in a practical manner through *samiti*, which is living a life of moderation and carefulness. The accumulation of dust in the house represented the seventh Nav Tattva, *bandha*, or bondage of karma. The eighth is *nirjara* (extermination of karmas), which is the activity of cleaning the house. The final stage is moksha, which is the liberation of the soul and the attainment of the state of nirvana. The clean house illustrates this stage.

Another way devout Jains try to eliminate bad karma is to adhere to the five great vows. Devout Jains, especially monks and nuns, will ascribe to the five great vows or the **Five Mahavratas**. The vows are *ahimsa* (nonviolence, extending to all living things), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (not stealing), *brahmacharya* (sexual purity) and *aparigraha* (detachment). This constitutes one of the **Three Jewels** of Jainism, with the other two being "right faith/views and right knowledge."²³ The final act of a Jaina to remove negative karma would be to fast unto death. This is the voluntary act of starving one's self to death for the purpose of eliminating large amounts of karma and possibly even leading to final liberation.²⁴ Not all Jains adhere to this practice; but those that do are usually monks. Fasting unto death requires a gradual program of fasting that may last up to twelve years.²⁵ However, if a monk gets sick he may choose to immediately begin his fast by going outside his village and finding a place where there is nothing he could injure or harm and then fast until death. Adherents believe that following these principles will lead them to liberation and the escape from the cycle of rebirth that brings continual pain, misery and death.

PRACTICES

Asceticism is important for Jains and this is evident by the severe ascetic practices. These practices are exercised for the purpose of increasing one's (usually a priest) *tapas* (heat) for performing sacrificial rituals. The practices include: wearing abandoned robes, only wearing three robes (upper, bottom and outer robe), begging with only one's hands cupped as a bowl, collecting food at every house, only eating a single meal a day, eating only from a bowl (no secondary item or utensil), not accepting additional food after receiving a meal, living in uninhabited areas without a shelter, live in an area where a human has been buried or burned, accepting a spot given to sleep and not looking for another, and a renunciation of utilizing the posture of lying down. Adherents believe that this will allow them to achieve moksha and experience liberation of the soul.

There are other practices within Jainism that focus on daily prayer and worship. Jains participate in a daily prayer each morning before the sun rises; this prayer is called **Namaskar Mantra**. They will also take part in a prayer at night invoking "the five classes of superior beings, which are the spirits, patriarchs, ascetic leaders, living saints, and all ascetics."²⁶ Daily prayers will include addressing the "supreme soul," which is understood as the collection of all the souls of the tirthankaras. These prayers are not for Jains to ask for needs or any material benefit but for guidance and inspiration to follow the path of happiness and moksha. These prayers will include *samayika*, which is a meditative ritual and *pratikraman* a ritual done morning and night to repent of violence or uncompleted duties. Along with the daily prayers many Jains will practice the **Six Obligatory Duties**, which include: worship of the supreme soul, serving the elders, studying the Jain scriptures, self-control, austerities and charity.²⁷ It often takes hours to complete these six actions and they are to be completed twice a day. Therefore, monks and nuns are the primary ones that fulfill these actions and even then they may opt to do it only once a day.²⁸

Daily prayers, The Five Mahavratas, The Three Jewels of Jainism, the Six Obligatory Actions combine to give the foundation of *puja*, which means "worship" and "honor."²⁹ Another way that some Jains will worship is by taking a *yatra*, or pilgrimage to one of the places where a tirthankara gained enlightenment. Jains worship in a practical day-to-day sense is centered on veneration to idols. Whether it is a small idol in a Jain's home or a large idol of a Jina in an opulent temple; "lay worshippers [would] remove old offerings, anoint the image with water, yogurt, or milk, recite prayers, and then present fresh offerings (uncooked rice, flowers, fruit, incense, flame and so on)."³⁰

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The Bible, in Genesis 1-2, teaches that God created everything by His Word, *ex nihilo*. Contrary to Jain teaching that the cosmos is eternal and runs on its own laws and exists independently without the intervention of any creator or god. The Bible affirms that there is one God (Isa. 43:10) and that He is the Creator of all things (Col. 1:16). Jainism does not offer an explanation as to when the universe began other than saying it is eternally existent. Due to the belief in one God, Christianity condemns the practice of idol worship (Exodus 20:4-5).

Jainism and Christianity both teach about the disciplines of fasting and meditation but the beliefs are fundamentally different. In Christianity fasting is the setting aside of eating or other activities for the purpose of devoting that time to God, focusing on His attributes and His word, the Bible. Meditation is different in that Christian meditation is focused on setting one's mind on things above (Col. 3:2) not emptying one's mind.³¹

Both Jainism and Christianity see humans as being spiritually flawed. Jainism maintains that human souls are fundamentally pure while Christianity teaches that all humans, while created God's image, are marred by sin committed against a personal, holy Creator. (Psalm 51:5; Romans 3:10, 5:12). Moksha is Jainism's answer to the soul's problem and that this achieved through reincarnation. Christianity teaches that there is only one life then judgment (Hebrews 9:27-28), where one will be judged based on their deeds (Romans 6:23) unless they have trusted Christ. The Bible rejects reincarnation³² and holds that it is only by faith in Christ and the grace of God that one can receive salvation (Eph. 2:8-9). Thus, salvation is not attainable through austere sacrifice, fasting, reincarnation, moksha, balancing karma or any type of idol worship. Contrary to Jain teaching the Bible asserts that when a person dies they will either be ushered to the presence of God or be eternally separated from God based on whether they have been obedient to God's call of salvation (Romans 2:6-8). Therefore, mankind's problem is a sin nature (Romans 3:23) and the only way to receive redemption of sin is through the work of Christ on the cross (Romans 5:8).

Notes

- ¹ There are over 16 different sacred texts some are accepted by the Digambaras group and others by the Shvetambara group.
- ² A separate 4-page Profile has been published on these subjects: C. Fred Smith, "Hinduism," & Jason Barker, "Zen Buddhism," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2016). A complete collection of Profiles (over 480 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. These Profiles are available at <http://www.watchman.org/staff/jwalker/ProfileHinduism.pdf>, and <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/zenprofile.pdf>.
- ³ Charles E. Farhadian, *Introducing World Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 177.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.
- ⁵ "24 Tirthankaras" Jainworld.com, <http://www.jainworld.com/education/juniors/junles03.htm>, accessed December 15, 2015.
- ⁶ Farhadian, 2015, 178.
- ⁷ Thomas A. Robinson and Hillary P. Rodrigues, *World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ James Fieser and John Powers, *Scriptures of the World's Religions*, 5th ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2015), 63.
- ¹⁰ Robinson, 2014.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² "Jainism" Patheos.com, <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Jainism>, accessed December 15, 2015.
- ¹³ Robinson, 2014.
- ¹⁴ Len Woods, *Understanding World Religions* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, Inc., 2008), 112.
- ¹⁵ Farhadian, 2015, 193.
- ¹⁶ A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: Eric Pement, "Reincarnation," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2016). A complete collection of Profiles (over 480 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/reincarnationprofile.pdf>.
- ¹⁷ A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: C. Fred Smith "Tibetan Buddhism," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2016). A complete collection of Profiles (over 480 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at <http://www.watchman.org/staff/jwalker/ProfileTibetanBuddhism.pdf>.
- ¹⁸ Smith, 3.
- ¹⁹ Robinson, 2014, 216.
- ²⁰ Farhadian, 2015, 189.
- ²¹ Woods, 2008, 111.
- ²² Alexander P. Varghese, *India* (New Delhi, India: Atlantic Publishers), 2008, 277-78.
- ²³ Robinson, 2014.
- ²⁴ Fieser, 2015.
- ²⁵ Fieser, 2015.
- ²⁶ Farhadian, 2015, 207.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Robinson, 2014.
- ²⁹ Farhadian, 2015.
- ³⁰ Woods, 2008, 111-12.
- ³¹ See the Christian Response from Barker, 2011.
- ³² See the Christian Response from Pement, 2010.



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