

from the

Rig Veda

Build Background

Book of Hymns The *Rig Veda* (rĭg-vā'də) is one of the sacred scriptures of the Aryans, who invaded India around 1500 B.C. The oldest of four Vedas, or books of wisdom, it contains 1,028 hymns to Aryan gods. Ancient priests called *hotars* chanted these hymns at ritual sacrifices. The hymns were passed down orally for generations before finally being written down sometime around 600 B.C. Today in India they are still recited at weddings and other ceremonies, in exactly the same form.

Thirty-three gods are mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. Indra, a thunderbolt-hurling war god, is the most important. He is praised for conquering the *dasas*, the people who lived in northern India before the Aryans came. Other gods named are Agni, the fire god, who consumes the sacrifices, and Yama, the god of death.

Aryan Life The hymns in the *Rig Veda* are not merely songs in praise of the gods; they also reveal much about the daily concerns of the ancient Aryans. Some of these concerns seem surprisingly contemporary. One hymn, for example, describes how gambling destroys family life. "Let someone else fall into the trap of the brown dice," it urges. Another hymn encourages people to give charity to the poor, for "the riches of the man who gives fully do not run out."

The two hymns you will read are different in style and subject. The first, "Creation Hymn," speculates about how the world was created. "Burial Hymn" is essentially a funeral sermon.

Connect to Your Life

Have you ever heard or read a statement that seemed to contradict itself or express the impossible? "I know that I know nothing" is one such statement. Jot down some others and share them with a classmate.


Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS: PARADOX

Even the translator, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, admits that "Creation Hymn" is hard to understand. She writes, "It is meant to puzzle and challenge, to raise unanswerable questions, to pile up paradoxes." A **paradox** is a statement that seems contradictory or impossible yet suggests a truth. The line "There was neither death nor immortality" is a paradox. Look for others in the hymn, and try to take the translator's advice: "Be as open to the words as possible, letting them move [you] when they can."

ACTIVE READING: MAKING INFERENCES

To understand "Burial Hymn" you will have to **make inferences** about, or guess from clues, what is taking place during the funeral ritual. For example, reading the words "this wall" and "this hill," you might infer that the mourners are outdoors.

 **READER'S NOTEBOOK** As you read, try to picture whom the priest is speaking to at different points in the ritual. Also imagine what actions he and the mourners are performing. Use a chart like the one below to organize your inferences.

| Who is addressed? | What is happening? |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| | |

from the Rig Veda

Translated by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty

CREATION HYMN

- 1 There was neither non-existence nor existence then;
there was neither the realm of space nor the sky
which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose
protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?
- 2 There was neither death nor immortality then.
There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of
day. That one breathed, windless, by its own
impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.
- 3 Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning;
with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The
life force that was covered with emptiness, that one
arose through the power of heat.
- 4 Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that
was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their
heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in
non-existence.
- 5 Their cord was extended across. Was there below?
Was there above? There were seed-placers; there
were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was
giving-forth above.
- 6 Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it?
Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation?
The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this
universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?
- 7 Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed
itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks
down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—
or perhaps he does not know.

2 That one: the unknown force that caused the creation of the world.

4 Desire . . . was the first seed of mind: Thought grew out of desire.

5 cord: something used as a boundary to separate the elements from one another.

6 The gods came afterwards: In other words, the gods are not the source of creation.

BURIAL HYMN

- 1 Go away, death, by another path that is your own, different from the road of the gods. I say to you who have eyes, who have ears: do not injure our children or our men.
- 2 When you have gone, wiping away the footprint of death, stretching farther your own lengthening span of life, become pure and clean and worthy of sacrifice, swollen with offspring and wealth.
- 3 These who are alive have now parted from those who are dead. Our invitation to the gods has become auspicious today. We have gone forward to dance and laugh, stretching farther our own lengthening span of life.
- 4 I set up this wall for the living, so that no one else among them will reach this point. Let them live a hundred full autumns and bury death in this hill.
- 5 As days follow days in regular succession, as seasons come after seasons in proper order, in the same way order their life-spans, O Arranger, so that the young do not abandon the old.
- 6 Climb on to old age, choosing a long life-span, and follow in regular succession, as many as you are. May Tvastr who presides over good births be persuaded to give you a long life-span to live.
- 7 These women who are not widows, who have good husbands—let them take their places, using butter to anoint their eyes. Without tears, without sickness, well dressed let them first climb into the marriage bed.

2 you: the mourners at the burial.

3 auspicious (ô-spĭsh'əs): favorable; successful.

6 Tvastr (tə-vāsh'tər): creator of the gods and protector of all living things.

7 butter: Purified by ritual, the butter is to protect the women mourners' eyes; **let them first . . . the marriage bed:** that is, before they are old or die.



Agni (God of Fire) (17th century). Panel from Temple Car. Tak. Madras. Inv:IM.15-1929. Photo © Victoria & Albert Museum, London/Art Resource, New York

HUMANITIES CONNECTION This 11th-century stone sculpture depicts Agni, the Vedic fire god. One of his roles was the purification of sacrifices.

- 8 Rise up, woman, into the world of the living. Come here; you are lying beside a man whose life's breath has gone. You were the wife of this man who took your hand and desired to have you.
- 9 I take the bow from the hand of the dead man, to be our supremacy and glory and power, and I say, "You are there; we are here. Let us as great heroes conquer all envious attacks."
- 10 Creep away to this broad, vast earth, the mother that is kind and gentle. She is a young girl, soft as wool to anyone who makes offerings; let her guard you from the lap of Destruction.
- 11 Open up, earth; do not crush him. Be easy for him to enter and to burrow in. Earth, wrap him up as a mother wraps a son in the edge of her skirt.
- 12 Let the earth as she opens up stay firm, for a thousand pillars must be set up. Let them be houses dripping with butter for him, and let them be a refuge for him here for all his days.
- 13 I shore up the earth all around you; let me not injure you as I lay down this clod of earth. Let the fathers hold up this pillar for you; let Yama build a house for you here.
- 14 On a day that will come, they will lay me in the earth, like the feather of an arrow. I hold back speech that goes against the grain, as one would restrain a horse with a bridle. ❖

8 Rise up, woman: The dead man's widow would have lain down beside his body.

13 let Yama build a house for you here: Yama, the lord of the dead, should build a structure to protect the dead man's remains.

