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of Mithraism and Seven Stages of  
Iranian Theosophy in Persian  
Poems**

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## **Comparison between Seven Stages of Mithraism and Seven Stages of Iranian Theosophy in Persian Poems**

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### **Abstract**

*Mehr* or *Mithra* is one of the Gods of ancient times that was mentioned in *Achaemenian's* inscription of Iran. *Mehr* religion started at *Achaemenian's* era and lasted until *Sassanians'* and meanwhile it was considered to be the extensive religious systems which its remainder signs show wonderful acceptance among people in Europe. Many temples and sanctuaries named Mithraum in Europe explain the importance of this religion. On top of this religion there was a Lord and the goal of his followers was to be united with him. The most important principal of this religion was cleansing, endurance, pain, ascetic and finally intuition. The language of *Mehr* religion followers in rituals and in *Mehr's* seven stages naming was Greek. In *Mehr* religion, number seven was considered to be sacred and noteworthy. In this religion there were seven stages that the disciple had to pass to reach innocence and salvation. Each stage had its own special difficulty. These seven stages consisted respectively: Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus and Pater. One of the Iranian poets and theosophists named *Attar* in his Book *Manteghotteir*, explained the seven stages that a disciple must pass to reach his destination and aim. These seven stages are matched with seven stages of *Mehr* religion. One passing these seven stages must endure lots of pains to reach his desired. These seven stages are: Demand, Love, Insight, Self- Sufficiency, Monotheism, Wonderment, Poverty and perdition. In this article *Attar's* poem and seven stages in Iranian theosophy will be compared to seven stages of *Mehr* religion.

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## **Introduction**

*Mehr* or *Mithra* one of the salient Gods of Aryan's has been worshiped in Iran from ancient times. The God of power and awaking, the one who assists truth, destroys liars and treaty outlaws. He is there to secure promises of human beings. Therefore he is the angel of light and brightness which nothing is hidden from him. This God is very similar to Helios the God of brightness in Greece. The start of extension of Mithraism is at the end of first Christian calendar in Rome. The Belgian Frants Cumont and Martin Vermaseren from Holland are the best researchers of this religion. From their viewpoint it was the influence of Iranian culture which affected Greece and Mithraism was transferred to Europe. Naming one of the stages of this religion- Perses- indicates the eastern roots of it. The remains of Mithraism in Rome and neighbor countries are only embossed prints and engravings but in Iran Mehr can be identified by texts. Remaining of several temples and worship places named Mithraum are found in European countries from Italy and Germany to England which shows the distribution of this religion in whole Europe. Some signs and remaining are found in Switzerland and France too.

## **From the Birth of Mithra to Ascension**

The theories of birth of Mithra are different. Some believe its birth was from a pine tree or a water lily, some from a stone or a cliff, a group believe it was born from a shell another group believe it was born as a child. But Cumont writes: Mithra was born as a youth from a stone with a hat on the head, a knife in one hand and a torch in the other to lighten the earth. He is ready to perform surprising tests. One of the exciting adventures of Mithra is his encounter with the first cow. The cow is grazing in the mountain. Mithra bravely approach it, get its horns and ride on it. The angry beast tries to free itself but the rider dominates it and does not let it go till the beast gets tired and surrender to Mithra. Then the brave God take the cow from its legs, put it on his back and take it to the cave he lives.<sup>1</sup> The cow takes advantage of the opportunity and runs away to graze in the pastures. Then the sun sends a crow with the message to Mithra to kill the fugitive cow. He accepts the divine request against his will and goes after the cow with his dog. The cow will hide in a cave but Mithra overpowers it in a cave and rips the side of the cow with his knife.

In the vestiges the scene of the fight of Mithra with the holy cow was only found pictured in Danube area. The sacrifice of a cow is the most important religious tradition in Mithraism. In the centre of Saint Prisca temple a statue of

Mithra with a cow's tether in his hand has been seen<sup>1</sup>

Mithra is a mediator between life and death ,good and evil and has the role of a saviour. For this reason the birth of Mithra was very important for his followers. Especially 25 December, this was known as the God's birthday, the epiphany of new light. A big feast would take place in Saint Prisca Mithraum for this reason<sup>2</sup>.At the time of the birth of Mithra two shepherds were

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<sup>1</sup> -. Cumont, Frants, Secrets of Mithraism, p.131-5

witnessing it with amazement, in reality two divine beings named Cautes and Cautapates or torch holders of Mithra who assisted him in coming out of the cliff<sup>3</sup>. In all the monuments and statues of Mithra remained two mysterious bodies are standing at each side of him one holding a torch upwards, symbol of the sun and the other holds the torch downwards, symbol of the sunset<sup>4</sup>. After the finalization of Mithra's prophecy, it time for his ascension. Mithra attends a public feast with Sol the God of the daylight and warmth of the sun before ascension to the empyrean. In this feast known as last supper the meat of the sacrificed beast will be eaten. The feast takes place in a cave and Mithra is wearing a long red dress with a yellow belt. Mithra is lying beside Sol and his right arm is on the shoulder of Sol and their relationship is friendly. Two servants are at service one with drinks and the other with food in an oval shaped dish.

Another servant had a mask of a crow and eight other teenagers brought gifts. These images were found in a temple built around 220 before Christ. After Mithra's miracles Mithra sat on the sun and ascended to sky<sup>5</sup>.

The subject described after this scene is Mithra being a saviour returning to earth for salvation of humanity. Most of the researchers believe that this idea is the same as Zoroastrian and Avesta's belief to Saoshyant which will resurrect the dead on the judgment day and participate in their judgement. Vermaseren believes that Mithra and Saoshyant were one. In an epigraph found in Rome to Mithra it has written: "Salute to you Saoshyant". Mithra will pass the good people from Cinvad bridge above the fire that has evil people inside it<sup>6</sup>. So Mehr is the creator and the saviour of human beings at the judgement day creates a new order that real believers stay in it eternally.

1. Vermaseren, Martin, Mithraism, p.98
2. Ashtiani, Jaleddin, Mysticism, p.290-292
3. Vermaseren, Martin, Mithraism, p.95
4. Rustum Poor, Saloomeh, Worshipping Mehr, p.101
5. Vermaseren, Martin, Mithraism, p.117-125
6. Ashtiani, Jalaloddin, Mysticism, p.306

### **Seven Stages and Levels of Worshipping Mithra**

Vermaseren has written about followers of Mithra and their worthiness that: *'neophyte needed to be honoured to be a follower of Mithra. Joining believers was at adolescence which needed previous preparation and taking hard exams. Passing the exams indicated bravery of the newcomer. When the volunteer declared his readiness for exams he was forced to live independently. This way the new member of the association pledged not to reveal the secrets of the group from unknown and especially women. There an oath letter in Florence museum which is the source of this information.'*

Teaching the ceremonies and secrets to the neophyte was performed by two members of Mithra followers meaning pater of religious guide. At the end of the ceremony the neophyte was known as brother of other learner's and would

similarly accept the filiation of pater. Pater tattooed his hands to determine his identity<sup>1</sup>.

*'Some works show cases like sleeping in grave, kind of waking from death, threatening with sword or walking stick and hitting by leader of the feast, putting them under pressure and etc are considered as some of the ceremonies. After finalization of the ceremonies Pater shakes right hand of the neophyte and with this act he becomes confidant and comrade of the pater<sup>2</sup>.'*

It can be seen that the road is full of hardship and pain and the disciple has to go through ascetics to reach higher levels. Not all can endure such hardship and only a few can reach these levels. A considerable note is the language used in the ceremonies by the Mithra worshipper's which was Greek noting that Perses as a name of one of the levels indicated the foreign root (eastern) of Mithraism.

In Osti Mithraum in Italy the signs of each level were inscribed on mosaics. In Mithraum of Saint Prisca the role of each level and their special personalities were drawn<sup>3</sup>.

Seven divine stages in this religion are as follows:

1. Corax 2. Nymphus 3. Miles 4. Leo5. Perses 6. Heliodromus 7.Pater

#### ***First Level: Corax (Crow)***

In the myth of sacrificing the cow the crow was a proclaimed. The precursor of Mithra and the message of God is given by it to Mithra. Due to this matter its sign is a wood with two snakes around it and a cup in front of it. Based on Parphyrios story, the Greek researcher, it was the grade of servants of Mithraum. The ones who wanted to become followers were accepted under supervision of Holy Father. His sayings are compatible with old findings. Because in all the old paintings the ones looking like crow were serving others

1. Vermaseren, Martin, Mithraism, p.156

2. Ashtiani, Jalaloddin, Mysticism, p.332

3. Vermaseren, Martin, Mithraism, p.167-171

in holy food ceremony. This grade is the lowest grade in Mithraism.

The followers dressed in crow clothes imitated acts of crows in some ceremonies<sup>1</sup>.*' Schutze writes: For Grecian's, crow was a learned bird. Alexander used crow as the guide of his army. The crow was also a symbol of power of soul for finding the right route and new lands. In the secretive religion of Mithra neophyte in the level of a corax shall find its way to the divine insight<sup>2</sup>.'*

#### ***Second Level: Nymphus (Mate)***

In this level which is called bride too, the individual will marry Mithra like a bride although this was a mystical marriage between disciple and Mithra. For this reason the bride was not a female. The one who reached this stage should keep away from his family and friends. One of the existing images in Saint



Prisca temple shows a nymphus who has covered his head and face with a piece of material. In a writing above his head it's said that Nymphus is supported by Venus the star. A mosaic in Osti's Mithraum which has some damages shows that the sign of this level is torch and head light. Torch is a symbol of new light which has a perseverant connection with Mithra<sup>3</sup>.

This level is mostly shown by snake, an animal which is always changing, changing old skin with a new one just like a neophyte changing levels with a new identity<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Third Level: Miles (Soldier)***

The third level is soldier. Mithra is the undefeatable God of war and the soldiers ask for help from him and he assists them immediately. The symbol of miles is rucksack, helmet and spear. It has said in Avesta that Mithra is the reason of victory of his followers in war. He is fighting the evil for victory.

For the honour of miles level Tertullien writes: *'The special ceremony will take place in a complete dark cave. The miles stand in this cave. A crown is on a sword and each mile will put it on his head. But the custom is the miles will throw the crown on their shoulders. This way they are declaring that Mithra is the crown on their heads. The minute they send back the crown they will receive the grade of Mithra soldier'*<sup>5</sup>.

Who wants to reach this level has to pass several hard tests victoriously.

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1- Rezaei, Abdulazim, Origin, Relationship and Religions, p.90

2-. Jalaloddin, Ashtiani, Mysticism, p.315

3- Vermaseren, Martin, Mithraism, p.174

4- Jalaloddin, Ashtiani, Mysticism, p.316

5- Vermaseren, Martin, Mithraism, p.175

In this level after the hard and horrifying ceremonies they cauterized Mithra's seal on their forehead. The last stage of the ceremony was taking oath. This ceremony was called sacramentum<sup>1</sup>.

From Schutze's viewpoint the most important quality of the real miles of Mithra in addition to bravery and perseverance is his own soul, mind and understanding. He had to be the declarer and defender of Mithra religion so he had to show what he had learned in the last level (Nymphus) with silence and soul strengthening<sup>2</sup>.

### ***Fourth Level: LEO (Lion)***

In the paintings and embossed picturesque stones the image of lion is seen a lot. Due to this reason after Islam the symbol of lion and sun was on the flags in Iran. *'In this religion, the leo wears a long dress of purple. Its special symbol is small shovel which replaces fire and fire is the symbol of Leo. In*

*this regard Porphir says: "At the time of being honoured by this religion honey is poured instead of water on the hands of the leo. This is a note that includes cleaning the hands of leo from any evil and crime". They wash its hands with honey because fire which a clarifying element is an enemy of water. They wash leo's tongue with honey to clear it from all sins. Leo is a superior level in Mithra religion. In one of the images in Saint Prisca a palfrey of seven honoured level is painted in which the miles grade is greatly respecting the leo grade<sup>3</sup>.' Leo level is the first superior level of Mithra religion. In this level no bodily burden was needed. Training the soul for ethical merit of secret understanding was needed. Schutze writes: 'In this level rising to human identity and revealing secrets of the mind is needed. For this work strengthening the inner insight and reaching an independent, conscience thinking is a must.'<sup>4</sup>*

### ***Fifth Level: Perses***

The symbol of Perses is a big sickle, a small sickle, a star and a new moon. In this religion moon is the protector of fruits which is the symbol of Perses. In Saint Persica's images we see Perses with long branches or branches with a sickle and he had grey clothes on<sup>5</sup>. Perses level other than its secretive sides are an irony of nature and growth and in between followers of Mithra is a symbol of freedom and liberty. Without a doubt Mithra followers considered freedom and bravery one of the obvious characteristics of Iranians that called this grade Perses<sup>6</sup>.

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1- Rezaei, Abdulazim, Origin, Relationship and Religions, p.93

2- Jalaloddin, Ashtiani, Mysticism, p.320

3- Vermaseren, Martin, Mithraism, p.177

4- Jalaloddin, Ashtiani, Mysticism, p.321

5- Vermaseren, Martin, Mithraism, p.182

6- Rezaei, Abdulazim, Origin, Relationship and Religions of Ancient Iranians, p.94

### ***Sixth Level: Heliodromus (Messenger of the Sun)***

The honoured person of this level is the representative of God Helios-Sol on earth and is protected by him. His symbols are whip, halo and Torch. As seen in Saint Persica images the globe and the halo are radiating. On the wall at the right of this temple Heliodromus is seen in between Mithra population. His head has a blue halo, a red dress on with a yellow belt and two blue globes in his hands. His right hand is up saying salute to the Pater. The Pater is sitting on a throne with a purple dress and hat. On the left wall Sol and Mithra can be seen having holy food<sup>1</sup>.

Some believe that the aim of sixth level is the hero of the sun which in reality has passed away from earthly life and live in soul in sun. The aim of all the previous levels is reaching this grade, inner security and brightness of the sun. The one who understood these secrets would have a deep concordance with his destiny and the route of the sun in the skies<sup>2</sup>.

If Perses is the characteristics of Iranian element in the seven levels Heliodromus is the indication of Roman element. As seen in Avesta Mithra and the sun have a very close relationship but since the religion went to Europe the roman's replaced their God instead of Iranian sun. Sol the God of Sun in Greece was called helios the God of Sun.

### ***Seventh Level: Pater***

The most superior level of Mithraism is Pater the representative of Mithra on earth. Pater is the defendent of Mithra population. He is the holy teacher and a sage with a symbol of a ring and cane as a sign of his sagacious. He is chosen by the honoured to secrets of the religion. Pater is the officer to choose new members. He has to teach the neophytes the secrets of different levels. Also in Rome the position of Magister Sacrorum and Pater Sacrorum existed. This grade is the highest holy level and the highest degree of abstinence. He has complete astrology competency and for this reason has the honour of seven levels of the conduct and is protected by the seven stars<sup>3</sup>.

The sign of this level is a ring, small cup, cane, a half broken Iranian hat and a sickle. In Saint Persica this level is identified with clothes similar to Heliodromus, a red coat with long sleeves with yellow tapes, yellow belt and a red flaunting cloak. Pater in this role has beard and looks aged in contradiction with Heliodromus that is young. He is sitting on a high throne and is showing the sky with his right raised hand. Schutze writes: Pater in reality indicates God- father. As God is the father of all creation the earthly father has to have all human beings under supervision. In these people who were rare the pious saw the will of God and believed in their connection with beyond<sup>4</sup>.

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1.-Vermaseren, Martin, Mithraism, p.183

2.-Jalaloddin, Ashtiani, Mysticism, p.323

3- Vermaseren, Martin, Mithraism, p.185

4- Jalaloddin, Ashtiani, Mysticism, p.326

### **Attar and Manteghotteir**

From the Islamic Sufism which Iranians had a big important share in, brilliant talented individuals like *Attar* came to life whom assisted development of humanity thought. *Attar* is one of these gifted individuals who had the unique trueness and sincerity which is the necessity of the owners of the conduct and followers of the truth. He has strived plenteously for removing the problems. He is a Gnostic poet from sixth and seventh century who was born in Neishabour. His father was a druggist and after his death Attar followed his work. He also treated patients. During performance of his medical duties a spiritual revolution took place in his soul and he became a sage. He put his numinous thoughts into poems. He was martyred in the *Mongolian* attack to Iran. Many literary works are left from him most important of them is *Manteghotteir*.

*Manteghotteir* is one of the most prominent works of world literature that like other literary- numinous works has mystery because of being associated

with allegory and special symbols. It is a kind of numinous epic including risks and difficulties of disciple's sprite that are created in seven stages of conduct. The story is started with description of birds' society. The birds indicate their need and interest to the commander which is their king and leader. Hoopoe which is symbol of prophecy and guidance declares that the king knows birds and if birds accompany him, he can lead them to king's portal. Describing of the king by the hoopoe, excited the birds, and enthusiasm of visiting the king is created in their heart and they are restless. However, from the beginning, concerns of distance and their inabilities is shaken their efforts and some of them feared. But they are ready; there are difficult stages in their path that passing them is not easy. The hoopoe tells them about difficulty of the path and says about seven stages: Demand stage, Love stage, Insight stage, Self-sufficiency stage, Monotheism stage, Wonderment stage, and Poverty & Perdition stage.

After listening to the difficulties, some of the birds were disappointed and went; some of them died at the path, and at the end only thirty birds achieve their desire. These seven stages are the seven stages of Iranian Gnosticism that any disciple must pass them for achieving the fact, and these seven stages are adaptable with seven stages and its difficulties in Mithraism.

***First stage: Demand***

The first stage of Gnostic's conduct is demand that can suppose it as Corax stage in Mithraism. Attar in this stage, first of all describe the Gnostic's status and says that this stage has pain and should be tolerated to achieve the desire. Should be desisted from worldly attachments, and become clean from worldly impurities so that God's light shines on heart. The demandant should always effort and does not fear from any risk, and forgets both universes, like neophyte in corax level that should pass difficulties in order to enter to next stage. Demand is results of divine guidance, because under divine guidance the disciple repents and seeks the fact. One of the anecdotes that *Attar* states about this stage is that when all people seek God's mercies, devil demands God's curse, because he believes that both curse & mercy are from God. Then conclude that if any one dose not achieve to his desired, there is defect in his demand and he is not a real demandant.

***Second stage: love***

Love is the most important element of mystic, and the most difficult stage that the disciple enters. Love is complementary of demand and its higher form. It is a force helps to the demandent to achieve the desired. As in Nymphus level in Mithraism the disciple changes and become new. Love offers new life to the disciple and transformed him constantly. In Attar's opinion, love means passing a path that finally causes removing of vanity and selfishness. Entering to new stage that there is no "self" in it and all things is beloved. In this path, the lover lost all he has even his mind and wisdom. Story of *Sheikh Sanan* in *Manteghotteir* of Attar is story of love of Muslim pious to Christian girl that after many years worship becoming a Christian due to his love to her, but at the end return to his religion and his returning causes the girl becoming a Muslim.

The story is full of anxiety and pain and is affected any readers, and indicate unique skill of *Attar* in storytelling. So, path of love is full of dangers and its condition is self-sacrifice.

***Third stage: insight***

This stage is stage of learning. Recognizing God's characteristics, and confirming him in all affairs, and making sure that God always supervises human's actions. Thus, must be avoided from carnal desires and mortify the sprite. There are various ways for recognition of God and each of them is not same. In this stage thousands person lose the path, and everyone understand in amount of his/her ability, but few person being aware about God's mysteries. It is a difficult path for the disciple, passing this path needs a man with wonderful life, because insight is conscience matter. Also, in third stage of Mithraism the persons who want to enter to Mile level, should pass difficult exams.

***Forth Stage: self-sufficiency***

In this stage nothing has value. Every thing from past, now and in future, either good or bad, is a drop in existence sea. Self-sufficiency is needlessness of God from creatures. In this stage the disciples feel that God dose not need to their actions. Exam in this stage is very hard so that among hundreds persons only one person can pass it correctly. *Attar* gives advice to have patience in this path, and he believes that the whale that God put in self-sufficiency sea does not allow every one pass this path easily. Whale is metonymy of devil, which is creature of God, but he always wait in ambush for cheating human. The only thing that can save person from this exam is God's grace.

In description of Leo level as 4<sup>th</sup> stage of Mithraism, Schutze said: '*In this stage should rise to human's identity; to do this you should reinforce internal insight and achieve independent, self-conscious, and direct thinking.*'<sup>1</sup> And it is self-sufficiency stage that comes after insight stage and the neophyte should recognize it.

***Fifth stage: Monotheism***

Monotheism means God is one, and believe to unity. Monotheism means perdition of lover and beloved, and survive of creature in essence of God. In this stage the disciple even loses himself and believes that as long as there are "I" and "we", can not be achieved to absolute fact. Monotheism is base of all divine religions; its subject is annihilation and death. Should pass multiplicity for achieving unity. Death in God is sign of survival. This stage is equal to 5<sup>th</sup> stage of Mithraism, Perses, which the neophyte enters to this stage after tolerating physical torture and passing difficult exams, and he should continue this path with courage and magnanimity. He should continue his efforts to perdition in Pater's existence.

***Sixth stage: wonderment***

Wonderment is result of insight to God, of course a permanent insight .The Gnostic achieves it in deliberation, thinking and attendance. At the end there is nothing for him except wonderment. After passing five stages, now the disciples is as connected person, like a person who achieves to Heliodramus position in Mithraism and will achieve to Pater soon. The person that enters to this stage is closed to perdition stage. In this stage all thing are forgotten.

*Attar* in many stories pointed out to human's ignorance about world's creation, and said due to he can not find the fact, pays attention to pain, pity, wonderment and bewilderment. Every one who can find a path to god he will receive to whole mysteries. In Mithraism, Heliodromus is champion of sun, who has left land life due to pity, wonderment and has survived in sun spiritually.

***Seventh Stage: Poverty & perdition***

Poverty is need against God, all people are God's creatures and the creature always needs to the God. God is needless and people are poverty. This stage is final stage of conduct of Gnostics and the disciple completely dies and nothing reminds from him. Receiving to this stage (perdition) is possible only for person that obeys God's will and releases selfishness. Perdition is result of love. Love has unity between lover and beloved. Every one who achieves poverty stage, will achieves to perdition stage. This stage is equal to Pater 1. Ashtiani, Jalaloddin, *Mysticism*, p. 320

level, the highest stage in Mithraism. Believers of Mithraism believe that Mithras is God's will in the earth and also believe that he has direct relation with Beyond the Universe. This stage is the finalist stage of improvement.

Also, in *Mysticism* achieving to Pater is after 7<sup>th</sup> stage, i.e. absolute innihilation. *Attar* believes that without Pater and the rational no body can pass this path. From the beginning the disciple needs to Pater and guide. Presence of Pater is essential for every body. Main condition in conduct is teacher's education, and until the disciple dose not die, he will not achieve Existence and survival.

**Conclusion**

1. Existence of many Mithraism temples in Roman Empire indicate that this religion was more attention in Europe than in Iran, even there is not one Mithraum with Rome Mithraum specifications in Iran. Of course lack of Mithraum in Iran does not negate Mithraism in Iran, but also shows that Mithraism in Iran was not same as Mithraism in Rome.
2. Mithraism is religion of symbols. Symbols like cave and spring, Pearl and Oyster, or Lily and Dolphin; there were these symbols in Europe, but these symbols were not mentioned in *Manteghotteir*.
3. *Attar* did not follow Mithraism, but his purpose was preservation of ancient Iran's culture.
4. Certainly there are common aspects between mystic contents of past and Islamic works and thoughts; and it indicates continuity of mystics culture in huge range of Mithraism, Manichean, Christian and Islamic world.

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