



Myth, Meet Thy Messiah!

Jacob Cheriyan

JESUS WAS THE CONCRETE HUMAN IMAGE OF WHICH THE OTHER RELIGIOUS MYTHS WERE SHADOWS OF. HE WHO THE MYTHS WERE SHADOWING WAS NOW WALKING THE EARTH IN FLESH AND BLOOD.

We see the concept of sacrifice in almost every strand of Hinduism. Though the theological motivation and the method may vary within the diverse spectrum of rituals, the act of sacrifice is unarguably prevalent in every sect of the religion. It ranges from offerings of milk, honey, grain etc. in the form of puja on one end to animal sacrifices like goat, chicken and water buffalos on the other¹.

The Hindu epics are filled with myths about sacrifice. These tales provide the basis for many of the rituals. Iconography pertaining to the myths can be seen in temples and other sacred places. Many of them are as old as the Indus valley civilization (2500 BCE)². Although there are hundreds of mythological stories about sacrifice only a few are well known to the masses. For example, Sage Dadhichi's sacrifice of his life so that Indra could make weapons from his bones. Sita's acts of sacrifice in the Ramayana, Eklavya's sacrifice for his teacher and King Shibi's sacrifice of his flesh in the Mahabharata are some of the more well known myths on sacrifice. Many of these stories have found their way into popular culture with movies and music made around them.

THE CREATION MYTH OF PURUSHA

Arguably, the most prominent myth on sacrifice is found in the creation myth of the Rigveda. It is written as a hymn called PurushaSukta and brings out a very strong theological notion of sacrifice. In this cosmogonic myth, we see that the world was made through the supreme

sacrifice of Purusha (the cosmic being). It is difficult to know the exact nature of this being. The Vedas symbolize Purusha as the universal being. The transcendent totality of all creation or the universal consciousness animating all manifestations³. Though it is difficult to define the exact nature of Purusha, through the descriptions we see there is a transcendent as well as an imminent nature to Purusha. He is a symbolic representation of both god and man⁴.

The myth states that Purusha's body was first sacrificed and from his body different parts of the visible world emerged. The sacrifice was done by himself in the account, Purusha willingly lays down his life. After he lays down his life, his eyes become the sun, his ear forms the moon⁵ and so on. Each part of his body becomes the basis for the formation of the different material things on earth. It is through this supreme sacrifice of Purusha that the world comes into existence. Each part of the visible world becomes a product of the sacrifice made by the universal being.

ROLE OF A CREATION MYTH

According to Nahum M. Sarna, creation myths serve specific functions for the community. In his book 'Understanding Genesis' Sarna looks into many of the eastern creation myths and the roles creation myths play within the social fabric of a culture. One of the functions, Sarna states, is that they reveal the metaphysical nature of the gods⁶. The innate essence of god or the true

characteristic of god in his being. In myths where gods have to kill other gods to bring creation into existence, violence is understood to be an inherent metaphysical nature of god⁷. In the Hindu cosmogonic myth of the Rigveda, Sacrifice seems to be within the metaphysical nature of god. The metaphysical nature of the gods also trickles down to the principal reality of the world around. A cosmic reality which pervades behind all that is visible. The reality which underlies all of creation. If sacrifice is inherent within god, then sacrifice is inherent within the created order⁸.

Another function of the cosmogonic myth, according to Nahum M. Sarna, is that the myth serves as the basis for the rituals. It forms the theological framework which legitimates communitarian activities⁹. If the gods have to sacrifice in order to create, then human beings have to sacrifice in order to imitate that divine act. Sacrifice was in Vedic philosophy a substitute for a cosmic operation that always lies outside the grasp of the human practitioner¹⁰. Creation was never looked at as a one-time process but an ongoing act of god. Hence if god sacrifices on a continuous cycle then humans need to imitate the act on a constant basis in order to continue to enjoy the benefits of creation.

Hence through Nahum M. Sarna we see two important aspects of the Hindu creation myth. Firstly, sacrifice is an inherent nature of god, that god himself is a sacrificial being. And secondly, human sacrifice acts as a substitute for a cosmic operation. A finite act which images an infinite reality. The texts dealing with the philosophy as well as the actual practice of sacrifice is very detailed within the Vedic texts. A huge portion of the Vedas are dedicated to the philosophy and the concept of sacrifice¹¹.

VICTIM OF THE SACRIFICE

Wendy Doniger in her book, 'On Hinduism' gives penetrating insights into the philosophical notions of the Vedic texts concerning the victim of the sacrifice. Since Purusha (the cosmic being) is the victim of the universal sacrifice then as a victim of the sacrifice, in ritualistic terms he represents both the person offering the sacrifice as well as the deity. Doniger states that:

"The victim represents or becomes both the invisible divine recipient of the offering and the human being who makes the offering, through this proximity, the victim who represents the gods comes to represent the sacrifice also."¹²

Hence we see that the sacrificial victim is a representation of both the god and the worshiper who offers the sacrifice (whether it be an individual or a community). Every act of sacrifice is a dramatization of the cosmic sacrifice of god and also the self-sacrifice of the person offering the sacrifice.

Since the sacrificed victim becomes the representation of both the person who sacrifices and the one to whom the offering is sacrificed, the victim becomes the uniting force between the transaction of god and man. Doniger states that "By standing in for the sacrifice and the deity, the victim draws them together".¹³ The gulf between the sacred and the profane is now bridged by the sacrificed victim. Channels of communication now become open. It is the sacrificed victim who makes the communication possible.

C.S LEWIS ON MYTH AND FACT

Many in the modern day believe myths to be fallacious stories. Stories which are completely false and have no element of truth in it. They see it as concoctions by different primitive groups of people who had no concept of science. C.S Lewis though had a very different notion on what a myth was. In his essay 'Myth became fact' he explains that a myth can help experience a concrete which can otherwise only be expressed as an abstract idea¹⁴. He believed that myths encapsulated profound truths. Contrary to popular ideas of myths being a complete fabrication, myths for Lewis was the expression of an ideal which lay outside what the natural world could offer.

In his essay 'Myth became fact' he states that Myths are a link between the abstract world of truth and the physical world of direct experiences. To clarify it further he parallels a myth with an isthmus. An isthmus which connects the peninsular world of thought with the vast continent of experience humans really belong to.¹⁵ Myths for Lewis was a way to concretely articulate a reality which can otherwise only be apprehended in the abstract. In his writings he urges his readers to take myths seriously and glean the deep rooted nature of truth that the mythological narratives try to get at.

Being a literary scholar, C.S Lewis was an expert on myths. Having written a series of extremely popular literary work of fiction himself, he understood the nature of mythological stories. Growing up as an atheist he had

read many religious myths and seen common patterns. He understood what a myth was the minute he encountered it. The plot lines, the caricatures, the fictional world created, the cultural imaginations that spawned that type of narrative. All the elements which go into putting together a mythological work was all-too familiar for Lewis.

In his readings of religious mythologies, he sees this concept of sacrifice over and over again. Though the mythological stories and characters were different, there seemed to be a common thread which connected these mythological stories. All these stories were shrouded in deep mythological characterizations. The tales had dragons, demons etc. But whatever the characterization of the myths, Lewis was able to see recurring patterns in almost all the myths he encountered. Lewis states that before reading the Gospels he was expecting to see the same kind of mythological story telling. One that consisted of a sacrificing god who dies. What astonished Lewis though was that when he read the gospels he found the same theological motifs as the other religious myths he had encountered, except this time he realized he was not reading a myth. He sees the same motifs and patterns as that of the religious myths he was all too familiar with but no mythological narrative¹⁶. What he found instead was an actual historical account. He sees the underlying principles of what the myths were trying to communicate but instead of a myth, he was now confronted with the biography of the man Jesus. A historical person born in first century Palestine, crucified under the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate. This perplexed Lewis and he wrestled with the idea until he finally understood the significance of it.

There were no traces of myths in the Gospel stories, according to Lewis, because the reality behind what the myths were trying to get at had now broken into history. Jesus was the concrete human image of which the other religious myths were shadows of. The shadow projections of myths were missing in the Gospels precisely because He who the myths were shadowing was now walking the earth in flesh and blood.¹⁷ The principal actor of the story, the God-Man Jesus, was the reality which underlined the sacrificial myths and rituals of other religions. What other religions were trying to get at and could only do so through the realm of the imagination (expressing it in the form of myths) had now become a concrete fact in human history through the life of Jesus. Here's how 'Myth, met its Messiah'!

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End Notes:

- ¹Fuller, *The Camphor Flame - Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, 83.
- ²Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 21.
- ³Potter, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*, 109.
- ⁴"The Purusha Sukta - Daily Invocations."
- ⁵Muir, *Original Sanskrit Texts on the Origin and History of the People of India*, 13-14.
- ⁶YaleCourses, *Lecture 3. The Hebrew Bible in Its Ancient Near Eastern Setting*, 12 min.
- ⁷YaleCourses, *Lecture 3. The Hebrew Bible in Its Ancient Near Eastern Setting*.
- ⁸Ibid., 9 min.
- ⁹Ibid., 18 min.
- ¹⁰Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 214.
- ¹¹Ibid., 207.
- ¹²Ibid., 208.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 66.
- ¹⁵Ibid.
- ¹⁶Ibid., 83.
- ¹⁷Ibid., 84.

*Jacob Cheriyan is Ministry Associate with
RZIM Life Focus Society, Chennai.*

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