

# The Rig Veda

*An Anthology*

*One hundred and eight hymns, selected,  
translated and annotated by*

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*For*  
*Tatyana Yakovlena Elizarenkova*  
*and*  
*Frits Staal*

Multiverse of  
gods

- 1 Not one of you, gods, is small, not one a little child; all of you are truly great.
- 2 Therefore you are worthy of praise and of sacrifice, you thirty-three gods of Manu, arrogant and powerful.
- 3 Protect us, help us and speak for us; do not lead us into the distance far away from the path of our father Manu.
- 4 You gods who are all here and who belong to all men, give far-reaching shelter to us and to our cows and horses.

## CREATION

THE *Rig Veda* refers glancingly to many different theories of creation. Several of these regard creation as the result – often apparently a mere by-product – of a cosmic battle, such as those mentioned in the hymns to Indra, or as a result of the apparently unmotivated act of separating heaven and earth, an act attributed to several different gods. These aspects of creation are woven in and out of the hymns in the older parts of the *Rig Veda*, books 2 through 9. But in the subsequent tenth book we encounter for the first time hymns that are entirely devoted to speculations on the origins of the cosmos.

Some of these hymns seek the origins of the existence of existence itself (10.129) or of the creator himself (10.121). Others speculate upon the sacrifice as the origin of the earth and the people in it (10.90), or upon the origins of the sacrifice (10.130, 10.190). Sacrifice is central to many concepts of creation, particularly to those explicitly linked to sacrificial gods or instruments, but it also appears as a supplement to other forms of creation such as sculpture (10.81–2) or anthropomorphic birth (10.72).

This short hymn, though linguistically simple (with the exception of one or two troublesome nouns), is conceptually extremely provocative and has, indeed, provoked hundreds of complex commentaries among Indian theologians and Western scholars. In many ways, it is meant to puzzle and challenge, to raise unanswerable questions, to pile up paradoxes.

- 1 There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred?<sup>1</sup> Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?
- 2 There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign<sup>2</sup> of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.
- 3 Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign,<sup>2</sup> all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.<sup>3</sup>
- 4 Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets<sup>4</sup> seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.
- 5 Their cord<sup>5</sup> was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers.<sup>6</sup> There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.
- 6 Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe.<sup>7</sup> Who then knows whence it has arisen?
- 7 Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in

the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know.

## NOTES

1. The verb is often used to describe the motion of breath. The verse implies that the action precedes the actor.
2. That is, the difference between night and day, light or darkness, or possibly sun and moon.
3. *Tapas* designates heat, in particular the heat generated by ritual activity and by physical mortification of the body.
4. *Kavi* designates a poet or saint.
5. Possibly a reference to the 'bond' mentioned in verse 4, or a kind of measuring cord by which the poets delimit – and hence create – the elements.
6. Through chiasmus, the verse contrasts male seed-placers, giving-forth, above, with female powers, impulse, below.
7. That is, the gods cannot be the source of creation since they came after it.

10.121 *The Unknown God, the Golden Embryo*

This creation hymn poses questions about an unnamed god (whom Max Müller first dubbed *Deus Ignotus*); later tradition (beginning with the subsequent appending of the final verse of this hymn, a verse that ends with a phrase used to conclude many other *Rig Veda* hymns) identified this god with *Prajāpati* and made the question in the refrain (who?) into an answer: 'Who' (*Ka*) is the name of the creator, a name explicitly said, in later texts, to have been given to *Prajāpati* by *Indra* (as agnostics are sometimes accused of praying 'to whom it may concern'). But the original force of the verse is speculative: since the creator preceded all the known gods,<sup>1</sup> creating them, who could he be? In verse 7, he seems to appear after the waters; in verse 9, the waters appear from him. They are born from one another, a common paradox.<sup>2</sup>

The creator in this hymn is called *Hiraṇyagarbha*, a truly pregnant term. It is a compound noun, whose first element

means 'gold' and whose second element means 'womb, seed, embryo, or child' in the *Rig Veda* and later comes to mean 'egg'; this latter meaning becomes prominent in the cosmogonic myth of the golden egg that separates, the two shells becoming sky and earth, while the yolk is the sun.<sup>3</sup> In the present hymn, the compound functions straightforwardly: the god *is* the golden embryo or seed. Later, it is glossed as a possessive compound: he is the god who (more anthropomorphically) *possesses* the golden seed or egg. *Sāyana* suggests that the compound may be interpreted possessively even here, making it possible to include several levels of meaning at once – 'he in whose belly the golden seed or egg exists like an embryo'. This seed of fire is placed in the waters of the womb; it is also the embryo with which the waters become pregnant (v. 7). So, too, *Agni* is the child of the waters but also the god who spills his seed in the waters. These are interlocking rather than contradictory concepts; in the late Vedas, the father is specifically identified with the son. Furthermore, the egg is both a female image (that which is fertilized by seed and which contains the embryo that is like the yolk) and a male image (the testicles containing seed). Thus the range of meanings may be seen as a continuum of androgynous birth images: seed (male egg), womb (female egg), embryo, child.

- 1 In the beginning the Golden Embryo arose. Once he was born, he was the one lord of creation. He held in place the earth and this sky.<sup>4</sup> Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 2 He who gives life, who gives strength, whose command all the gods, his own, obey; his shadow is immortality – and death.<sup>5</sup> Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 3 He who by his greatness became the one king of the world that breathes and blinks, who rules over his two-footed and four-footed creatures – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?

- 4 He who through his power owns these snowy mountains, and the ocean together with the river Rasā,<sup>6</sup> they say; who has the quarters of the sky as his two arms<sup>7</sup> – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 5 He by whom the awesome sky and the earth were made firm, by whom the dome of the sky was propped up, and the sun, who measured out the middle realm of space<sup>8</sup> – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 6 He to whom the two opposed masses looked with trembling in their hearts, supported by his help,<sup>9</sup> on whom the rising sun shines down – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 7 When the high waters came, pregnant with the embryo that is everything, bringing forth fire, he arose from that as the one life's breath of the gods. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 8 He who in his greatness looked over the waters, which were pregnant with Dakṣa,<sup>10</sup> bringing forth the sacrifice, he who was the one god among all the gods – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 9 Let him not harm us, he<sup>11</sup> who fathered the earth and created the sky, whose laws are true, who created the high, shining waters. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 10 O Prajāpati, lord of progeny, no one but you embraces all these creatures. Grant us the desires for which we offer you oblation. Let us be lords of riches.

## NOTES

1. Cf. 10.129.6. Here and throughout these notes, numbers without a designated text refer to Rig Vedic hymns translated in this volume.

2. Cf. the birth of Dakṣa and Aditi from one another in 10.72.4.

3. Cf. 10.82.5–6.

4. This traditional cosmogonic act is often credited to Viṣṇu, Varuṇa, Indra, and other gods.

5. This may refer to the world of gods and the world of humans, or it may have some subtler and darker metaphysical significance.

6. The river Rasā surrounds heaven and earth, separating the dwelling-place of men and gods from the non-space in which the demonic powers dwell. Cf. 10.108.2.

7. A reference to the cosmic giant, Puruṣa (cf. 10.90), whose arms are in that part of space which the four cardinal directions span.

8. This act of measuring out space, closely connected with the propping apart of sky and earth (cf. v. 1), is also attributed to Viṣṇu and Varuṇa, who are said to set up the sun and then to measure out a space for him to move through, a space which (unlike sky and earth) has no finite boundaries. The sun itself also functions both as a prop to keep sky and earth apart and as an instrument with which to measure space. Cf. 1.154.1 and 1.154.3.

9. This verse presents an image on two levels. The two opposed masses are armies, the polarized forces of gods and demons (Asuras) who turn to the creator for help (as in 2.12.8). But they also represent the parted sky and earth, who seek literal 'support' (the pillar to keep them apart). The images combine in a metaphor suggesting that sky and earth themselves form a phalanx in the fight between gods and demons.

10. Dakṣa represents the male principle of creation and is later identified with Prajāpati. As the embryo of the waters, he is identified with the seed or fire (v. 7), the latter then explicitly defined in this verse as the sacrifice, or sacrificial fire. Sacrifice is often an element in primeval creation (cf. 10.90.6–9).

11. In this verse, the abstract tone vanishes and the poet lapses back into a more typical Vedic fear (and particularly typical of book 10), the fear of a personified, malevolent god.

10.90 *Puruṣa-Sūkta, or The Hymn of Man*

In this famous hymn, the gods create the world by dismembering the cosmic giant, Puruṣa, the primeval male who is the victim in a Vedic sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> Though the theme of the cosmic sacrifice is a widespread mythological motif, this hymn is part of a particularly Indo-European corpus of myths of dismemberment.<sup>2</sup> The underlying concept is, therefore, quite ancient; yet the fact that this is one of the

latest hymns in the *Rig Veda* is evident from its reference to the three Vedas (v. 9) and to the four social classes or *varnas* (v. 12, the first time that this concept appears in Indian civilization), as well as from its generally monistic world-view.

- 1 The Man has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. He pervaded the earth on all sides and extended beyond it as far as ten fingers.
- 2 It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality, when he grows beyond everything through food.<sup>3</sup>
- 3 Such is his greatness, and the Man is yet more than this. All creatures are a quarter of him; three quarters are what is immortal in heaven.
- 4 With three quarters the Man rose upwards, and one quarter of him still remains here. From this<sup>4</sup> he spread out in all directions, into that which eats and that which does not eat.
- 5 From him *Virāj*<sup>5</sup> was born, and from *Virāj* came the Man. When he was born, he ranged beyond the earth behind and before.
- 6 When the gods spread<sup>6</sup> the sacrifice with the Man as the offering, spring was the clarified butter, summer the fuel, autumn the oblation.
- 7 They anointed<sup>7</sup> the Man, the sacrifice<sup>8</sup> born at the beginning, upon the sacred grass.<sup>9</sup> With him the gods, *Sādhyas*,<sup>10</sup> and sages sacrificed.
- 8 From that sacrifice<sup>8</sup> in which everything was offered, the melted fat<sup>11</sup> was collected, and he<sup>12</sup> made it into those beasts who live in the air, in the forest, and in villages.
- 9 From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the verses and chants were born, the metres were born from it, and from it the formulas were born.<sup>13</sup>
- 10 Horses were born from it, and those other animals that have two rows of teeth;<sup>14</sup> cows were born from it, and from it goats and sheep were born.

- 11 When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?
- 12 His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born.<sup>15</sup>
- 13 The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born. Indra and Agni came from his mouth, and from his vital breath the Wind was born.
- 14 From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear. Thus they<sup>16</sup> set the worlds in order.
- 15 There were seven enclosing-sticks<sup>17</sup> for him, and thrice seven fuel-sticks, when the gods, spreading the sacrifice, bound the Man as the sacrificial beast.
- 16 With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice.<sup>18</sup> These were the first ritual laws.<sup>19</sup> These very powers reached the dome of the sky where dwell the *Sādhyas*,<sup>10</sup> the ancient gods.

## NOTES

1. Cf. the horse as the primeval sacrificial victim in 1.162 and 1.163.
2. The dismemberment of the Norse giant Ymir is the most striking parallel, but there are many others.
3. This rather obscure phrase seems to imply that through food (perhaps the sacrificial offering) *Puruṣa* grows beyond the world of the immortals, even as he grows beyond the earth (v. 1 and v. 5). He himself also transcends both what grows by food and what does not (v. 4), i.e. the world of animate and inanimate creatures, or Agni (eater) and Soma (eaten).
4. That is, from the quarter still remaining on earth, or perhaps from the condition in which he had already spread out from earth with three quarters of his form.
5. The active female creative principle, *Virāj* is later replaced by *Prakṛti* or material nature, the mate of *Puruṣa* in *Sāṅkhya* philosophy.

6. This is the word used to indicate the performance of a Vedic sacrifice, spread or stretched out (like the earth spread upon the cosmic waters) or woven (like a fabric upon a loom). Cf. 10.130.1-2.

7. The word actually means 'to sprinkle' with consecrated water, but indicates the consecration of an initiate or a king.

8. Here 'the sacrifice' indicates the sacrificial victim; they are explicitly identified with one another (and with the divinity to whom the sacrifice is dedicated) in verse 16.

9. A mixture of special grasses that was strewn on the ground for the gods to sit upon.

10. A class of demi-gods or saints, whose name literally means 'those who are yet to be fulfilled'.

11. Literally, a mixture of butter and sour milk used in the sacrifice; figuratively, the fat that drained from the sacrificial victim.

12. Probably the Creator, though possibly Puruṣa himself.

13. The verses are the elements of the *Rig Veda*, the chants of the *Sāma Veda*, and the formulas of the *Yajur Veda*. The metres often appear as elements in primeval creation; cf. 10.130.3-5 and 1.164.23-5.

14. That is, incisors above and below, such as dogs and cats have.

15. The four classes or *varṇas* of classical Indian society.

16. The gods.

17. The enclosing-sticks are green twigs that keep the fire from spreading; the fuel sticks are seasoned wood used for kindling.

18. The meaning is that Puruṣa was both the victim that the gods sacrificed and the divinity to whom the sacrifice was dedicated; that is, he was both the subject and the object of the sacrifice. Through a typical Vedic paradox, the sacrifice itself creates the sacrifice.

19. Literally, the *dharma*s, a protean word that here designates the archetypal patterns of behaviour established during this first sacrifice to serve as the model for all future sacrifices.