

The Theological intersection between Ashurism and Hinduism

On today's map, the Euphrates and Indus river are only one country away – the Islamic republic of Iran. Aside from the Zagros mountain belt of Northwestern Iran, there exist few impassable natural barriers between these historical rivers that birthed some of the earliest human civilizations (Williams 2). Their geographical proximity, coupled with the invention of the wheel during the early Mesopotamian and Vedic periods, made it easier for both civilizations to interact and therefore influence each other (Bondar 272). Given the heightened importance of religion in the pre classical era, it is not unwise to expect a religious intersection from the two great ancient civilizations that were in contact with one another. Various scholars have documented the relationship between Zoroastrianism and Hinduism; however, the impact of Ashurism, another prominent indigenous Mesopotamian religion, on Hinduism, has not received much scholarly attention. Despite the lack of substantial academic literature on this matter, one could indirectly observe the influences of Ashurism within Hindu mythology such the Ramayana – in particular, the demigod Ravana, along with other Asuras bear an antagonistic resemblance to the omnipotent Ashur of the Assyrians if analyzed with a careful lens.

Before delving into the theological intersection between Ashurism and Hinduism in the Ramayana, a historical discussion is necessary to provide the appropriate contextual background to explore the interreligious connection. In the 10th century BC, the Assyrian empire, the birthplace of the Ashurism, expanded to include the modern day Iranian plateau and ruled with brutal efficiency with little tolerance to the pre-existing indigenous Indo-European Elamite kingdom(Tanashia 6). Among the many stories written in Nineveh's engravings include graphic descriptions of the oppression of Elamites (Tanashia 6). The destruction the conquered people faced was only

Nobel Manaye

February 2022

Rel-132

coupled by the religious intolerance of the iron-equipped conqueror, which only added salt to the wounds of the Elamites (Van De Mieroop 1). As the concurrent Assyrian King Sennacherib remarks, “ My people seized [Babylon] and smashed the gods living inside it”—demonstrating that the Assyrians were more than glad to assert the superiority of Ashur over the Elamite gods (Van De Mieroop 1). This could be explained by the fact that Assyrian kings saw themselves as the earthly representative of the omniscient god Ashur—their actions, including conquest, were always backed by divine power (Stefan 336). Hence, it is not unthinkable to suggest that the term “Ashur”, as both the God and the earthly king he represented, would have brought a traumatic and villainous figure to mind for the Elamites. The Vedic polities, given their contact with Mesopotamian polities as far and relatively small states such as Mitanni, would have probably been informed of this disturbing conquest of the Assyrians, the most powerful state in the Near East (Thieme 301). As such, it is not unreasonable to suggest that they could have known about the God Ashur. Coupled with the phonetic similarity of Asuras and the God Ashur, some scholars have accredited origin of Asuras to the god Ashur himself, —a god that gave the divine blessing to the brutal conquest of a Indo-European state not far from the Indus valley. The phonetic connection between Ashur and Asuras is only buttressed by the chronology of events — the Assyrians conquest took place in the 10th century BC, while the oldest pieces of the Ramayna are dated to the 7th century BC (British Library 1). Therefore, the possibility of semi-villainous Asuras such as Ravana emerging from on the Assyrian Ashur is not narrow.

Some inconsistencies, however, are bound to appear to a careful eye. Ravana, as powerful as he may have been as an Asura, is eventually defeated by Rama, driving a wedge between the similarity between him and the omniscient, invincible Ashur. This could, however, be a reflection of the Assyrian empire’s eventual defeat. The burning of Lanka could have been inspired by the

Nobel Manaye

February 2022

Rel-132

sack of Nineveh, the capital of Assyrian empire, in the seventh century BC (near the time of the Ramanya's composition) (Tanashia 7). The Asur God, which reigned unchallenged in the Middle East, had its holy site destroyed by a rebel coalition (of which the neo-Avestani Medes took part). The lines “ The sanctuary of Assur...was so thoroughly leveled that any appreciable remains of the building did not remain preserved in the rubble ... the god Assur, people concluded ...surrendered the [Assyrians] to destruction”(Maul 354) capture the death of not only the spiritual center of Assyrians but also the symbolic death of Ashur in the eyes of his followers as he had abandoned them. Conversely, in the Ramayana, Hanuman burns Ravana's residence Lanka while the antihero himself is killed in battle by Ram(Goldman, 49). The parallelism is only reinforced by the fact the Medes, like the Elamites who were oppressed by the Assyrians, followed a neo-Avestan tradition (Darmatheses 7). From this angle, it could be said that the Avestani Medes could be considered as a manifestation of Rama of their own right; like Rama, they took back their “earth” stolen by Ashur Adherents three centuries ago. This liberation of the Iranian plateau from the shackles of Assyrian domination could be further encapsulated by Sita's maternal lineage as the daughter of Bhumi the earth god (Vaidya 132). Sita could thus be likened to the Iranian plateau which the Assyrians “stole” in the same manner that Ravana took her. Some may still protest to the inverted correspondence of Ashurist to Vedic deities as Ravana, unlike Ashur, did not consider himself inherently superior in the Ramanya epic. Nonetheless, one must not forget that he was part Brahman, which draws some parallels with the mythical force that was powering the Assyrians, as Brahman occupies a central role in modern Hinduism as well as the early Vedic religion along with Siva and Vishnu (Bower 146).

A historical critic might also question the conduit that allowed a theological interchange between Ashurism and Hinduism; one may wonder who, or what, facilitated the religious link. From the analysis of the Ramayana, it was postulated that the Medes could have been the channel that transferred Ashur into the villainous Asuras. The Medes nonetheless differ in that they were adherents of the Avestan tradition and/or were within its sphere of influence and thus considered the Asuras as protagonists, in contrast to the Vedic beliefs (Darmatheses 7). This might rule out the involvement of the Medes as the theological channel for the god Ashur as they regarded the Asuras rather positively. On the other hand, their neighboring Elamites, despite having a geographical affinity and a shared history of Assyrian oppression, have an entirely different religion and social structure than the Medes. For instance, Elamite society was a matriarchal society which is irreconcilable to the somewhat overtly patriarchal environment of Vedic and Zoroastrian faiths, as could be observed with the admiration of Sita as an obedient, somewhat “submissive woman”, while all male figures are often assertive (Fazgheli 136). This cultural discrepancy allows one to consider the Elamites as having a somewhat differing theological lens to view the God Ashur—particular, they could have had a particular distaste for Ashurist God, in spite of the revelation of the Asuras from their Median neighbours. Elamites passed through a stressful period during the Assyrian regime, but finally found themselves relieved when the Babylonian king sacked Nineveh, rejoicing the final days of the Assyrian empire (Fazgheli 137). Though much of what is known of Elites is not written by themselves, it is not illogical to suggest that they had a deep dislike of Ashur and therefore the Asura (Fazgheli 139). This distaste for Asuras, along with the collapse of the Ashurist empire, may have transferred into the scriptures of

Nobel Manaye

February 2022

Rel-132

the Vedic sages who could have themselves witnessed the devastating conquests Assyrian king symbolized by Ashur three centuries ago.

If history might pave the way to link Ashurism and Hinduism, linguists may take issue on the path taken. In particular, the suggestion that the concept of Ashur, a God of semitic origin, could have manumitted itself into the Indo-European Sanskrit in the first millennia BC could raise flags. Understandably, the distance between Afro-Asiatic and Indo-European languages is significant enough to wedge them into separate linguistic super-families; it does not mean, however, that they were entirely segregated in their development. For instance, it could be said that almost all Indo European languages west of the Ganges river family use Semitic and/or Semitic-inspired writing systems. Urdu and Farsi are written in the Arabic script, while the Greeks developed their alphabet from the Semitic Phoenicians from which the Romans and other European languages inherit from (Waal 84). Therefore, although part of a Semitic family, it is not implausible to say that Akkadian, Aramaic, Arabic and others played a crucial role in the development of Indo-European languages. Hence, the proposition of a Semitic God inversely transfusing into a Indo European Language is not inconceivable given the considerable linguistic influence of Semitic civilizations in the early classical era.

One should however not limit oneself to the Ramayana epic to see link between Ashurism and Hinduism. Both seem to share certain theological cornerstones that may be difficult to discern the true origin of these concepts. For instance, the tree of life, the conduit that connects heaven and earth, is of the utmost importance in the Ashurist faith(Parpola 164). As per the lines “ The Tree of Life has been an important philosophical and spiritual symbol that can be seen in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism”(Parpola 164), scholars seem to attribute the origin of the tree of

Nobel Manaye

February 2022

Rel-132

life to the Ashurites who later emitted their philosophy outward to other faiths. From a historical standpoint, the author's claim does hold water, as the tree of life begins to appear around the fourth millennium BC in Assyria, and is observed in the Indus valley civilization after two millennia (Parpola 164). Named "Iswatha" in the Hinduism, Brahman serves as the foundation for the spiritual power (as opposed to Ashur). The Hindu tree of life may differ from its Ashurist counterpart in that it is inverted; however, conceptually, they refer to the achievement of a higher status by drawing spirit from the inside, as could be referred from the lines "The pure root of the tree is Brahman, the immortal, in which the three worlds have their being" (The Three worlds). Some may not entertain this link as they would expect Ashur to occupy Brahman's seat in the Assyrian tree of life. Nonetheless, considering that Anu, King of Heaven, that occupies the crown of the Ashurist tree, it can be argued that it does not differ from Hinduism as Anu, like Brahman, reigns over the holy skies (Parpola 165).

While the theological relations regarding the tree of life might lack much dissonance, one may still harbor doubts about the relations between Ashurism and Hinduism in the Ramayana. The inverted relations between Asuras and Devas in the Vedic school of thought as supposed to the Avestas have puzzled many a scholar, but the influence of Ashurism as well as its sudden, brutal end might have served as an inspiration to label Asuras as the eventually unfortunate devas who did things. Although the Assyrian language may be too Semitic to have been a root for important deities in the Vedic religion, one must not forget that such languages played an important role in the development of Indo-European languages, and thus entertaining the idea of linguistic transfer between the two language families should not be beyond imagination.

Nobel Manaye
February 2022
Rel-132
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Nobel Manaye

February 2022

Rel-132

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Nobel, this an ambitious and widely researched paper. I admire the broad horizon you have set for the inquiry, and your sensitivity to the possible interaction of historical and mythological narratives. In such a short space, you have addressed many issues that would require more detailed examination. My general viewpoint, as I noted earlier in my email, is that it would be difficult to establish the derivation asura < aśśur, not to mention the many other possible connections with Assur, taking the totality of evidence into account. It is perilous to rely on the apparent similarity of individual words considered in isolation of larger patterns within the languages, and on broad narrative parallels not supported by compelling similarities of detail.

You would be on more secure ground to focus the argument on Vedic and/or Avestan sources, which are much closer in date to the historical events you discuss. The Ramayana as we have it is very distant in time and space, so any connection the story might have had has been obscured by centuries of retellings and adaptation to later concerns. Sita's birth is connected to a kingdom in eastern north India, and Ravana's citadel is in Sri Lanka --- so her "earth" and the place of her recovery are very distant from each other, and from Assur!

Still, this is an admirable first foray into tackling such questions.