

ZOROASTRIANISM  
INNOVATIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE RELIGION IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Masood Ahmadi Afzadi

**Abstract:** This article seeks to cast a new light on an ancient religion, one that stands as one of the most innovative and oldest religions in the world. It has introduced profound concepts such as human rights, eschatology, life, light and fire, humanity, free will, love, and many other valuable notions to various religions. Major religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have also been influenced by these concepts. The article posits that Zoroastrianism and the religious heritage of ancient Iran essentially constitute a global legacy for all of humanity.

**Keywords:** Zoroaster, Amesha Spenta, Ahura Mazda, Light, Fire, Judaism, Iran

**Introduction**

We would like to mention an ancient religion and an ancient civilization in the East. We don't mean Gautama Buddha, the prince of Persian descent in 563 BC in northern India. And our view is not Mahavira, the founder of Jainism at this time either. The landscape of Confucius, the Chinese sage in 551 BC or Lao Tzu, was not a little earlier than him. We are not talking about the religion of the ancient Egyptians in the first or even second millennium BC. We are not talking about Mesopotamia and the glorious civilization of Sumerians, Assyrians, and Elamites in the first and second millennium BC.

We want to talk about the religion and the prophet introduced by the Greek historian Plutarch. Plutarch in the first century AD, detailed this religion and its prophet; introduced Zoroaster, and citing the Greek historian Theopempeius of the 4th century BC, considers his lifetime to be five thousand years before the Trojan War. That is, six thousand years before Plato. Aristotle, Eudoxus, and Hermippus write that Zoroaster lived five thousand years before the Trojan War. Diogenes Laertius quotes the same opinion from Hermodorus and Xanthus. Findings in regions historically associated with early Zoroastrianism, such as Northeast Iran and Northwest Afghanistan, show settlements dating back to around 2000 BCE that could plausibly be linked to Zoroaster's teachings. Zoroastrianism is based on the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra), who emphasized the worship of one god, Ahura Mazda, the god of wisdom. Its scriptures are collected in the Avesta, which includes the Gathas, hymns thought to have been composed by Zoroaster himself. The core beliefs include:

**1. Monotheism:** The worship of Ahura Mazda as the supreme deity.

**2. Cosmic Dualism:** The constant battle between the forces of good (led by Ahura Mazda) and evil (led by Angra Mainyu or Ahriman). Followers are urged to actively do good to promote the order of Ahura Mazda.

**3. Human Choice:** The belief in free will, where humans must choose the path of good or evil.



## Connections to Proto-Zoroastrianism

### Linguistic and Ritual Links:



- Old Avestan Language: The linguistic evidence of the Old Avestan language and the ritualistic use of fire in BMAC align with Zoroastrian practices, supporting theories that Zoroaster's activities could be dated to the early 2nd millennium BCE.

- Symbolism: Symbols found in BMAC, including the winged disc, are similar to those used in later Zoroastrian iconography.<sup>12</sup>

### Light and Fire

Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest monotheistic religions, profoundly integrates the symbolism of light, particularly through the elemental form of fire, into its theological and ritualistic practices. This article explores the multifaceted role of light in Zoroastrianism, emphasizing its representation of purity, truth, and the divine presence of Ahura Mazda. The discussion extends to practical and eschatological implications of light, underscoring its pivotal role in religious rituals and ethical guidance.



In Zoroastrianism, light serves not only as a physical phenomenon but also as a spiritual symbol that permeates various aspects of the religion. Central to Zoroastrian worship and cosmology, light—and by extension, fire—represents wisdom, purity, and the life-giving quality of Ahura Mazda, the supreme deity (Boyce, 2001: 115).

The reverence for light manifests in the continuous fire maintained in Zoroastrian temples, symbolizing an eternal battle against darkness and evil.

### Light as Divine Wisdom

Light in Zoroastrianism transcends its physical form, embodying divine wisdom and the inherent goodness of Ahura Mazda. Mary Boyce notes that light, particularly fire, is considered the purest form of Ahura Mazda's creation, promoting the religion's key tenet of purity (Boyce, 2001: 117). The concept

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, pp. 110-135. This book provides detailed findings on the religious aspects uncovered in Margiana, linking them to early Zoroastrian practices.

& Francfort, Henri-Paul. „Seals and Sealing in the Ancient Near East,“ In *Bibliotheca Mesopotamica*, 1989. Francfort discusses the administrative and ceremonial uses of seals, which complement the findings from BMAC sites.

& Lamberg-Karlovsky, C. C. „Archaeology and Language: The Indo-Iranians.“ In *Current Anthropology*, 2002. This article explores the linguistic connections between the Indo-Iranians and the BMAC, providing context for the spread of linguistic and religious practice

<sup>2</sup> Hiebert, Fredrik Talmage. „Origins of the Bronze Age Oasis Civilization in Central Asia.“ In *Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology*, 1994. Hiebert provides a comprehensive overview of the BMAC, including discussions on the origins and characteristics of its civilization.

& Kohl, Philip L. „The Making of Bronze Age Eurasia.“ In *Cambridge World Archaeology*, 2007. Kohl discusses the broader Eurasian context within which the BMAC developed, highlighting its role in regional trade and cultural exchanges.

of fire as a medium through which divine insight and purity are disseminated is discussed thoroughly in Dhalla’s seminal work (Dhalla, 1938 204–206).



Fire temples, or Agiaries, play a crucial role in Zoroastrianism, housing a sacred fire that is never allowed to extinguish. Philip Kreyenbroek elaborates on the significance of these temples, describing them as beacons where the eternal flame not only symbolizes light’s triumph over darkness but also serves as a constant reminder of the Zoroastrians’ duty towards righteousness (Kreyenbroek, 1993: 59-63).

**Cosmic Dualism: Light Versus Darkness, The Battle Between Good and Evil**

The dualistic nature of Zoroastrianism is vividly illustrated in the cosmic struggle between light (good) and darkness (evil). R.C. Zaehner discusses how this struggle defines the moral and theological framework of Zoroastrianism, with light acting as a metaphor for Ahura Mazda’s divine order opposing Angra Mainyu, the destructive spirit (Zaehner, 1961: 141–143).

William Malandra explores light’s eschatological roles, where it is envisioned as a purifying force during the end times. According to Zoroastrian belief, fire will purify the world, and molten metal will test the souls, separating the righteous from the wicked (Malandra, 1983:102–104).

**Practical and Ethical Implications of Light**

Michael Stausberg provides an extensive analysis of how fire is used in daily rituals, highlighting its role in guiding adherents toward ethical living. Fire ceremonies, involving the recitation of sacred texts and offerings, are integral to Zoroastrian worship, reinforcing the community’s commitment to living in accordance with Ahura Mazda’s principles (Stausberg, 2004: 187–190).

**Trial by Fire in the Tale of Siavash from the Shahnameh**



The Shahnameh, an epic poem written by Ferdowsi around 1000 AD, encapsulates the mythological and historical traditions of Persia, with the story of Siavash highlighting moral and theological themes prevalent in Zoroastrianism. Siavash’s trial by fire is a pivotal episode that utilizes fire as a metaphorical tool for testing truth and purity. This analysis seeks to understand the symbolic and practical roles of this trial within the context of ancient Persian society.

This study synthesizes interpretations from various sources, including the Shahnameh itself, Zoroastrian religious texts, and scholarly analyses. Historical

methodologies are applied to discern the connotations of fire in ancient rituals and their socio-legal implications.

Siavash, accused of incestuous advances by his stepmother Sudabeh, undergoes a trial by fire to prove his innocence. This narrative element is not merely a plot device but reflects deep-set religious practices within Zoroastrianism where fire (Atar) is sacred and purifying.

In Zoroastrianism, fire represents truth, wisdom, and the divine presence of Ahura Mazda (Boyce, 1979). The “Var” test in Siavash’s tale symbolizes an ordeal where only those pure of heart and deed

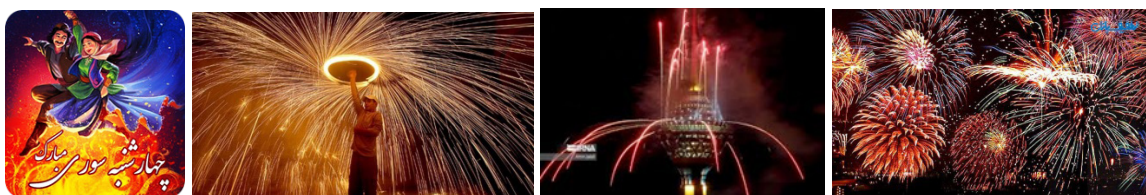
can survive unharmed, reflecting the dualistic nature of Zoroastrian cosmology—the eternal struggle between order (Asha) and chaos (Druj).

Fire's role in the "Var" test is multifaceted, serving as a purifier that rejects the impure and embraces the righteous. This not only asserts Siavash's innocence but also reiterates the cultural ethos that the righteous will prevail through divine will, a recurring motif in Persian literature (Jackson, 1928).

The trial by fire also acts as a public vindication of Siavash's moral stance, reinforcing the societal values of honesty, purity, and justice. Psychologically, it represents the individual's struggle against baseless accusations and the societal judgment that follows (Omidzalar, 2012).

The integration of the "Var" test within the narrative illustrates the legal use of religious rituals as forms of ancient forensic testing. Such ordeals were not merely superstitious practices but structured, deeply symbolic acts designed to uphold social order and moral law, predicated on the belief in a cosmic balance maintained by divine justice.

### Festivals of Light



Festivals such as Nowruz (New Year) and Yalda (Winter Solstice) underscore fire's symbolism. Mary Boyce describes these festivals as celebrations of light's victory over darkness, where fire plays a central role in rituals meant to promote spiritual renewal and moral reflection (Boyce, 1977: 233–237).

Light, particularly fire, is a cornerstone of Zoroastrian theology and practice. It is a symbol of divine wisdom, moral purity, and the eternal presence of Ahura Mazda. Through the continuous and reverent use of fire, Zoroastrians affirm their devotion to upholding the cosmic order against chaos and destruction. The profound symbolism of light extends beyond religious rituals, influencing ethical behaviors and fostering a community bound by a shared commitment to righteousness.

### Faravahar: Exploring Symbol of Zoroastrianism

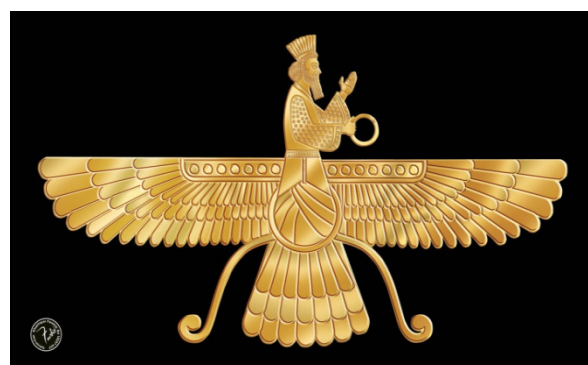
The Faravahar is a winged symbol featuring a human figure with outstretched wings, holding a ring or a circle. It symbolizes the eternal journey of the soul, the choices between good and evil, and the quest for spiritual enlightenment. This article examines the Faravahar and its variations, including the Farohar, shedding light on their theological, cultural, and philosophical implications in Zoroastrianism.

The origins of the Faravahar can be traced back to ancient Mesopotamian and Persian cultures, where winged symbols represented divine protection and guidance. Over time, the Faravahar became associated with Zoroastrianism, evolving to embody its unique theological concepts (Duchesne-Guillemin 1975: 45-50).

The Faravahar incorporates several symbolic elements, each carrying profound significance:

- The human figure represents the individual soul, responsible for its own choices and actions.
- The wings symbolize the journey of the soul, its ascent towards spiritual perfection, and closeness to Ahura Mazda.
- The circle or ring held by the figure symbolizes eternity and the eternal cycle of life and death (Boyce, 1975: 90-95.).

The Faravahar embodies the Zoroastrian principle of ethical dualism, depicting the eternal struggle between good (represented by the figure's uplifted hand) and evil (represented by the figure's down-



turned hand). This dualism underscores the importance of individual choice and responsibility in the cosmic battle between Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu (Zaehner, 1961: 120–125.).

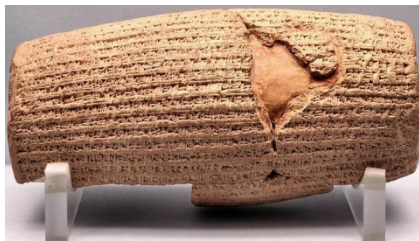


### Connection to Faravashi

The concept of Faravashi extends beyond the symbol of the Faravahar, representing the divine essence or guardian spirit inherent in every individual. In Zoroastrian belief, each person is accompanied by a Faravashi throughout their life, guiding and protecting them on their spiritual journey (Modi, 1922: 65[70]).

The Faravahar serves as a potent symbol of Zoroastrian identity, representing the rich cultural heritage and spiritual legacy of the faith. It is prominently displayed in Zoroastrian rituals, ceremonies, and artwork, serving as a reminder of the community's enduring values and beliefs (Kotwal, 2015: 30–35).

### Cyrus Cylinder: A Proclamation of Ancient Human Rights



Discovered in 1879 in the ruins of Babylon, the Cyrus Cylinder has attracted considerable scholarly attention due to its inscriptions promoting governance reforms by Cyrus the Great after his conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. Scholars like Irving Finkel have translated and interpreted the text, which advocates for racial equality, religious tolerance, and the abolition of slavery—themes that resonate with contemporary human rights discussions.

Cyrus the Great's empire-building efforts were marked by policies that embraced cultural diversity and religious tolerance, stark contrasts to the typical imperial norms of the era. Upon his conquest of Babylon, Cyrus implemented reforms that included the repatriation of displaced peoples and restoration of religious statues to their rightful temples (Finkel, 2013: 14–17).

The Cylinder was found during a British Museum excavation led by Hormuzd Rassam in 1879. Its text not only offers insights into Cyrus's rule but also reflects Zoroastrian societal ideals, which can be seen as precursors to modern human rights (Curtis, 2010: 23–26).

#### The text on the Cylinder covers several key themes:

- Proclamation of Freedoms: Cyrus's text declares the freedom of slaves and the right of all citizens to choose their religion.

- **Racial and Religious Equality**: The Cylinder advocates for the racial equality of Babylonians within the Persian Empire and the free practice of their religions.

#### Comparison with Modern Human Rights

While the Cylinder is often regarded as the first “charter of human rights,” it differs significantly from modern interpretations and documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The Cylinder's decrees are more about Cyrus's specific policies rather than a universal principle applicable to all humans (Schmitt, 2012: 45–47.).

The Cyrus Cylinder serves as a pivotal artifact in understanding ancient approaches to governance and societal management. While it is not a “human rights document” in the modern sense, its declarations reflect a progressive approach to the concepts of freedom and human dignity. By examining the

Cylinder within both its historical context and its subsequent interpretations, we gain valuable insights into the evolution of human rights concepts through history.

The importance of the Cyrus Cylinder as an ancient artifact with significant implications for the understanding of human rights. Through its ancient decrees, it provides a foundational text that informs both historical and contemporary discussions on governance and moral law. The nuanced examination of the Cylinder's text and its thematic analysis not only enriches our understanding of Persian imperial practices but also contributes to the broader discourse on the development and understanding of human rights.

### **Zoroastrianism & Judaism: An Examination of Religious and Cultural Intersections**

The interaction between Zoroastrianism and Judaism has been a subject of scholarly interest for decades, primarily due to the significant historical periods when the Jewish community lived under Persian rule. This paper explores the profound influences of Zoroastrianism, one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions, on Jewish religious thought, particularly during and after the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550–330 BCE). The study delineates the adoption and adaptation of Zoroastrian cosmological and eschatological ideas within Jewish theology, rituals, and ethical practices.

The Babylonian Exile (586–538 BCE) and subsequent Persian rule marked a transformative period for the Jewish people both historically and theologically. Under Cyrus the Great and his successors, the Jewish community returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple, a period that not only restored their cultural identity but also exposed them to Zoroastrianism. Here reviews scholarly discussions that illustrate the Zoroastrian influences on Judaism, which are evident in aspects of angelology, demonology, eschatology, and ethical dualism.



### **Angelology and Demonology**

Before the Exile, the Jewish concept of angels was not as developed. Post-exile texts, however, such as those found in the later prophets and apocalyptic literature, reflect a more structured hierarchy of angels and developed demonology, concepts that are well-established in Zoroastrianism.

#### **Amesha Spentas**

The Amesha Spentas are central to Zoroastrian theology, representing beneficial aspects and moral principles that sustain life:

1. Vohu Manah (Good Mind) – Encourages positive thinking.
2. Asha Vahishta (Best Righteousness) – Promotes order and justice.
3. Khshathra Vairya (Desirable Dominion) – Symbolizes power used wisely.
4. Spenta Armaiti (Holy Devotion) – Represents devotion and earth.
5. Haurvatat (Wholeness) – Embodies water and health.
6. Ameretat (Immortality) – Stands for immortality and plants.

#### **Yazatas**

Yazatas serve specific aspects of the creation:

- Mithra (Covenant) – Presides over covenants.
- Anahita (Waters) – Governs water and fertility.

#### **Jewish Angelology**

Developed during the Second Temple period, the Jewish angelic hierarchy includes:

- Michael – Protector and warrior representing God's mercy.
- Gabriel – Messenger angel, often brings God's judgments.
- Raphael – Angel of healing and divine providence.

### Similarities

Both religions utilize angels to mediate between God and humanity, with each angel or divine being having specific roles that promote or maintain cosmic and moral order.

1. Vohu Manah and Michael: Both represent aspects of wisdom and leadership, guiding humans towards righteousness.
2. Asha Vahishta and Gabriel: Serve as bearers of truth and justice, maintaining cosmic order.
3. Spenta Armaiti and Raphael: Embodiment of the nurturing aspects of devotion, with Raphael's role as a healer reflecting Armaiti's connection to the earth (Boyce, 1994: 111–115).

### Eschatology

The idea of a messianic figure who will arise at the end of time, a final judgment, and the resurrection of the dead is central in both Zoroastrianism and developed post-Exilic Jewish texts (Cohn, 1993: 89–90 & Collins, 2016: 142–145.).

### Ritual and Ethical Dualism

Zoroastrianism's emphasis on the cosmic struggle between good and evil and the moral obligation of individuals to choose "the good" likely influenced similar themes in Jewish writings post-Exile (Lincoln, 2007: 58–60. & Smith, 1971: 180–182.).

## The Concept of Angra Mainyu & Satan



The evolution of 'Satan' in Jewish thought illustrates a significant Zoroastrian impact. Originally a minor figure, Satan becomes a prominent antagonist and the embodiment of evil in post-Exilic texts, mirroring the Zoroastrian Angra Mainyu (Zwinger, 1995: 75-77).

Here is the artistic representation of Satan and Angra Mainyu. The image illustrates Satan with red skin, horns, a pointed tail, and bat-like wings in a fiery landscape, while Angra Mainyu appears as a shadowy figure with multiple eyes and black smoky tendrils in a cold, apocalyptic setting. They face each other, symbolizing a clash of fire and ice, chaos and ruin. The scene effectively blends fiery reds and oranges with icy blues and grays to depict their contrasting natures.

### Resurrection and Afterlife

The explicit references to resurrection found in Daniel 12:2 and associated literature post-date the Exile and reflect Zoroastrian beliefs about individual judgment and the afterlife (VanderKam, 2002: 401-403).

The influence of Zoroastrianism on Judaism is evident in the development of Jewish angelology, demonology, eschatology, and moral philosophy. These influences are most prominently observed during the Second Temple period, reflecting the close cultural and religious interactions between the Jewish people and their Persian rulers. This study not only highlights these theological borrowings but also underscores the dynamic nature of religious evolution and interaction.

### New Aspects of Zoroastrianism in Ancient Religions: An Interdisciplinary Approach

Originating in ancient Persia, Zoroastrianism introduces several revolutionary concepts, including monotheism, the dualistic cosmology of good and evil, and eschatological ideas, such as the final judgment and resurrection. Scholars have long debated the extent of its influence on other ancient religions, particularly through the interactions during various empires' expansions and contractions, such as the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian empires.



## **Theological Innovations**

### **Monotheism and Angelology**

Zoroastrianism's concept of Ahura Mazda as the supreme god introduced a unique form of monotheism that influenced the theological frameworks of Judaism during the Babylonian Exile (Boyce, 2001: 17–20. & Duchesne-Guillemin, 1958: 30–32).

### **Dualistic Influence**

The Zoroastrian dualism between Ahura Mazda (good) and Angra Mainyu (evil) profoundly impacted the religious narratives of Gnostic sects of Christianity, introducing a structured form of ethical and cosmic dualism (Shaked, 1994: 101–117).

### **Cosmological Contributions**

#### **End Times and Apocalyptic Visions**

Zoroastrian eschatological concepts, such as the Saoshyant (savior figure), resurrection, and final judgment, have parallels in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic eschatology, especially in apocalyptic literature (Collins, 2016: 90–95. & Cohn, 1993: 77–80).

#### **Creation Myths and Ritual Practices**

Zoroastrian creation myths and ritual practices, particularly those involving the sacredness of fire and water, influenced the ritual purities practiced in Judaism and the baptismal practices in Christianity (Lincoln, 2007: 142–145).

### **Eschatological Shifts**

#### **Concept of Hell and Heaven**

The Zoroastrian concepts of heaven (Vahishta Ahu) and hell (Achista Ahu) as places of reward and punishment helped shape similar concepts in Christianity and Islam (Malandra, 1983: 102-105 & Barr, 2010: 59–63.).

The intercultural and religious interactions facilitated by the expansive reach of the Persian empires allowed Zoroastrianism to significantly influence the religious landscape of ancient religions. Through its innovative theological, cosmological, and eschatological concepts, Zoroastrianism contributed to shaping the narratives and doctrines of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This study not only highlights these influences but also encourages a reassessment of the origins and evolutions of ancient religious practices and beliefs.

This article offers a scholarly examination of Zoroastrianism's profound impact on ancient religions, underscoring the interconnectedness of religious developments and the enduring legacy of Zoroastrian doctrines in shaping theological and cosmological concepts within these traditions. Through meticulous analysis and comprehensive references, it provides insights into how ancient Persian religious ideas permeated and influenced the broader religious terrain.

## **Exploring New Aspects of the Amesha Spentas in Contemporary Zoroastrian Studies**

Traditionally, the Amesha Spentas have been viewed as archetypal figures representing ideal virtues and elements of the natural world, which include Vohu Manah (Good Mind), Asha Vahishta (Best Righteousness), Khshathra Vairya (Desirable Dominion), Spenta Armaiti (Holy Devotion), Haurvatat (Wholeness), and Ameretat (Immortality). This study examines contemporary scholarly discourse surrounding these figures, highlighting how modern Zoroastrians and scholars interpret these concepts in the context of today's global challenges.

Recent interpretations of the Amesha Spentas emphasize their role in promoting environmental stewardship. Each Spenta is increasingly viewed not just as a spiritual guardian but also as a patron of physical realms essential to ecological balance (Kellens, 2000: 58–62 & Eduljee, 2011: 12–17).

### **The Amesha Spentas and Human Rights**

In the context of human rights, the Amesha Spentas are interpreted as champions of social justice, advocating for principles that underpin the rights to life, liberty, and security. Scholars discuss how these divine figures can inspire contemporary governance frameworks (Lincoln, 2007: 95–99. & Skjærvø, 2006: 110–115.).

Debates on universalism and particularism have been enriched by exploring the Amesha Spentas' roles. They are seen as embodying universal virtues that transcend cultural and religious boundaries, facilitating interfaith understanding and cooperation (Boyce, 1975: 140–145. & Stausberg, 2004: 200–205).

The principles represented by the Amesha Spentas are applied to modern ethical dilemmas, including bioethics, environmental ethics, and the ethics of technology. This aspect involves a reinterpretation of ancient wisdom in light of current issues (Rose, 2011: 73–76. & Maneck, 1997: 85–90.).

The Amesha Spentas continue to be a vital component of Zoroastrian theology and moral philosophy, with their roles and interpretations evolving in response to modern challenges. This exploration reveals that ancient religious doctrines can offer valuable insights into contemporary social, ethical, and environmental issues, proposing solutions that are both innovative and rooted in tradition.

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