



**Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton, eds. and trans.,  
*The Rigveda* (3 volume set)**

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\$399.00. ISBN 978-0199370184.

INDIA'S EARLIEST TEXT, the *Rigveda* (RV), has a new English translation, published in three volumes with continuous pagination. The translators are Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton, Vedicists and Indo-Europeanists trained at Yale in the 1970s by Stanley Insler. This is the first complete translation of the RV in English since the misbegotten poetic effort by R. T. H. Griffith, published from 1889 to 1892, which “conceals rather than reveals the wonders of the *Rigveda* and would (properly) discourage any sensitive reader from further pursuit of the text” (3). Parts of the RV have been translated into English since Griffith (most notably by H. D. Velankar in the 1950s and 1960s), but none complete. Louis Renou translated most of the RV into French from the 1940s to 1960s; a complete translation into Russian by T. Y. Elizarenkova was published in Moscow between 1989 and 1999; a complete translation into German, which remains the primary reference work by Vedic scholars, was authored by Karl Friedrich Geldner in the 1920s but published posthumously in the 1950s (in four volumes in the Harvard Oriental Series); and a translation into German is ongoing by Michael WITZEL and Toshifumi GOTŌ (the first two volumes were published in 2007 and 2013). Many other partial translations and anthologies in English are available, including, most importantly, selected hymns by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (1981) and Walter Maurer (1986), and more than a century earlier by F. Max Müller (1856). For the record, the earliest translation of parts of the RV was in German, by Friedrich August Rosen, in 1830, of 121 hymns. Besides Griffith’s translation, one other early more or less complete English translation remains in print, by H. H. Wilson, published posthumously in London from 1860 to 1888. Wilson’s and Griffith’s translations were rightly regarded as deficient from the very date of their publication (for different reasons), although, to be fair, Wilson was one of the great Sanskritists of the first half of the nineteenth century. Two other recent English translations have appeared: by R. L. Kashyap (12 volumes; Pondicherry, 2009) and Prasanna Chandra Gautam (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 2014–2015). Neither of these authors can claim philological mastery of the subtleties of Vedic Sanskrit; rather, they are guided by coded interpretations that are often disconnected with the content and culture of the RV itself.

It is hardly necessary to state in this review, but because of the deep (if not universal) suspicion of Sanskrit studies on the part of the American postcolonial left within the world of Indian and South Asian studies, the active equivocation towards Vedic studies in the decidedly less postcolonial Sanskritic scholarly community in Europe, and the assault on western Sanskrit and Indological study by the Hindutva-inspired right (note the steady stream of books and websites on the

Vedas with a distinct ideological bias), it is heartening to see a work as mature and non-ideological as this, an exemplary result of a combined eighty (or more) years of philological study. In other words, in its classical philological presentation Vedic studies has limped beyond its natural expiration date, according to the promethean (and procrustean) agendas of the left and the right in Indic studies. With this translation, however, Jamison and Brereton have disproven this.

In addition to the history of translation, the RV has been subjected to an enormous amount of scholarly analysis. The reason, of course, is because this is the earliest extant text in any dialect of Sanskrit. In several important studies published during the 1980s and 1990s, Michael Witzel has identified a number of Vedic dialects and regions of composition of the different parts of the RV, as well as more accurately fixed much of the history of (and within) the text (for example, WITZEL 1989; 1997). Nearly all non-ideologically motivated scholars agree with Witzel's general outlines (many particulars will remain open to debate), although his work by no means supersedes the bulk of the earlier scholarship on the RV. That work includes studies of myth, ritual, and metaphysics that we might retrieve from the RV, Rigvedic literary and textual history, and unending volumes of philological study of the RV. Thousands of studies of R̥gvedic lexica, the RV's unique or characteristic linguistic features and forms (Jamison has herself written a book on the Vedic suffix *-aya-* [JAMISON 1983]), its complicated syntax, and its relation to Indo-European and later Indic languages, have been written.

Until the last decade and a half, practically all the scholarship on the RV was noted in six enormous and largely annotated volumes, commencing with Louis Renou's *Bibliographie védique* (1931) and followed by five volumes of *Vedic Bibliography* by R. N. Dandekar (appearing regularly thereafter until 2004). It is difficult to estimate the number of entries in these six volumes, but it must be well over fifty thousand. Such a project, especially in hard copy, will never again be undertaken. Much of this vast scholarship has been helpful, but it is much too massive for any single individual (including the indefatigable R. N. Dandekar) to have read it all. Nevertheless, it has been largely digested and absorbed by Jamison and Brereton, who summarize the highlights of both the traditional and modern scholarship (18–22).

Jamison and Brereton's primary editorial decision was to leave most of the text unreferenced, to ask the reader to refer to Geldner or other sources that more fully explicate the individual hymns, verses, and problematic lexical items within the text. Only in this way could they limit their translation to three volumes and a mere 1,728 pages. Their second major editorial decision was to provide a succinct introduction to the textuality of the RV at the beginning of the first volume, adding brief pithy statements at the beginning of each *mandala* ("chapter" or "book") outlining its contents, then, importantly, introductions of varying length or brevity to each of the 1,028 hymns. Occasionally they mention scholarship on the individual hymns, but, in keeping with their agenda, they have completely eschewed footnotes. The absence of footnotes is convenient and awkward simultaneously: convenient because it enables the reader to glide uninterrupted through the text, and awkward because it forces the authors to include clarifications and alterna-

tive translations in parentheses or brackets in the body of the translation. Both of these editorial practices are unexpected and uncharacteristic of modern Indological scholarship, in which (especially) the art of the footnote is practiced *in extremis*. Despite the occasional awkwardness, these editorial choices decidedly contribute to the success of the volumes.

As partial explanation, they state in their introduction: “Perhaps the most unusual feature of our translation is our decision to avoid the use of footnotes entirely ... [S]everal considerations led us to it. First, the notes in Geldner’s translation, especially the parallels he cites, are full and informative, and interested readers should consult them.... Further, this translation will appear approximately coincident with the new Witzel-Gotō translation into German, which contains annotations to verses that build on Geldner’s work. Yet another set of similar annotations seemed to us unnecessary and redundant” (81). They continue, referring to the brief introductions to the individual hymns: “In the introductions we usually do not engage with the considerable secondary literature on the hymn or the variant interpretations of other translators.... [A] detailed discussion of how and why we differ from other interpretations would swell our already long work to unmanageable proportions” (82).

It is important to note that in June 2015, Brereton announced on the Indology Listserv that he and Jamison were undertaking a website, sponsored by UCLA, Jamison’s home institution, on which they would discuss technical points to their translation that were impracticable in the published book. A quick perusal of this website (<http://rigvedacommentary.alc.ucla.edu/>) just before sending off this review reveals that Jamison has thus far contributed philological notes to the first 115 hymns of the first *maṇḍala* and the Indra hymns of the eighth *maṇḍala*. No doubt this will have expanded by the time the present review is published. They expect to complete this project in three years.

The authors are clear about which of them translated which hymns, about their division of labor. Joel Brereton translated 169 hymns, including many of the best known hymns, including the *puruṣasūkta* (10.90), the hymn describing Indra separating the heaven from the earth by slaughtering the demon Vritra (the Encloser) (1.32), the description (among other things) of the mechanics of sound and the levels of speech by the seer Long Darkness (Dirghatamas) (1.164), the much-noted hymn cited as the beginning of abstract philosophy in India (10.129), and the hymn to the goddess of Speech (Vac) (10.71). Stephanie Jamison, however, has translated the vast majority of the text, 859 hymns, or 84 percent of the entire corpus. This includes the entirety of the sixth, eighth, and ninth *maṇḍalas*, in the latter of which nearly all the hymns in praise of *soma* (the purifying *soma* or *soma pavamāna*, to be precise) in the RV are gathered together in one place (114 in this *maṇḍala* alone).

The general introduction in the first volume should be read closely. Every scholar, including those who have thought about the Vedas for decades, will profit from it. On the problematic and contentious issue of dating the RV, the authors place the period of composition “sometime within the period 1400–1000 BCE or, even more approximately, within the second half of the second millennium BCE” (5).

Recognizing that the semi-nomadic pastoral society of those who called themselves *āryas* has left virtually no material and datable remains, historians must fall back on the ample evidence of poetic tradition reflected in the text, which is clearly much older, with affinities to Indo-Iranian and Indo-European. Thus Jamison and Brereton state succinctly, “The Ṛgveda is only the surface of a very deep tradition” (5).

The authors explain that one of the primary features of the poetry is to forge correspondences with the cosmos, the individual, and the sacrifice. This is well known, and is one of the reasons why the scholarship on the RV is so extravagant, and, by no accident in the hands of scholars little trained in the subtleties of the Vedic language and ritual, filled with a great deal of even more extravagant connections and associations. The general introduction dedicates a good deal of space to the Vedic ritual (25–35), including the *soma* sacrifice, which dominates the RV, although much more on the connections between the verses in the hymns and the Vedic rituals is found in the introductions to the individual hymns themselves. Indeed, the erudition in matters of language, poetic convention, ritual, and cosmology found in the introductions to the hymns is one of the strongest features of this translation. The depth, maturity, and attentiveness to detail in these introductions show exactly why it took the authors two decades to complete their work; they thought deeply about every hymn, no matter how insignificant or repetitive it might be.

Occasionally I wish that the authors had supplied just a little more information on the scholarship, as in Jamison’s introduction to RV 10.106, a hymn to the *aśvin* twins, which she rightly introduces with the statement, “There is no question that this is the most frustrating hymn in the *Ṛgveda*” (1,569). She explains in her typically effusive style why, following Geldner, she leaves verses 5–8 of this eleven-verse hymn untranslated: “[T]he style goes far beyond the recondite to the utterly incomprehensible, with impossible hapaxes of unusual morphological structure, seemingly in part driven by phonological play” (1,569). In her judiciousness to leave it untranslated, I wish she could have referred to KUIPER’s article (2000), which suggests that a bilingual poet might have composed it, and that the problematic verses might be in Munda, an altogether separate language outside of the Indo-European fold. No matter, however; this provides Jamison the opportunity to expand on her rhetorical observation that many hymns are omphalic, that “the center holds the mystery” (1,569). Any Sanskritist who looks at the text of this hymn can appreciate that Vedic grammar and syntax will likely be very far from that of classical Sanskrit, and that no one can undertake a translation of the RV without decades of training in the intricacies of this peculiar language and a refined poetic sensibility.

Jamison and Brereton’s fidelity to the nuances of modern scholarship on Vedic, even if generally unmentioned, may be observed on every page. An example of this is Jamison’s translation of the most commonly cited and recited verse in the RV, namely 3.62.10, the famous *gāyatrī* mantra. Jamison translates: “Might we make our own that desirable effulgence of god Savitar, who will rouse forth our insights” (554). The verb *dhīmahi*, “might we make our own,” has almost always been translated “Let us meditate.” But Jamison and Brereton (as well as Witzel and Gotō)

understand this to be an optative on the verbal root *dhā*, to place or put, rather than the verbal root *dhī*, to meditate or consider deeply. Perhaps slightly better is Witzel and Gotō's rendering, "Dieses, des Gottes Savitar, wünschenswerte Licht möchten wir (in uns) setzen, der unsere Eingebungen antreiben soll" (WITZEL and GOTŌ 2013, 110), to "place (into us) this desirable light of God Savitar." Because this is a better reading of the Sanskrit, it better reflects the ontology of the Vedas. The idea of abstract meditation is a more recent idea, dating from the Aranyakas and Upanishads. More common for the time period under discussion was the idea of possession by a deity or imposition (*nyāsa*) into or on to one's body of a deity or divine force, such as the "light of God Savitar" (SMITH 2006, 175–244). This is a significant difference. The translation "meditate" is an error that has been repeated by dozens or perhaps hundreds of translators over decades (or even centuries). This is distinctly different from the idea of absorption of the deity or identification with the deity due to the transferal of the deity's material or ethereal qualities or essences onto the individual, as the *gāyatrī* mantra, read correctly, indicates.

The remainder of the general introduction in the first volume provides vignettes of many of the Vedic deities (Agni, Soma, Indra, Vayu, the Maruts, and so on), the reading of history through the RV, an account of the prosody, the difficult and arcane language of the text, the authors' translation principles, and the format they employ. With respect to translation principles, they note, "Although we began the translation with the determination to supply nothing not found in the passage itself, this principle came to seem not only unworkable but also contrary to the practice of the poets, since they often rely on shared knowledge to allow their contemporary audience to 'fill in the blanks' of allusive expressions. But we have tried to avoid the regrettable tendency of some translators to supply material without any methodological controls" (80). This is where their combined 80+ years of studying the RV, with their equally long history of high-quality scholarship, gives the reader confidence in what they have placed before us.

Among the strengths of this translation is the authors' understanding of the development of the Vedic *śrauta* ritual. Many translators undervalue the importance of the Vedic rituals in the RV precisely because the complicated nature of these rituals can be daunting, and, short of spending a lifetime studying them, they are not given to the religious or discursive universalism that is attractive to most modern scholars and readers. An example of this understanding appears at the very beginning of the RV, in the second *sūkta* (1.2, [89–91]). Typically, Jamison is attentive to the prosody, noting the versification and the division of its nine verses into three groups of three (*trca*, a group of three verses). She notes that this *sūkta*, along with the next one (1.3), contribute to what was later called the *prāyugaśāstra*, the "yoke-pole-tip recitation," in the classical *soma* sacrifice because it summons and praises certain deities who are given offerings at a particular time in the *soma* sacrifice (the morning pressing of the *soma* or *prātahsavana*). These deities are, *trca* by *trca*, respectively, Vayu (the wind god), Indravayu (a dual divinity combining the natures of the raucous Indra, the king of the gods, with Vayu), and Mitravaruṇa (a dual divinity who combines the powers of Mitra and Varuṇa). There is no clear link between these verses and the *prātahsavana*; they are certainly an appropriation into

the *prātahsavana* by ritual studies specialists a few centuries after the composition of these hymns. Above and beyond the ritual context, Jamison notes the remarkable accounting in the final *ṛca* of “the three elements necessary to conceive and carry out an action” (91), namely insight (*dhī*), skill (*dākṣa*), and purpose (*krātu*). These abstract qualities are characteristic of the two deities Mitra and Varuṇa, but, in addition to merely noting the attributes of these deities, the verses deepen our knowledge of the understanding of the Rigvedic sages into matters of more general and continuing interest. Jamison’s translation reads:

7. I call upon Mitra of refined skill and Varuna, who cares for the stranger, the two who send our ghee-covered insight to its goal.
8. By truth—o Mitra and Varuna, strong through truth, touching truth—you have attained your lofty purpose.
9. The two sage poets, Mitra and Varuna, powerfully born, having a wide dwelling place, furnish us effective skill.

The single example provided above, which barely scratches the surface of what these volumes offer, can be multiplied by hundreds. Yet it must suffice for us to begin to grasp the depth, breadth, and complexity of the *Rigveda*, and of Jamison and Brereton’s gift of the fruit of their decades of dedicated translation and commentary, which, I suspect, will remain the gold standard for several generations.

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