

अस्य वामस्य होतुस्  
The Asya Vāmasya Hymn  
of the Ṛg Veda (1.164)

दीर्घतमस्  
Sage Dīrghatamas

translated and annotated

by

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October 22, 2010

अस्य वामस्य पलितस्य होतुस्तस्य भ्राता मध्यमो अस्त्यश्वः ।  
तृतीयो भ्राता घृतपृष्ठो अस्यात्रापश्यं विशपति सप्तपुत्रम् ॥ १॥

सप्त युञ्जन्ति रथमेकचक्रमेको अश्वो वहति सप्तनामा  
त्रिणाभि चक्रमजरमनर्व यत्रेमा विश्वा भुवनाधि तस्थुः॥ २॥

इमं रथमधि ये सप्त तस्थुः सप्तचक्रं सप्त वहन्त्यश्वाः।  
सप्त स्वरारो अभि सं नवन्ते यत्र गवां निहिता सप्त नाम ॥ ३॥

को ददर्श प्रथमं जायमानमस्थन्वन्तं यदनस्था बिभर्ति।  
भूम्या असुरसृगात्मा क्व स्वित्को विद्वांसमुप गात्रप्रष्टुमेतत् ॥ ४॥

This lovable grayed priest [the sun] has an all-pervading middle brother [lightning]. His third brother is ghee-backed [the sacrificial fire]. Here [in this rite] I saw the Lord of the people with his seven sons.<sup>1</sup> (1)

Seven yoke the one-wheeled chariot and one horse with seven names pulls it. Three naves has the unaging and unstopable wheel on which all these beings [worlds] stand.<sup>2</sup> (2)

Which seven stand on this chariot with seven wheels; seven horses pull it, seven-wheeled. Seven sisters together sing forth praises in which are hidden the seven names of the cows.<sup>3</sup> (3)

Who saw the first one being born, the one with bones which the boneless bears? Where was the life, blood, and self of the earth? Who approached the learned one to ask about this?<sup>4</sup> (4)

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<sup>1</sup>This first verse starts with a visionary experience that the author undergoes during a sacrificial rite. The rest of the hymn seems to describe that visionary experience. Next verse tomorrow

<sup>2</sup>One can see in this hymn some of the antecedents of the use of the metaphor of the chariot in the Kathopanishad, 3.3. The chariot is probably the chariot of the sun. The use of the number seven recurs throughout the hymn. Who the seven are is not known.

<sup>3</sup>Seven may refer to the seven rasis who are objectified in the seven stars of the Pleiades or Ursa Major or the Big Dipper. There are seven days of the week (a Mesopotamian invention?), seven levels of planets up and down. The "which" may refer back to the seven of the previous verse who "yoke" the chariot. Or, Kunhan Raja thinks it refers to the seven horses who "stand" in the sense of being yoked to the chariot. Now the chariot has seven wheels instead of just one. And cows! Cows are everywhere in this hymn.

<sup>4</sup>The old question of epistemology again. Who knows what happened in the beginning, when the structured (boned) was being born supported or birthed by the unstructured (boneless)? Where were the breath, blood, self (actually Atman also means 'to breathe,' so we have two words for breath here) of the earth? Someone must know but who asked that person? Here is the epistemology presented by the text. Seeing (ko dadarza), that is pratyaksa or direct sensory perception. And failing that what? Prazna, questioning someone in the know, that is someone who either saw the first being born or someone who heard from someone who did, and so on. Thus, we have pratyaksa and zabda or testimony of the expert. But the fundamental means of knowing appears to be pratyaksa. Here the author reveals his real intention and quest. It is for the ultimate truth and is only tangentially interested in astronomy.

पाकः पृच्छामि मनसाविजानन् देवानामेना निहिता पदानि ।  
 वत्से बष्कये धि सप्त तन्तून् वि तत्रिरे कवय ओतवा उ ॥ ५॥  
 अचिकित्वाञ्चिकितुषश्चिदत्र कवीन्पृच्छामि विद्यने न विद्वान् ।  
 वि यस्तस्तम्भ षलिमा रजांस्यजस्य रूपे किमपि स्विदेकम् ॥ ६॥  
 इह ब्रवीतु य इमङ्ग वेदास्य वामस्य निहितं पदं वेः ।  
 शीर्ष्णः क्षीरं दुहते गावो अस्य वत्रिं वसाना उदकं पदापुः ॥ ७॥  
 माता पितरमृत आ बभाज धीत्यग्रे मनसा सं हि जग्मे ।  
 सा बीभत्सुर्गर्भरसा निविद्धा नमस्वन्त इदुपवाकमीयुः ॥ ८॥

I, a fool, ask, not understanding with my mind, about these hidden abodes of the gods. Over this young calf the poets have spread wide the seven threads in order to weave indeed.<sup>5</sup> (5)

As one who does not see I ask the poets who do see in order to know what I do not know. What indeed is the one in the form of the unborn who set apart these six regions?<sup>6</sup> (6)

Let him who knows with certainty proclaim here the hidden home of this lovely bird. The cows draw milk from its head [and] dressing in its clothes they drink water with the foot.<sup>7</sup> (7)

The mother gave a share to the father in the Law; in the beginning she approached him with thought and with the mind. She fearful [loathsome] with juicy womb [menses?] was pierced. They indeed bowing down spoke close by.<sup>8</sup> (8)

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<sup>5</sup>Again there is the theme of inquiry and the suggestion that perhaps one cannot understand it all with one's mind. Important realization here: true inquiry comes after one discovers that one does not know. i.e. is a fool. The inquiry is about the places of the gods which are hidden. The third quarter of the verse has that word *baSkaye* which never appears again. I follow Kunhan Raja in taking it to mean "young." The poets are described as weavers here. They spread the seven threads in order to weave them together. Perhaps what comes later will make more sense of this verse. Remember: poets weave.

<sup>6</sup>There is nothing astronomical here. This is about finding knowledge if you don't have it. Interestingly the root of the word *acikitvān* and of *cikituṣas* is *cit*, the root of the word for consciousness. Here in its earliest usage it means "to see or perceive." If I do not perceive it, I go to those who do perceive it and ask them. So knowledge is based on perception, either direct or indirect. What does our poet want to know? What is that one who in the form of the unborn set the six regions apart. Again, it is a question here of beginnings and ultimate truths. Put simply the question is who created the world. We also learn that it has six regions (*rajas*). In the Vedas *rajas* meant "the sphere of vapor or mist, region of clouds, atmosphere, air, firmament." We can kind of see how *rajas* took its place between *sattva* (clarity, clear skies) and *tamas* (darkness, opacity).

<sup>7</sup>The word for bird here is *vi*. This is a new word to me. Again we have the quest for knowledge in the first quarter, a hidden abode in the second and cows in the third and fourth. The cows, it has been suggested, refer to clouds in this verse, drawing water through their feet and milk from the head of the bird. Kind of a nice imagery. The milk would be the while misty portions of clouds high in the sky. What do you think? Is the bird then the sun? Others think the cows are sun rays here (Brown). The same author connects this verse with verses 47, 51 and 52. We will revisit this when we get there.

<sup>8</sup>No one seems to understand this verse. It seems to suggest a primordial sexual union between the mother (earth?) and the father (sky or sun?). The word *bībhatsu* seems to suggest that she was disgusted by the union. Perhaps this refers to a primordial incest, an early version of that passage in the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.4). in which *ātman* shaped like two, male and female joined together, split and

युक्ता मातासीद्धुरि दक्षिणाया अतिष्ठद्गर्भो वृजनीष्वन्तः ।  
अमीमेद्वत्सो अनु गामपश्यद्विश्वरूप्यं त्रिषु योजनेषु ॥ ९॥

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begin a series of copulations that produce all of the varieties of animals in the world. No idea who comes bowing and speaking in the last quarter. Perhaps the progeny of that union. There is here also the suggestion that procreation takes place when the woman is approached by the man when she is in her menstruation. This appears frequently in the later tradition. Brown: The mother (of the Sun, i.e, Usas [Dawn]), in accord with supreme order (rta), yielded the father (Dyaus [Sky]) his due, for at the beginning reverently and with concentrated mind she united with him. A reluctant prude, she became pregnant when pierced. Reverent worshipers went to give applause.

The mother was joined to the yoke of the south; the embryo stood within the clouds. The calf lowed and looked after the cow who was all-formed in the three stages.<sup>9</sup> (9)

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<sup>9</sup>This is a particularly puzzling verse for me. None of the other translations I have seen make very good sense of it. Here is Brown, for instance:

The mother (Dawn, USas) was yoked to DakSiNA's chariot pole. The child (Sun) was within the enclosures (?). The calf (Sun) lowed and searched for the many-colored cow (Dawn) in the three stages.

This is why reading Veda is so much fun and why Sri Jiva says we cannot understand it anymore. The great Vedic commentator Sāyaṇa thinks this verse refers to a rain storm which nourishes the earth and creates crops. For him, the mother is the sky, *dyaus*, which does sometimes have a feminine grammatical gender in the Veda. *Dakṣiṇā* means, according to him, the earth. So the Sky was engaged (*yuktā*) in supporting the earth. How? By becoming ready to rain. The embryo is the waters hidden in the clouds. The calf refers again to the waters in the clouds which when the three, cloud, rays of light, and wind (the three *yojanas* of the verse) are joined together make sound as thunder. The waters then "look after" the earth, which has the form of the world; that is, they fall as rain.