

Passing through Flood Waters in Vedic Thought

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This paper examines whether ṛgvedic thought is at the root of the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa's Flood myth despite the fact that it has been borrowed by another cultural sphere. It seems that there were two parallel developments in Indian religion: one maintaining ṛgvedic metaphorical language of crossing the Flood, and the other leading to the specifically cosmological function of the myth. The question is how a myth can appear in a defined cultural sphere, in an apparently closed orthodox theological system, and how we can go beyond the eternal "mists of time" that often complicate a truly historical approach, especially when the Vedic sources' chronology is rather vague and subject to many ideological controversies. Therefore, we must examine the Ṛg Veda's metaphorical language, taking into consideration the possible connections but also the differences between the oratorical function of the hymns within the sacrificial system and the explanatory function of the brāhmanic comments about the sacrificial system. With this aim in view, we will simply restrict ourselves to a few considerations about the idea of the Flood's salvific crossing such as it appears in ṛgvedic language.

The Indian myth of the Flood, as it appears in the purāṇic literature, has been known to Europeans since the seventeenth century (Lord 1630). At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Jesuit Bouchet was already comparing the purāṇic myth, exalting the Viṣṇu fish-shaped avatāra, with Genesis 6 to 9 (Bouchet 1728: 102). To him, it was obvious that the Hebrew stories had arrived in India after the Flood by means of Noah's sons. In this way, Bouchet hoped to counter Spinoza's attacks on the authenticity of the Pentateuch's authorship as Pierre-Daniel Huet had supported it before him (Huet 1679). Traditionally Moses was the author of these five biblical books. During the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, two opposing theses regarding the Indian Flood story, as with the West Indies' version (Kastner 1845: 48-55), were put forward: the first was theological and tried to prove that a universal Flood in Noah's day had taken place. This thesis confirmed the truth of the Biblical chronology in

human history. The second, more historical and geological, tried to prove that local Floods had taken place at different times and different places. For a few people, the discovery of fossilized marine shells where there had been no sea for a long time was sufficient proof of the latter position.

In 1829, Franz Bopp published the Flood nagarī text of the *Mahābhārata* (Bopp 1829) [Mbh] and then its German translation (Bopp² 1829). In 1847, the French translation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* [BhP], gave Eugène Burnouf the opportunity to suggest that these epic and purāṇic myths were an Indian borrowing from a Mesopotamian version. He wrote: “le récit du déluge, selon ce grand poème, repose sans doute sur une tradition ancienne, mais il n’a rien de ces vieux itihāsas racontés dans les brāhmanas védiques et je ne sache pas qu’on l’y ait encore rencontré” (Burnouf 1847: XXVII). Two years later, in 1849, Albrecht Weber found its origin in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* [ŚB] and published his translation in *Indische Studien* (Weber 1849: 161ff). Because of this discovery, Felix Nève, who had published in the same year a study entitled *De l’origine de la tradition indienne du déluge* (Nève 1849), had to reconsider the question of the Vedic origin of this myth and in 1851 published *La tradition du déluge dans sa forme la plus ancienne* (Nève 1851).

From that time on, there was no further doubt that the myth was present in the Vedic literature. But as there was no mention of it in the most archaic texts such as the *Ṛg Veda* [RV], its origin still posed a problem: was it an original Vedic work or a borrowing from Mesopotamian or Assyro-Babylonian culture? In the nineteenth century, we can count three ideological positions regarding this myth. First, some Catholic theologians still mentioned it to safeguard Biblical chronology. Secondly, and against them, some people saw in the chronological anteriority of the Vedic myth of the Flood (as compared with the Genesis’ myth), the proof that Āryan India had been the cradle of humanity not only in terms of language but also of myth, enabling Europe with its Indo-European tradition. (Today, some researchers claim a purely Indian or even Indusian origin for the Vedic version). Finally, European specialists on India used to provide only the translated myth, without any comment as to its origin. They just wrote that this myth was the counterpart of Sumerian and Semitic myths among others. Nevertheless, there has been no

myth as frequently translated by specialists on India as this Indian Flood myth in anthologies or general works.

This paper doesn't claim to prove what the precise origin of this Vedic myth was, if there was just one, which is most unlikely (Gonda 1975: 392). According to Georges Dumézil, similarity in myth can be due to coincidence, to natural necessity, to borrowing or to a genetic relationship (Dumézil 1992: 20). Our purpose is to show how the ṛgvedic metaphorical language describing the crossing of the Flood allowed one brāhmaṇic School, that of white Yajur Veda, under Yajñavalkya's authority, to assimilate and absorb a diluvian story of which the other Vedic Schools were unaware or which they deliberately ignored and to create a specifically Vedic myth of the Flood. Does this echo the ŚB legend according to which some texts, unknown to ṛṣi Vaiśampāyana, have been revealed to his disciple Yajñavalkya by the horse-shaped Aditya? But beyond metaphorical language, the aim of creating this myth is to explain what Iḍā, prayer or oblation, within the sacrificial system, is, rather than to exhort men to morality by telling how only one just man was saved, as in Mesopotamian, Assyro-Babylonian or Semitic Flood stories. Besides, the brāhmins were able to cleverly combine this explanation of a distinctive feature of Vedic ritual with ṛgvedic thought by underlining not only Manu's nature, as the father of the human race [*yājā svadhvarāṃ jānam mānujātaṃ ghṛtapūṣam*, ṚV 1.45.1cd], but also his function as the first "sacrificing" (Yajamāna)-sacrificer [*manuṣvāt tvā nī dhīmahi manuṣvāt sām idhīmahi āgne manuṣvād aṅgiro devān devayate, yaja*, ṚV 5.21.1].

So, in the present case, our purpose is not to follow the history of the written tradition of the myth from ŚB to *Purāṇa* as is usually the case. Such an approach is too simplistic because the Vedic myth such as it appears in the ŚB may not be the only source of the later versions in the epic and purāṇic literature (often considered simply to be the result of interpolations). It is not because ŚB's version seems to be the *textus minor* that it was necessarily the only common source of the others. The *variae lectiones* of the two ŚB versions, Mādhyandina and Kānva, show that a prior source already existed. Of course, minor variants of the two versions testify to the fact that the diluvian story of this Vedic School had been written earlier and was conveyed probably in the form we know it today. But this does not mean that the brāhmins of this

School were the first authors of this myth, nor that they did not adapt narrative elements to illustrate what *Idā* is. Only a narrative analysis can help us to understand how the narrative elements are structured and which ones remain implicit as elements known to the readers-hearers. However our purpose is not to make an internal analysis of this myth. This is the subject of an exhaustive study of all Flood narratives in Sanskrit literature, currently in progress.

Rather we will try to see if ṛgvedic thought is at the root of the myth in spite of the fact that it has been borrowed by another cultural sphere. It seems that there were two parallel developments in Indian religion, one maintaining ṛgvedic metaphorical language of crossing the Flood, and the other leading to the specifically cosmological function of the myth. The question is how a myth can appear in a defined cultural sphere, in an apparently closed orthodox theological system, and how we can go beyond the eternal “mists of time” that often complicate a truly historical approach, especially when the Vedic sources’ chronology is rather vague and subject to many ideological controversies. Therefore, we must examine the *RV*’s metaphorical language, taking into consideration the possible connections but also the differences between the oratorical function of the hymns within the sacrificial system and the explanatory function of the brāhmanic comments about the sacrificial system. With this aim in view, we will simply restrict ourselves to a few considerations about the idea of the Flood’s salvific crossing such as it appears in ṛgvedic language. These few comments should rather be seen as assumptions coming from our own researches than as final affirmations.

If in the *ŚB* myth, *Manu* is the main character as in the tradition of the Flood’s stories, along with a one-horned fish, though we notice that other *ārya* clans’ ancestors have crossed floods as well. In the *RV*, poets make allusions to the gods’ successful attempts to save some mortals, hoping that the gods will repeat the same exploits in favor of the *yajamāna*. We observe that gods of each of the three Dumézilian functions fulfilled this role. *Varuṇa*, who knows about ocean-going ships [*vēda nāvāḥ samudrīyaḥ*, *RV* 1.25.7c] invited the ancestor *Vasiṣṭha* to board his ship [*vāsiṣṭhaṃ ha varuṇo nāvya ādhād*, *RV* 1.25.7c] in order to help him cross the ocean. *Indra* helped

those who could not swim to cross the floods safely [*só asnātṛ́n apārayat svastí*, RV 2.15.5b]. As for the Aśvin, they saved Tugra's son, Bhujyu, from drowning; He had been thrown into the middle of the ocean by perfidious friends [*utá tyám bhujyúm aśvinā sákhāyo mádhye jahur durévāsaḥ samudré*, RV 7.68.7ab]. These Aśvin twins, who often sailed across the ocean, fished out the poor man and took him back to dry land [*samudrásya dhánvann ādrásya paré*, RV 1.116.4c; see 1.117.14-15; 1.118.6c]. Those "salvation" stories may have taken root in popular tales which predate the writing down of the hymns. But today, the only context in which we can possibly study these tales is in the RV. Now, the RV uses a metaphorical language which no longer allows us to consider these stories to reflect authentic historical facts. The poetic language of its composers is different from the vernacular, and shows that divine exploits in the world of mortals refer also to the heavenly or divine world. Consequently, when the officiant, the hotṛ, alludes to the gods' exploits, this is not a prayer of desperation at the time of an unfortunate marine accident. In this context, the signifiers have new meanings and crossing and surviving the Flood will not mean the concrete crossing of rivers or seas but of surviving life's difficulties. We can count two literary styles, the first referring to the prayer (ornamented with the image of the successful crossing), and the second referring to salvation metaphorically described as a passing through Flood waters.

We have focussed our attention on the ṛgvedic verbal root **pr*¹ whose meaning is "to cross", "to be saved", from the indo-european root **per*- (Delamarre 1984: 273). It is from this verbal root that we find the periphrastic future attested in the Flood myth of the ŚB². In the RV, the gods help people through their difficulties. Either the poets ornament their prayers with a comparison or it remains implicit. The most common poetic ornamentation is "as we cross the Sindh with a ship" [*nāvā ná síndhum áti paṛṣi*, RV 1.97.8a; 1.99.1d; 5.4.9b; 9.70.10c]. For example, Indra helps warriors to overcome enemies on the battlefield, just as they might cross a river with a ship [*sá naḥ pápṛiḥ párayāti svastí nāvā puruhūtáḥ índro vísvā áti dvíṣaḥ*, RV 8.16.11]. The same image is used of Agni and the Aśvin who also help overcome difficulties [*sá naḥ síndhum*

¹A second similar root is *tr*-.

²" *pārayiṣyāmi* " or " *pārayiṣyasi* ", ŚB 1.8.1.2.

iva nāváyāti parṣā svastāye āpa naḥ śósucad aghám, ṚV 1.97.8] or dangers [nāvéva naḥ pārayataṃ yugéva, ṚV 2.39.4a].

The recurrence of this comparison suggests that the poets had already fixed this stylistic ornamentation, the image of crossing from one state to another, in speaking of the yajamāna: man will overcome existential difficulties thanks to the gods' help. In his sacrificial act, he pays for the crossing, he recompenses the god who helps him cross from one bank to the other, from desperation to happiness. The gods are therefore seen as ferrymen and the use of the verbal root p̥- does not need comparison. So, Indra helps to overcome pain [bhāvā supāró atipārayó no, ṚV 6.47.7c], Agni saves from dire straits [agne tvám pārayā nāvyo asmán svastíbhīr āti durgāṇi vísvā, ṚV 1.189.2a], Soma, from rough times [purá no bādhād dūrítāti pāraya, ṚV 9.70.9c] and medicinal herbs, from illnesses [vīrúdhāḥ pārayiṣṇvāḥ, ṚV 10.97.3d]. This suggests that the gods have the ability to lead those who sacrifice towards peace of mind, as Tārksya who steers us happiness like a ship [índrasyeva rātīm ājóhuvānāḥ svastāye nāvam ivá ruhema, ṚV 10.178.2ab]. And if gods are ferrymen, then, obviously, the sacrificial area, or even the sacrifice itself, is identified with the ship. In the ṚV there is a whole metaphorical field referring to river navigation. As with the metaphorical language of the chariot, that of the ship shows how much Vedic poetics was not satisfied with a representation of the terrestrial world alone. Identification between the sacrifice and the ship was all the more easy to sustain inasmuch the sacrificial area, the védi, was concave in shape and that the heaven of the gods resembled a different kind of "water", not little or large rivers or even earthly seas, but indeed on the scale of the heavenly world.

Consequently, based on the tripartite Vedic cosmology (earth, median-space, heaven), poets considered the terrestrial world to be one river-bank and the heavenly world as the other. At the time of sacrifice, the one who offers the sacrifice himself crosses from the world of mortals to that of the gods and every officiant had his role to play just like any ship's crew member. Thus, in building the sacrificial area as one builds a ship with oars [mandrá kṛṇudhvam dhíya á tanudhvam nāvam aritrápāraṇīm kṛṇudhvam, ṚV 10.101.2ab], in inviting the gods as one hails the ferryman [nāvéva yāntam ubháye havante, ṚV 3.32.14d], in reciting magic words as one

launches a ship on the Sindh [préndrāgnībhyaṃ suvacasyāṃ iyarmi sīndhāv iva prērayaṃ nāvam arkaīḥ, RV 10.116.9ab “and” kánikradaj janúṣam prabruvāṇá íyarti vācam aritéva nāvam, 2.42.1ab], the aim is to allow mortals to cross over from their bank to the gods’ bank. And mortals who don’t board the sacrifice-ship will remain on the terrestrial bank for ever [ná yé śekúr yajñīyāṃ nāvam ārúham īrmaívá té ny àvisanta képayah, RV 10.44.6cd].

This metaphorical language about the salvific crossing is combined with that of Soma’s identification with the ocean [pávasva soma mahān samudráḥ, RV 9.109.4a; samudráḥ soma pinvase, RV 9.64.8c], with the somic stems “whose sap runs in the cauldron like rivers towards the ocean” [vṛthā samudrāṃ sīndhavo ná nícīḥ sutáso abhí kalásām aṣṡgran, RV 9.88.6cd], with king Soma himself diving into the ocean [rājā samudrāṃ nadyò ví gāhate, RV 9.86.8a], etc. Consequently, what is the metaphorical meaning of Bhujyu’s drowning near? In fact, he seems to be the unfortunate yajamāna who is misled by friends³; and who will never reach the opposite bank, that of happiness. The sacrifice is a ship with oars which only skilful brāhmanas are able to manoeuvre and steer to safety. Any error in ship-handling can prove to be perilous. The Aśvin appear therefore as helpful gods, able to take the yajamāna in distress in the heavenly ocean back to the terrestrial bank. The twin gods may thus have specific functions within the sacrificial system, in particular at the time of the return of the yajamāna from the sacred to the profane world. Also, terrestrial pleasure [bhujyú-] linked to the third Dumézilian function, does not have a place in the sacrifice and in the heavenly world and consequently, the Aśvin take “it” back to the dry land, to the terrestrial world.

The metaphorical language describing the passage through life’s difficulties to reach the opposite bank that of happiness, led to imaginative representations of the saṃsāra, of the river of life carrying beings away in a countless series of transmigrations⁴. It is thus not surprising that we find this same

³It seems they are not brāhmanas who use the v,di as a ship. About the myth of Bhujyu, see Oettinger 1988 : 299-300.

⁴“ dhama eva plavo nānyah svargam draupadi gacchatām saiva nauḥ sāgarasyeva vañijah páram icchantah ”, Mbh 3.32.22. About these upamā and rūpaka in epic literature see also Ducoeur 2004 : n° 1112 ; 1372 ; 1639 ; 3658 ;

metaphorical language, in which the ship is identified either with Buddha, or with Dharma, in the p ali and sanskrit buddhistic sources. Crossing the ocean Flood is to go beyond passions as in this sentence of the *Mahāvastu*: “He has crossed the ocean Flood, and they who have crossed this are rid of passion” (*Mahāvastu* 1956: 190). [eṣo atare tam arṇavoghaṃ yaṃ taritvān bhavanti vitarāgāḥ, Mhv 3.195.5-6]. And there is nothing more explicit than these gathā of the *Lalitavistara*:

“When I [Buddha] realized this, I turned to the good ship of the Dharma [...] Entering this ship, I crossed over by myself, and now I will give passage to beings without number, beings caught in the current of rebirth, troubled by the sorrow of rebirth, fearful of the waves of anger and the monsters of passion that hinder passage over the turbulent waters. This is my thought: since I by myself have crossed this ocean of existence, infested with the monsters of harmful views and the Rakṣasas of emotional conflict, I will establish all beings in the happy place where there is no more old age or death!”⁵

This quotation echoes the Vedic tradition of the crossing from a desperate earthly state to heavenly happiness. In Buddhism, the opposite bank is none other than nirvāṇa or extinction.

The myth of the Flood in the ŚB has its root directly in the ṛgvedic notion of the crossing. This is made possible thanks to a third entity. The dialog between Manu and the fish may be compared to the sacrificial ritual between the yajamāna and the god⁶, each benefiting the other, corresponding perfectly to the formula “do ut des”⁷. Manu will save the fish, will help him surmount the danger of being

4367 ; 4953 ; 5074 ; 6608 ; and in ascetic poetic works see, for example, Śilhaṇa 2007 : n° 55.

⁵ (*Lalitavistara* 1983: 325-326), [aham iha samudāniyā dhamanāvaṃ [...] svayam aham abhiruhyā nāvāmimātmāno 'vatīrya saṃsāraughe ahaṃ tārayiṣye anantaṃ jagat śokasaṃsārakāntāraṣormirāgagrahāvartavairākule dustare eva cittam mama tad ātmanottīrya idaṃ bhavāṇavaṃ savairadṣṭigrahakleśārākṣasam svayaṃ taritvā ca anantakaṃ jagat sthale sthapesye ajarāmare śive, Lv 15, gathā 55-57].

⁶ See Heesterman 1983 : 25-38 and Gonzalez-Reimann 2006 : 223.

⁷ Or “dadāmi te, dehi me”, according to Marcel Mauss’ formula (Dumézil 1948 : 73).

eaten by a bigger fish. This crossing begins with Manu's hands, symbolizing the ship which the fish boards (ā pad-), and ends in the ocean. In the same way, the ship which Manu boards (ā pad-), drawn by the fish, will enable him to cross the floods and to reach the summit of the mountain, reminding us the gods' mountain, the heavenly world. Manu is therefore seen as the father of the human race and the founder of the sacrifice or rather the creator of Idā, his daughter. He is also the original author of the prayer of every yajamāna who is as alone in reaching heaven as Manu after the Flood. First father and first sacrificer, he is on equal terms in the ŚB with Vasiṣṭha whom Varuṇa had invited to board ship [RV 7.88.4a]. In ŚB 2.4.4.2, Vasiṣṭha's sacrifice make it possible to successfully obtain descendants and prosperity, in the same way as the sacrifice established by Manu after the Flood. By making Manu the victorious hero of the Flood, the brāhmins of the white Yajur Veda's School ranked him among the other mythical ancestors and ensured that he became famous, as is clearly seen in the epic and purāṇic literature and in the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, for example.

If, in the Mbh, the idea of the crossing has survived thanks to the verbal root *ṭṛ*⁸, the same is no longer true of the purāṇic versions. Purāṇic cosmology developed the notion of the cyclical eras, creations and destructions of Kalpa, and required their authors to find a new concept for the Flood. The main character no longer has to cross it in order to reach a summit. The fish keeps drawing the ship tirelessly one as long as Brahmā's night lasts⁹. The metaphorical Vedic language of the salvific crossing disappears in place of a crossing for the staunch viṣṇuit believer who trustfully takes refuge in the supreme god.

Many have wondered why the Flood seems to occur without any cause in the ŚB version. Like a distant echo of the Indo-European myth about the sudden rise in the water level of the river (Dumézil 1995: 1093ff), in the Vedic version there is no preliminary narrative allowing the reader-hearer to understand the reason for the Flood. Manu's morning ablutions and the rescue of the one-horned fish remain the first narrative elements. The consequence of this first rescue is

⁸“ sa tatāra tayā nāvā samudram ”, Mbh 3.185.39.

⁹“ahaṃ tvām ṛṣibhiḥ sārddhaṃ saha nāvam udanvati vikarṣanvichariṣyāmi yāvad brāhmī niśā prabho”, BhP 8.24.37.

that the fish warns of the imminent coming of a huge Flood. Therefore, the deep history of this myth lies in the idea of crossing itself, in the idea that the rescue can occur only if Manu, the yajam ana, has faith [ raddh a]¹⁰ in the warning words of this extraordinary fish. By listening to the fish’s voice and to its advice, Manu is saved. He overcomes every difficulty as safely as any grh apati, as the head of any family, who having to officiate on his own, must accomplish sacrifices in order to obtain descendants and prosperity. For this reason, we can affirm that even if the white Yajur Veda’s br ahmans, who created this myth, have adopted a Flood myth from another cultural sphere, as is very likely the case, and even if they kept the structure, introducing narrative inconsistencies, they added their own religious conception of the salvific sacrificial crossing, while preserving from Vedic thought, all its depth.

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