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MITRA IN AVESTA : MORAL, SOCIAL, AND JUSTISE FUNCTIONS

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Abstract

In Zoroastrianism, the deity Mitra (Mihir) occupies a prominent and multifaceted position within the sacred corpus of the Avesta. Far from being a peripheral figure in the ancient Indo-Iranian pantheon, Mitra functions as a central guarantor of cosmic, moral, and social order. Within the Avestan texts, Mitra's role is articulated through a complex interplay of juridical, ethical, and ritual functions, emphasizing his authority over covenants, promises, and the maintenance of harmonious relationships among human beings, as well as between humanity and the divine.

Mitra is frequently depicted as the enforcer and witness of agreements, whose presence ensures that obligations—whether between individuals, social groups, or political entities—are respected and that violations are met with appropriate sanctions. This juridical dimension positions Mitra not merely as a deity concerned with interpersonal morality, but as a fundamental stabilizing force whose authority underpins societal cohesion and political legitimacy. In addition, Mitra's association with the principles of truth, loyalty, and justice links him to the broader cosmic order, reflecting the Zoroastrian understanding that human ethical conduct is inseparable from the maintenance of universal harmony.

The Avestan hymns further situate Mitra within the divine hierarchy, often emphasizing his interrelations with other deities, such as Ahura Mazda and Varuṇa, highlighting his integrative function within the pantheon. Through these



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relationships, Mitra mediates between divine authority and human obligation, embodying the moral and social norms that regulate both spheres. The textual evidence also suggests a degree of gradation in Mitra's influence: while he directly governs human contracts and social alliances, his authority extends metaphorically to the cosmic level, reinforcing the notion that ethical conduct is foundational to the stability of the universe.

The Mihr Yasht, corresponding to the tenth Yasht within the Avesta, represents the primary textual source devoted explicitly to the deity Mitra, both in terms of its length and its literary sophistication. This hymn occupies a central position in Avestan literature, reflecting the theological and ritual significance attributed to Mitra in the Zoroastrian pantheon. Within the Mihr Yasht, Mitra is described through a series of distinctive epithets that emphasize his omnipresence, authority, and perceptive capacities, highlighting his role as both a moral and cosmic overseer.

The epithet Vouru-gaoyaoiti, translated as "possessor of wide pastures," conveys Mitra's dominion over expansive domains, symbolically representing the breadth of his influence across both human and natural spheres. This characterization underscores the deity's connection to fertility, abundance, and the regulation of resources, reflecting an understanding of divine authority as encompassing not only ethical and juridical order but also the material well-being of communities. The term Hazangra-gaosha, meaning "thousand-eared," illustrates Mitra's capacity for vigilance and awareness, suggesting that he is capable of perceiving all oaths, covenants, and moral transgressions. The auditory metaphor emphasizes the deity's role as a guarantor of social and cosmic law, who monitors human behavior and ensures that ethical obligations are upheld. Similarly, the epithet Baevare-chashmana, or "ten-thousand-eyed," reinforces this motif of omniscience, portraying Mitra as all-seeing and capable of discerning truth from



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falsehood in every context. Through these visual and auditory metaphors, the Mihr Yasht presents Mitra as a deity whose knowledge and perception extend across both human society and the natural order, thereby legitimizing his role as a guarantor of justice and harmony.

Collectively, the epithets in the Mihr Yasht serve a dual function: they convey Mitra's extraordinary capabilities in sensory perception and oversight, while simultaneously articulating his ethical and cosmological authority. By emphasizing his comprehensive vigilance and expansive dominion, the hymn situates Mitra as a central agent in maintaining the interconnected systems of moral, social, and cosmic order that characterize Zoroastrian thought.

These descriptions underscore Mitra's comprehensive awareness and his capacity to oversee every corner of the cosmos. Through these epithets, the deity is portrayed as omniscient and omnipresent, capable of perceiving all actions and maintaining vigilance over both the natural and social orders. Such imagery reinforces the conceptualization of Mitra as a guarantor of universal harmony, whose authority extends to ethical, legal, and cosmic dimensions.

Within Avestan theology, Mitra fulfills multiple critical functions simultaneously, integrating moral, social, and cosmic responsibilities.

Divine Guardian of Covenants and Promises: The very etymology of the name "Mitra" is grounded in the concept of agreement, alliance, or friendship. This linguistic foundation reflects his principal role as overseer of oaths and treaties, ensuring that commitments—whether between individuals, groups, or states—are honored. Mitra's function as custodian of these covenants positions him as an essential mediator in human relations, whose oversight guarantees the stability of social, political, and legal structures. His authority in this regard underscores a broader theological principle: that human fidelity to promises is inseparable from the maintenance of cosmic and moral order.



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Although Mitra is not equated directly with the sun in the Avesta—where the solar deity is distinctly named Xvarsheta—he is depicted as a divinity who emerges before sunrise, illuminating creation with light. This pre-solar appearance positions Mitra as a symbol of illumination and truth, linking him to ethical and cosmological clarity. His role in heralding the dawn emphasizes the metaphorical connection between light and moral insight, reinforcing his function as an agent of order and transparency within both human and cosmic realms.

Mitra also assumes a judicial role in eschatological contexts. At the Chinvat Bridge, the point of final judgment, he collaborates with Rashnu (Justice) and Sraosha (Obedience) in weighing the deeds of humans, assessing their sins and virtues. This function underscores Mitra's role as a guarantor of moral accountability, whose oversight extends beyond worldly affairs to the ultimate evaluation of human conduct. His participation in this cosmic adjudication reinforces the notion that ethical behavior is intimately tied to both social stability and cosmic order.

In addition to his juridical and cosmic functions, Mitra is characterized as a deity with both martial and social dimensions. While fundamentally a protector of peace and guarantor of covenants, he is simultaneously depicted as a formidable warrior in the Avesta, particularly toward those who violate agreements, known as *Mihr-daruj* (“those unfaithful to their promises”). This dual characterization illustrates Mitra's capacity to enforce order through both persuasion and coercion, highlighting the integration of ethical oversight with the practical enforcement of social and political norms. The depiction of Mitra as a disciplined, vigilant warrior reflects the broader Indo-Iranian conceptualization of divinity as inseparable from the maintenance of societal stability and the defense of moral and legal obligations.



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He destroys the homes of those who have been deceived or who break their oaths and defeats armies aligned with evil, demonstrating his active role in enforcing moral and social order. Mitra's portrayal as a charioteer reflects the military culture and social stratification of ancient Iranian societies, symbolizing his capacity to intervene directly in human affairs. This imagery underscores Mitra's recognition as a force that ensures societal stability and confers Xvarno—the divine glory and legitimacy—upon righteous rulers, thereby linking his martial and juridical functions to the maintenance of both political authority and ethical governance.

Although the status of Mitra underwent certain modifications during the monotheistic reforms of Zoroastrianism, the later strata of the Avesta emphasize that Mitra is to be revered alongside Ahura Mazda. This parity indicates the enduring strength and popularity of the Mitra cult among the populace. Within this framework, Mitra is elevated to the position of Ahura Mazda's most trusted aide and serves as his representative in overseeing worldly affairs. The texts portray him as a divine agent who implements the will of Ahura Mazda, ensuring that moral, social, and cosmic orders are maintained. This relationship highlights both Mitra's functional autonomy in practical matters and his subordination to Ahura Mazda's supreme authority, reflecting a complex theological structure in which divinely sanctioned intermediaries play a central role in governance, justice, and the maintenance of societal stability.

In conclusion, Mitra occupies a multifaceted and central position within the Indo-Iranian religious framework, particularly as reflected in the Avestan corpus. His role encompasses the enforcement of covenants, the maintenance of social and cosmic order, and the administration of justice, both in human society and in eschatological contexts. Through epithets emphasizing his omniscience and vigilance, Mitra is portrayed as a guarantor of ethical conduct, capable of



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rewarding fidelity and punishing transgression. Simultaneously, his martial and charioteer imagery situates him within the sociopolitical and military realities of ancient Iranian culture, linking divine authority to societal stability. Despite the monotheistic reforms elevating Ahura Mazda, Mitra retains significant autonomy and prominence, serving as a trusted intermediary in the execution of divine will. Overall, the Avestan portrayal of Mitra demonstrates the integration of moral, juridical, social, and cosmic functions in a single divine figure, highlighting the essential role of covenants, alliances, and ethical oversight in sustaining both human and cosmic order.

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