
Mithraism: An Ancient Tradition in the Light of Reason and Science

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Abstract:

The Mithraic tradition, or Mithraism, is considered one of the most ancient religious-philosophical belief systems in the history of Iranian and global civilization. This study approaches Mithraism from a rational, scientific, and humanistic perspective, aiming to reconstruct and analyze its content. The article examines its historical origins, key concepts, interactions with other religions such as Zoroastrianism and Christianity, and its geographical spread. It also seeks to assess the contribution of this tradition to the emergence of elevated human values such as truth, light, covenant, love, patience, and dignity.

Keywords: Mithraism, Mithra, ancient tradition, Iran, covenant, sun, Mithra, Anahita, Iranian mysticism

1. Introduction

Mithraism, known in Western textual traditions as the *Mysteria of Mithras*, is considered one of the most prominent esoteric traditions of antiquity. It emerged in Iran prior to Zoroaster and was later transmitted to Europe through cultural and military interactions. (1)

2. Historical Background and Origins

Archaeological evidence and mythological texts suggest that the Mithraic tradition is at least 4,000 years old, with some narratives estimating its age up to 8,000 years. (2) Its origin lies among the Aryan tribes who migrated to the Iranian Plateau and the Indian subcontinent. In this tradition, Mithra is the deity of light, covenant, and justice. His birth from a virgin named Anahita—the goddess of waters—is a central mythological component. (3)

3. Key Concepts in Mithraism

Mithra, as the deity of light and illumination, is closely linked with the sun. However, sun worship in Mithraism does not equate to the worship of the sun as a physical body, but rather the veneration of its life-giving essence. Hence, labeling it as "sun worship" is an imprecise characterization. (4) In this faith, breaking a covenant is considered one of the gravest sins.

4. The Role of Philosophy and Mysticism in the Development of the Faith

Mithraism is deeply intertwined with philosophy and rational thought, and it even influenced Zoroastrian thinkers such as Zoroaster Spitama. Many Mithraic teachings, like truthfulness, rationality, and covenant-keeping, were integrated into Zoroastrianism. (5) During the Islamic era, signs of Mithraic influence can be found in the poetry of Rumi and Hafez, as well as in Iranian mystical thought—for example, the concept of *kharabat* (*khur-abad*), which symbolized the Mithraic temple of the sun. (6)

5. Geographical Expansion and Cultural Encounters

With the expansion of the Parthian Empire (ancestors of the Tajiks, Persians, and Kurds) and the military confrontations between the Aryans and Romans, Mithraism was transferred to Europe. In the early centuries CE, it competed with Christianity. Many *Mithraea* (Mithraic temples) were later converted into churches, and remnants of them still survive beneath some European churches. (7)

6. Symbolism in Mithraism

Prominent symbols in Mithraism include the swastika (the wheel of Mithra), lion, sun, and the lotus flower. Water-related symbols such as the pearl and dolphin are also associated with the myth of Mithra's birth from water. (8)

7. Organizational Structure and Practical Teachings

Mithraism was a hierarchical tradition with various initiatory stages one had to ascend to reach the rank of *Pir* (elder or master). Each stage involved specific teachings and psychological and physical practices. This hierarchical model later influenced Sufism and Islamic mysticism. (9)

8. General Conclusion

Mithraism is one of the most influential religious-philosophical systems in human history, playing a major role in shaping moral and philosophical concepts across the civilizations of Iran, India, Rome, and Europe. A rational and comparative analysis of this tradition can open new horizons for understanding the common roots of religions and universal human values.

Notes and References

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