

Cyavana Helps Ashvins, Prometheus Helps Humans:

A Myth About Sacrifice

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Though founded by linguists, the field of Indo-European Studies has developed two offshoots or annexes – the archaeological and the socio-cultural. The sociocultural can be subdivided in various ways, for instance into domains (social structure, pantheon, myth/epic and ritual, legal systems, and so on), and/or by regions – which is to say, by branches of the language family. One tempting regional comparison is between India and Greece. This too can be subdivided, for instance on the basis of the texts used for the comparison. As regards India, much work has focused on the Vedas, especially the Rig Veda, on the grounds that ‘earlier’ texts are more likely to contain Indo-European heritage than ‘later’ ones.¹ However, contrary to this reasonable expectation, the allusive, elusive – even cryptic – Rig Veda offers less narrative material suitable for comparison with Greece than does the copious epic tradition, especially the vast *Mahābhārata*.

A certain amount has been done on Homer-*Mahābhārata* comparison (e.g., Allen 2010), and another paper from the same point of view (Allen 2005) presented a Hesiod-*Mahābhārata* comparison. The present paper continues the latter direction of study, though by no means exhausting its possibilities. The comparison concerns the myth of origin of a ritual. The Greek myth concerns animal sacrifice in general, while the Sanskrit is more specialised in that it concerns only *soma* sacrifices.

The first tasks are to introduce the helpers who appear in my title and whom I call ‘the protagonists’, and to contextualise the stories about them. Cyavana is a brahmin – a sage and ascetic. Of the various stories about him I discuss only the one best told in *Mbh* Book 3.² At this point Arjuna is visiting his divine father in heaven, and the other four Pāṇḍava brothers are starting their pilgrimage round India, guided by a brahmin called Lomaśa. When the party reach a sacred location, Lomaśa often tells a story associated with it – an ‘encapsulated’ story, i.e. one that is not part of the main plot of the epic. At the location in question, in the course of a sacrifice, Cyavana once helped the Aśvins, disputing with Indra and getting his own way. Part of the story is told again in Book 13, in a didactic

¹ The inverted commas serve to emphasise that the date at which a story is first written down may or may not correlate with the date when the story was first told orally.

² In the Critical Edition (which I use) the whole story runs from 3.121.15 to 125.11, but the section relating to the sacrifice starts at 123.20. For a translation see van Buitenen 1975: 457–462.

passage about the superiority of brahmins to warriors.³ This version ('version II') is shorter than the other, and I make less use of it.

The story of Prometheus is told by Hesiod in the *Theogony* (West 1966). This poem contains genealogies of the gods (as its name suggests), but also the Succession Myth, which narrates the succession of Ouranos, Cronus and Zeus as leaders among the gods. The Prometheus story (lines 507–616) comes between Zeus's rise to power and his war against the Titans. In the course of a sacrifice Prometheus once helped humanity, disputing with Zeus and getting his own way. Part of the story is told again in *Works and Days* (42–105), Hesiod's other main poem, near the start. It is introduced as explaining why the life of mortals is so laborious, and bears only slightly on the theme of sacrifice.⁴

The aim of the paper is to compare two stories which, as far as I know, have not been compared before. We are studying not stories A and B in themselves, but in their mutual relationship, concentrating on similarities. For this purpose it is not essential to explore at length secondary literature (either comparativist or specialist) that focuses on one of the stories without citing the other. Thus Cyavana's story is reasonably well known to IE cultural comparativists through the writings of Dumézil.⁵ Dumézil compared it with the Norse story of Mímir and Kvasir, arguing that it illustrated a feature of IE doctrine. The point was that divine society (like human society) remained incomplete until representatives of the third function (such as the Aśvins) were admitted to join with representatives of the first two functions. His interpretation seems to me persuasive, but is only tangentially relevant here. As for the classicist literature on Prometheus, it is of course enormous.⁶

But what is the point of comparing the stories? My background assumption, like that of several IE comparativists, is that much of the narrative heritage of India and Greece goes back to shared ancestral narratives told in early IE times – to 'protonarratives'. I have also (e.g. in 2009) been exploring the hypothesis that the Greek tradition quite often fuses or amalgamates traditions that were separate in the protonarrative and remain separate in the Sanskrit. I believe this applies to the present case. The similarities between the Cyavana and Prometheus stories go back to a protonarrative, but I suspect that the Prometheus story draws on at least one other protonarrative that is well preserved in the Sanskrit. In this short article I do not discuss either this other Sanskrit comparandum or the other versions of Cyavana's story, either the 'earlier' ones in the Jaiminīya and Śatapatha Brāhmaṇas or the 'later' ones in the Purāṇas.⁷

³ 13.141.15–30. Translation by Ganguli (using a Vulgate text): Anusasana Parvan CLVI (p. 364–5). Brief allusions to the story can be found elsewhere: 1.22.117–8; 3.288.9; 4.20.7; 12.329.14.3.

⁴ Text in West 1978. Translations of both poems in West 1988, from which I usually quote.

⁵ See especially his *Roman des jumeaux*, 1994.

⁶ See, e.g., Dougherty 2006. For comparison with the Caucasus see Charachidze 1986.

⁷ I thank Emily West for showing me her unpublished article on the story of Cyavana. Cf. also Witzel 1987.

Moreover, I narrow the focus even further by barely referring to the females involved in the stories – Sukanya and Pandora – whom I hope to examine elsewhere. Sukanya is central to the first part of the Sanskrit story (till 3.123.19), while Pandora appears (unnamed) after the most relevant portion of the Greek story (namely 533–561), as well as in *Works and Days*. Because of the narrow focus we shall much of the time be comparing only 39 shlokas with 29 hexameters.

Here is a slightly fuller précis of the stories in question.

The aged ascetic Cyavana is grateful to the twin Ásvin gods because they have rejuvenated him and thereby improved his marriage with Princess Sukanya, daughter of King Śaryāti. Accordingly, he promises to secure them admission to *soma* sacrifices, whatever the attitude of Indra. He arranges for the king to lay on a suitable ritual and starts to officiate. Indra sees him preparing an offering to the Ásvins, and objects: the Ásvins rank too low in divine society, they are too close to men. Sage and god argue, and Indra raises his thunderbolt. Cyavana uses his magic to paralyse Indra's arm and to conjure up a monster called Mada. Indra is terrified by Mada and agrees to admit the Ásvins to the ritual. Cyavana then frees Indra and disperses Mada.

In Greece, gods and men have gathered and an ox is killed, presumably as a sacrifice. Prometheus arranges the meat in such a way as to induce Zeus to choose the less desirable portion – the bones and fat. Zeus is angry and withholds fire from mortals (so they cannot cook the meat); but Prometheus steals fire from heaven in the hollow of a fennel stalk. Thereafter Zeus punishes Prometheus and humanity, but this part of the story lies outside our main focus.

At first sight the similarity consists in little more than a conflict between protagonist and god, leading to a change in sacrificial practice. However, on closer inspection one can distinguish at least eighteen rapprochements.

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1. Mythic precedent for humanity's offerings to gods. Sacrifice is what ensures normal harmonious relations between humanity and gods, and both stories serve as myths of origin for significant features of the ritual. Vedic rituals fall into three main types, according to the type of offering. *Soma* rituals, the most elaborate and expensive type, enjoy the highest standing and, in so far as they continue to be performed, continue to include *soma* offerings to the Ásvins. Similarly, in most Greek sacrifices, gods continued to receive burnt bones. As Hesiod says, 'Ever since then [when Prometheus tricked Zeus] the peoples on earth have burned white bones for the immortals on their aromatic altars' (*Th.* 556–7).

2. Brain versus brawn. In both cases the conflict is between a protagonist who relies successfully on his knowledge or ingenuity and a god who relies

unsuccessfully on force. As Cyavana is a brahmin, his association with learning and knowledge is more or less guaranteed by the stereotype attached to that social category. More precisely, he owes his success on this occasion to knowledge of sacred texts and magic (*mantratas* and *kṛtyā*, 3.124.17). Prometheus is described repeatedly as crafty or subtle (511, etc), being contrasted with his stupid brother Epimetheus. In contrast, Indra is of course a warrior god, and Zeus certainly can be one, as he is for instance in the Titanomachy.

3. Seniority of protagonist. Version II of Cyavana's story is one of a set illustrating the superiority of brahmins over kshatriyas, so in this context at least the god is implicitly aligned with human warriors; and brahmins were created before warriors (e.g. 12.329.5.6). Moreover, warriors are unlikely to be aged, while Cyavana, until his rejuvenation, is emphatically old; the Aśvins imply that he is too old to make love. In Greece, Titans are gods of the generation preceding Olympians, and Prometheus, son of the Titan Iapetus, must himself be a Titan. Moreover, Iapetus is older than Zeus's father Kronos (last-born of the Titans, *Th.* 132–8). So the Greek protagonist is the senior disputant in two senses.

4. Named location. Cyavana's contest with Indra took place near Mt Vaidūrya and the Narmadā River, at a lake (3.121.15, 125.11). Prometheus disputed with Zeus at Mekone (536), which is said to be the old name of Sikyon in the north-east Peloponnese. This rapprochement rests only on the fact that both places are named, while by no means all mythic events are given a geographical location. Unlocalised myths include Indra's fight with Vṛtra and (in Hesiod) Zeus's with Typhoeus.

5. Opening the dispute. Both disputes are opened by the protagonist. Cyavana draws *soma* to offer to the Aśvins, while Prometheus cuts up the great ox and prepares portions for humans and for Zeus. Cyavana's action is explicitly part of a ritual, and the context suggests that the same applies to that of Prometheus.

6. The protagonist's challenge. As he implies in his initial promise to the Aśvins, Cyavana is aware of Indra's unwillingness to admit them as *soma*-drinkers (3.123.22); so in effect he is challenging the god, being confident that he can win. The crooked-schemer Prometheus, 'intent on deceit' (547), is doing just the same. The point is even clearer in the abrupt opening of version II where, having made his promise to the Aśvins, Cyavana simply tells Indra to make them *soma*-drinkers: *somapāṇv aśvinau kuru* (2nd person singular imperative, 13.141.16).

7. The god. Indra and Zeus are not only typologically akin, both being kings within their respective pantheons, but they are also demonstrably cognate in some other stories. For instance, as I argued in 2010, Indra's role in the Burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest (1.214–215) parallels Zeus's role in Iliad 21, when the gods fight each other on the Trojan plain.

8. Thunderbolt. This weapon is wielded by both gods, not only in general but also in this particular story. Indra tries, but fails, to hurl it at Cyavana.⁸ Zeus uses it to send Prometheus' brother Menoetius to the region of darkness (to *erebos*, 515).

9. Words and deeds. Both disputes combine verbal argument and physical action. As we saw in §6, the sage's initial challenge is an action: he draws a draft of *soma* for the Ásvins (presumably accompanying the act with invocations that make it clear to Indra who is to receive the offering). The god voices his objections and starts the argument. Giving up the war of words, Cyavana resumes his activity. The god issues a final verbal threat and follows it up with his physical attack. In Greece Prometheus makes his preparations. Zeus opens the dialogue, as did Indra. After one exchange of speeches, the god picks up the 'wrong' pile of meat, then reverts to words. Finally he restrains or removes fire.

10. The god's three speeches. During the quarrel Indra makes three speeches. The first two give reasons why the Ásvins should not be allowed to drink *soma*, and the third is a threat: in effect he says 'If you continue, I shall use my bolt'. In the *Theogony* Zeus makes only two speeches. First he protests at the division of meat, then, after his 'wrong' choice, he blames the Titan for deceiving him. However, in *Works and Days* (54–58), he makes a third speech, announcing his response to the theft of fire. In effect he says to Prometheus: 'You may be pleased with yourself, but I shall punish humanity'. In both traditions the first two speeches concern the past or present, while the third consists of two parts. The first part concerns the behaviour of the protagonist (If you continue...; You may be pleased...) while the second concerns the god's intensions. Naturally it therefore contains verbs in the first person singular future: *prahariṣyāmi*, 'I shall throw [the bolt]' (3.124.15); and *dōsō*, 'I shall give [an affliction, i.e. Pandora]' (57).

The alignment of the third speech with the other two finds some support in the wording. All three of those by Zeus open with the vocative *iapetionidē*, 'Son of Iapetos', which is then expanded with a phrase beginning *pantōn* ('all', genitive plural). The first expansion is *pantōn arideiket' anaktōn*, 'outstanding (or eminent) among all the lords', the second, identical with the third, is *pantōn peri mēdea eidōs*, 'clever above all others'.⁹

11. Length of speeches. All these speeches by the god are in *oratio recta* (in inverted commas, as it were), so they are clearly delimited; and each of Indra's speeches occupies just one standard shloka (124.9, 12, 15).¹⁰ Since a shloka consists of two sixteen-syllable half-shlokas, it roughly corresponds in length to two Greek hexameters, since a hexameter has a maximum of seventeen syllables but on average somewhat less. In the *Theogony* each of Zeus's speeches, as well

⁸ In version II Indra supplements the thunderbolt with a huge mountain, which he seizes (13.141.21).

⁹ A second vocative *ō pepōn*, 'my good sir' occurs in speeches I and II, but is irrelevant here.

¹⁰ Cyavana's response to the first occupies two shlokas.

as the intervening one by Prometheus, are two hexameters long (the average hexameter length being 16.2 syllables).

12. Anger. Since the story is about a quarrel, it is not surprising that the participants become angry but it is worth noting how often the theme recurs. Right at the start Lomaśa mentions briefly the three things that happened at the sacred site (§18). The second is that this is where the great Bhargava ascetic was angry with Indra (*cukopa* 121.21a) and paralysed him. Yudhiṣṭhira picks up the point, asking the reason for the anger (*kopaṃ cakre* 22d). In the course of his dealings with Sukanya, the sage waxes angry (*akrudhyat*), being very irascible (*parama-manyuman* 122.13cd). Mada runs at Indra in fury (*saṃkruddhaḥ* 124.24a). Indra's submission ends the sage's anger (*manyur* 125.7c). In version II, when his intervention is ignored by Cyavana, Indra is *krodhamūrchitaḥ* (13.141.21b), filled or pervaded with anger, while Cyavana is *amarṣākulalocanaḥ* – his eyes filled with anger (21f). The eight references to anger use four different roots.

In the Sanskrit anger is attributed mainly to Cyavana or his creation Mada, and only in version II to Indra; but in the Greek Prometheus is never said to be angry, only Zeus. The theme occurs first in the introductory section in connection with the ending of Prometheus' punishment: irate though he was, Zeus ends the anger he had before. The 'anger vocabulary' here is *khōomenos* and *kholos* (533). Thereafter we find *khōsato* and *kholos* (554), *khōomenos* and *kholos* (561–2), *kholoō* (568), and one can add *daken d' ara neiothi thumon* 'it stung (Zeus) deep to the spirit' (567). *WD* has *kholōsamenos* in 47 and again in 53. So in all there are ten references to anger, using three roots.

13. Protagonist smiles. After Indra threatens him, Cyavana (despite his irascibility), looks at the god with a smile (*smayan* 124.16), and when Zeus first objects, Prometheus responds with a soft or quiet smile (*ēk' epimeidēsas* 547). No doubt in both cases the smile expresses confidence that brain will outdo brawn (§2). The verbs *smi-* and *meidaō* are cognate (as is English 'smile'), and both forms are nominative masculine singular participles.

14. Tit-for-tat. After engaging in the dialogue each god makes an aggressive move, which is immediately or promptly countered by the protagonist. Indra's attack is answered by Cyavana's two-pronged use of magic (to paralyse and to frighten). Zeus's removal of fire is answered by Prometheus' recovery of it. The similarity lies not in the actions themselves but in the sequence dialogue – god's act – protagonist's counter-act.

15. The god shows respect. In Book 3 Indra is overcome by Cyavana's magic and makes his submission verbally: he admits the Aśvins to *soma* rituals, he recognises the authority of what the sage says, and he asks for mercy. All this implies respect, but in Version II the implication is also enacted non-verbally. The gods, with Indra, find themselves within the mouth of Mada, at the root of his tongue. Having conferred, the gods tell Indra to bow down or make obeisance

to Cyavana, and he does so. The verb *praṇam-* ‘bow’ is thus used twice (13.141.26, 27).

Zeus certainly does not physically bow down to Prometheus, but he does – rather surprisingly – show respect to someone who helps the Titan. As part of his punishment Prometheus is immobilised, and each day an eagle eats part of his liver, which grows again at night (so that the punishment can continue indefinitely). Zeus’s son Heracles kills the eagle, saving Prometheus from that affliction and setting him free from distress. Zeus accepts this (for a reason discussed in §16); thus the god does reverence and honour to his eminent son (*taut’ ara hazomenos tima arideiketon huion*, 532).¹¹

So in both stories the king of the gods shows respect to a mortal. But the rapprochement can be pushed further, if we focus on a third agent in the picture. The Ásvins help the sage by freeing him from his senility, while Heracles helps Prometheus by freeing him from his distress; and each helper receives respect from the relevant god. In other words, in submitting to Cyavana’s demands Indra is agreeing to respect not only the sage but also the Ásvins, so the possibility arises of comparing the Ásvins with Heracles. In the Rig Veda the Ásvins are often the sons of Dyaus (West 2007: 187); Heracles is the son of Zeus; and the two gods are etymologically cognate. Moreover, just as the Ásvins are emphatically twinned, so Heracles too has a twin brother. Iphicles is begotten by the mortal Amphitryon a few hours after Zeus begets Heracles; the two share the womb of Alcmena. The Ásvins, initially regarded by Zeus as excessively close to mankind, are promoted to the rank of *soma*-drinking gods; and at his death Heracles is promoted from hero to god.

16. ‘Spin’. At first sight both our warrior gods suffer humiliation, indeed Zeus suffers it several times. Indra is paralysed, frightened, and forced to do what he initially says he does not intend to do. Zeus is tricked at the sacrifice; his first attempt at punishment fails when the fire is recovered; and his second attempt is terminated by Heracles, apparently sooner than expected. Both gods remind one of politicians who suffer what is potentially a blow to their prestige. Employing spin, they try ‘put a brave face on it’, to ‘make the best of things’, offering explanations that may or may not convince their audience. Similarly, the gods imply that appearances were deceptive. Indra claims that the promotion of the Ásvins was what he himself all along intended – with a view to glorifying the sage. After Prometheus replies to Zeus’s first speech, Hesiod comments that Zeus recognised the trick and did not fall for it (*gnō r’ oud’ ēgnoiēse dolon*, 551). When Heracles terminates the sufferings of the Titan, Hesiod comments that Zeus was not unwilling for this to happen (*ouk aekēti Zēnos*, 529), so that his son should become more famous.

17. Phraseology. Though one hardly believes them, the gods’ explanations merit close attention. Actually three instances of divine spin need consideration,

¹¹ The same word for ‘eminent’ is applied (sarcastically) by Zeus to Prometheus (cf. §12).

since Indra offers two of them (the duality is emphasised more in Ganguli's translation than in van Buitenen's).

- 125.5cd *bhūya eva tu te vīryaṃ prakāśed iti bhārgava*
so that your power might once more shine forth, O Bhargava,
125.6ab *sukanyāyāḥ pituścāsyā loke kīrtiḥ prathed iti*
and so that the fame of Sukanya and her father might spread in
the world.
- 530 *ophr' hēraklēos thēbageneos kleos eiē*
so that the fame of Heracles, born at Thebes, should be
531 *pleion et' ē to paroithen epi khthona pouluboteiran.*
still greater than before on the wide-pastured earth.

- Syntax. The particle *iti*, whose function can roughly be described as 'close inverted commas', shows that the preceding clause presents the speaker's thinking. Despite the differing position, it corresponds to the purposive conjunction *ophra*.
- Subject (in nominative): *vīrya* 'power, heroic deed'; *kīrti* and *kleos* both meaning 'fame'. All three are abstract nouns.
- Genitives. Each subject has a dependent genitive. The *te* 'of you' refers to Cyavana, as the vocative confirms. In the Sanskrit, where the second half-shloka refers to Cyavana's wife and father-in-law, the double genitive occupies a whole pāda (quarter of a shloka). In the Greek the noun phrase consisting of Heracles and his birth-place occupies more than half the syllables of its hexameter. Both of these long genitival expressions precede the nominative word for 'fame', and a few Sanskrit manuscripts reverse the order of *loke* and *kīrti*, thereby juxtaposing the genitive and nominative, as in the Greek. Anyway, it is obvious that the Greek is closer to Indra's second explanation than to his first.
- Verbs. The verb *prakāś-* 'shine forth' (5d) is echoed in the noun that is the subject in 6d *ato mayetad vihitam tava vīrya prakāśanam*, 'Therefore that public manifestation of your powers was decreed (or destined) by me.' But let us leave this part of Indra's explanation for a moment and move to the next verb – *prath-* 'spread, extend', which is filled out by *bhūyas* 'more', which itself is followed by the mildly emphatic particle *eva*. A similar meaning is conveyed in the Greek by the ordinary verb 'to be' associated with *pleion* 'more, greater', itself qualified by *eti* 'even, still' and the comparative phrase. Both *bhūyas* and *pleion* are placed emphatically at the start of the half-shloka or hexameter.
- Spatial context: situated towards the end, *loke* 'in the world' corresponds to *epi khthona* 'on/over the earth'.

Textual similarities of this kind are not uncommon if one looks for them (Allen in press). Indra ends his speech with a plea for mercy and with a recognition of Cyavana's success ('Let it be as you want it,' 6f). The next shloka notes the prompt decline of Cyavana's anger – his *manyur vyagamat* (7c). Zeus's approval of his son (532, discussed in §15) is immediately followed by his calming down

(‘irate though he was, he ended the wrath (*pauthē kholou*) he had before’, 533). West reads the genitive of *kholos* ‘anger’, but a number of manuscripts have the nominative, i.e. the same case as in the Sanskrit.

Here is one final textual similarity, a little less obvious. Indra claims that he ordained (*vidhā-* 6c) Cyavana’s demonstration of power. As for Zeus, just before introducing Prometheus’ punishment, Hesiod mentions the task given to Prometheus’ brother Atlas, namely to hold up the sky, ‘for Zeus the resourceful assigned to him this lot’ (*tautēn gar hoi moiran edassato mētieta Zeus*, 520). Atlas is not Prometheus, but in both passages the god’s will is referred to, and in both the vocabulary relates specifically to dividing up or sharing out. Thus *vidhā-* means ‘distribute, apportion, dispose’ (the prefix implying division); *moira*, ‘portion, fate’ is from *meiromai* ‘receive as one’s share’; *dateomai* means ‘divide, share out’. Given the proximity of the other verbal parallels, coincidence seems to me unlikely.

18. Sequencing. This rapprochement concerns the order in which events are narrated or mentioned. When the Pāṇḍavas reach the sacred site, Lomaśa introduces it by mentioning three events (3.121.20–21). A: This is the site of Śaryāti’s sacrifice, where Indra drank *soma* with the Ásvins in person. B: where Cyavana was angry with Indra and paralysed him. C: where Cyavana obtained Sukanya as his wife. Curiously, these events are mentioned in the reverse order to that in which they occur. In the story proper, the sage’s marriage precedes his dispute with Indra, which itself precedes the Ásvins’ *soma*-drinking. Yudhiṣṭhira, asking for a fuller account, ignores Lomaśa’s C, but picks up his A and B, putting them in the ‘right’ order.

Hesiod starts his account with Iapetus, father of Prometheus, and with Iapetus’ four sons. He has something to say on each of them, on Epimetheus, Menoetius, Atlas and finally Prometheus. He refers first to Prometheus’ punishment and Heracles’ intervention; then backtracks to the dispute at Mekone. In moving from later events to earlier ones Hesiod’s introduction to the sacrifice story follows the same course as Lomaśa’s introduction.

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The differences between the two stories are innumerable: for instance, different sorts of protagonist (brahmin and Titan), different offerings (*soma* and meat), different recipients for them (Ásvins and gods in general), and many more; moreover, the Sanskrit ending is more or less happy, while the Greek ends with an emphasis on punishment – both of Prometheus and of mortals. However, I hope to have presented enough evidence that the two stories are related; and there is more to be found. The comparison can certainly be taken further, by including the females and going beyond Hesiod to later Greek sources; and as I said, further Sanskrit stories need to be brought into the picture – not to mention the Norse. My argument here has only been that the protonarrative lying behind Cyavana’s story is *one* component of the Prometheus story.

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