

Ama Kyerewaa

Professor Lannon

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Hanuman: A Great God in Hinduism, a Demonic Beast in Christianity

The Book of Revelation talks of two beasts who, along with the devil, comprise the “trinity of evil” (Johnson 196). They are known among Christians as enemies of God who will try to overpower and dominate God and His followers in the future. Rudyard Kipling’s story, “The Mark of the Beast,” contains a reference to one of the beasts in its very title. This story is written in a form of a narrative that follows the horrific consequences that occur as a result of Fleete, an Englishman “polluting the [statue] of Hanuman” (Kipling 92), a prominent Indian god. When viewed through a Biblical lens, I will argue that Kipling’s story validates the negative popular preconceptions British Christian Missionaries had of Hinduism during the 18th and 19th centuries. This negative pre-notion is strengthened in the story by the degrading effects the leper (the major Hindu character) has on the English characters.

Christians look the Book of Revelation in part as a set of warnings that reveals the great evils that will eventually come to the world. Certain parts of Revelation give detailed descriptions of the devil and the two beasts, as well as their purpose on earth. The devil is described to be a “fiery red [dragon] having seven heads and ten horns, and seven [crowns] on his heads” (*The Bible New King James Version*, Revelation 12:1). The devil’s frightening appearance in some ways aligns with some basic features of the first beast who is said to have

come from the sea as this beast is also physically described as “having seven heads and ten horns” (Revelation 13:1). The ten horns symbolize the strength (Hughes, 136) of the dragon and the beast. Furthermore, the first beast is said to have “on his horns ten crowns and on his heads a blasphemous name” (Revelation 13:1). According to Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, this blasphemous name represents “radical hostility to God” (Hughes 145), indicating that the first beast’s purpose on earth is to wage war against God and to deceive the people of earth into worshiping him instead. In addition to that, the beast from the sea (the first beast) is depicted as having features of a hybrid of a number of wild animals: “[he] was like a leopard, his feet were like the feet of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion” (Revelation 13:2). It is not only the fearsome physical appearance that the first beast and the dragon have in common; they also share the same power, as it was the “dragon [who] gave [the first beast] his power, his throne, and great authority” (Revelation 13:3). The beast is able to gain many followers because of the great power he possesses. It is said in Revelation 13:4 that the world marveled in his presence and worshiped him saying: “Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?”. Because the dragon is the source of power for the beast, the people who worship the beast indirectly worship the dragon who is known to be the devil.

The second beast is physically less frightening in comparison to the first beast as he is described as having “two horns like a lamb” (Revelation 13:11). His less fearful appearance implies the second beast is inferior to the first beast. However, the second beast is described as resembling the dragon in the way he speaks, implying that just like the previous beast, he is able to spark fear in people and command worship. According to Revelation 13:12, the second beast “exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast.” Furthermore, he tells the people of “earth to make an image

[or statue] to the [first] beast” and is given power to kill people who refuse to worship the image of the beast (Revelation 14-15). These details imply the second beast is under the rule of the first beast whose power was given to him by the dragon (devil) who tried to overthrow God.

Therefore, it can be argued, “both beasts are the instruments of Satan in his warfare against God” (Hughes 151). In addition to causing people to worship the first beast and killing those who do not, the second beast makes all people “receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads” (Revelation 13:16). In giving out the mark, he brands the people who are in alliance with the devil (Hughes,153) and by association, against God. These descriptions of what is to come play a role in how Christians formulate certain views of the world and how they view other religions.

Historically, Christian attitudes towards other religions, especially the ones that are fundamentally different from Christianity, have not always been favorable. A possible explanation for this view could be rooted in the Bible’s warning against the rising up of the two beasts who will challenge God’s power. Christians often take what is said in the Bible and interpret it how they see fit. For example, *The Latter Rain Evangel*, a Christian journal, argues that other religions will unite under the power of the second beast (Johnson 196). It can be inferred that the view that other religions will eventually be against God has been particularly popular among missionaries; they are the ones who go out to other places to convert people from other religions to Christianity. Catherine Cornille argues that a possible reason why traditional Christian missionaries studied other religions was “to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity” (Cornille 28). To support this argument, she uses the way in which Christian missionaries viewed and portrayed Hinduism in their writings in the 18th century. Cornille acknowledges that these missionaries often paid “careful attention to the religious rituals of [Hinduism], and [wrote] detailed recording of rituals” (Cornille 30). However, that did not stop

them from using “derogatory adjectives” such as: “the disgusting lingam, the most contemptible and ridiculous stories ... or silly beliefs in astrology” (Cornille 30) to generalize and devalue Hindu beliefs, practices and rituals. Cornille argues this was the dominant stance 18th and 19th-century Christian missionaries held about Hinduism. As a result, these “negative value judgments [were] known to be the rule rather than the exception” (Cornille 30) in missionary writings during that time period. By portraying the Indian religion as vulgar and deceptive, it can be argued these missionaries were validating the superiority of Christianity in comparison to Hinduism. In addition, it can be argued that, this pejorative view aided the formation of some of the negative preconceptions the general British public had toward Hinduism and other religions during the 18th and 19th centuries.

These views can be seen at the start of Kipling’s “The Mark of the Beast,” as the narrator positions readers to expect the worse from the Indian gods. The narrator opens with the native proverb: “Your gods and my gods- do you or I know which are stronger?” (Kipling 84). This quote can be interpreted as a religious challenge, indicating a power struggle between the Church of England Providence and the Indian gods. Furthermore, the text suggests that the gods currently have more control than Providence, as “[men are] handed over to the power of the gods and devils of Asia” (Kipling 84) when they commit crimes. The narrator also notes that this theory of the gods “accounts for some of the more unnecessary horrors of life in India” (Kipling 84). Although the narrator acknowledges the power of the gods, he condemns their judgment as “unnecessary horrors” (Kipling 84). Thus, even before reading the actual story, the narrator subtly makes it known to readers that his story depicts Indian gods in a negative light. In addition to this, the narrator admits to readers after he finishes telling the story that he believes publishing the story would “[un]likely clear up [its] mystery” (Kipling 95). This implies that the narrator’s

purpose for sharing his experience, which he says was “a rather unpleasant” one, is to promote the mysterious and horrendous nature of Indian gods, and to validate the negative views about Hinduism.

A central part of the narrator’s story is his friend Fleete disrespecting Hanuman, a notable Hindu god’s statue. Analyzing the physical features of a popular Hanuman statue in Tantra provides a possible explanation to what motivated Fleete to mark Hanuman in Kipling’s story. Although many forms of Hanuman statues in Tantra have multiple heads (3, 5, 7 or 11 heads), the most popular one among Tantra is the one with “five different heads and ten arms” (Lutgendorf, 271). The five faces of the statue are of five animals, which include the faces of a “fierce monkey”, “man-lion”, “Garuda (a bird)”, “boar” and a “horse” (Lutgendorf 275 as qtd in Mishra 1971: 132-34). Analyzing the fearful features of this particular statue of Hanuman suggests the statue’s resemblance to the dragon and the first beast mentioned in the Bible. Like the first beast, Hanuman’s statue is a hybrid of wild animals. The dragon (devil) and the first beast are primarily known for waging war against God and His people. The statue of Hanuman’s physical resemblance to the first beast of Revelation could have led the British to associate Hanuman and the religion with the devil. Lutgendorf notes that British colonizers often dismissed the beliefs and practices of Tantra as either “primitive superstition” or “hellish abomination[s]” (Lutgendorf 286). This provides a possible explanation to why Fleete refers to Hanuman as the beast and marks the statue to identify him.

If Hanuman can be interpreted as the first beast through a Biblical lens, it can be argued that the purpose of the leper is analogous to that of the second beast in the Christian Bible, whose purpose is to “cause the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast” (Revelations 13:12). The leper, who is described as a naked Silver Man (Kipling 86), emerges out of nowhere

“without any warning [...] behind the image of [Hanuman]” immediately after Fleete marks Hanuman on the forehead and declares him a beast (Kipling 85). In order to make the English know the power of Hanuman, whom they have offended, the leper bites the area “over [Fleete’s] left breast” which later turns into a mark described by the narrator as: “the perfect double of the black rosettes--the fix or six irregular blotches arranged in a circle--on a leopard’s hide” (Kipling 87). In the Bible, it is the second beast who offers the mark of the beast to people. Just as in the case of the people who receive the mark of the beast in the Bible, Fleete receiving this mark means he is now under the power and will of the one who marked him (the leper).

The Silver Man’s mark manifests into a curse upon Fleete, degrading him into exactly what he called Hanuman —a beast. Fleete gradually becomes more inhuman as the hours of the day pass by. The first sign of Fleete literally losing his human side is his sudden excessive hunger and preference for “undone-bloody [raw meat] with gristle” (Kipling 90). In addition to this, Fleete’s eating manners, as described by the narrator, became like that of “a beast” (Kipling 88). Fleete’s behavioral transformation quickly progresses to Fleete physically turning into an animal, a beast to be specific, as the narrator describes seeing “green light from behind [Fleete’s eyes] ... and [his] lower lip hung down” (Kipling 90). Finally, Fleete completely loses the most fundamental human quality that arguably distinguishes humans from animals—his ability to speak: he is only able to “howl”, “snarl” like a wolf and “ma[k]e beast-noises” (Kipling 91) to communicate. In degrading Fleete into a beast, the Silver Man (the leper) successfully forces Fleete to acknowledge his power. This is shown when “[Fleete,] the beast, doubled backwards into a bow as though [he] had been poisoned by with strychnine, and moaned in the most pitiable fashion” (Kipling 93) in the presence of the leper. Furthermore, the narrator claims: in that moment “several other things happened also, but they cannot be put down here” (Kipling 93).

This implies Fleete as a beast possibly did more shameful things to show reverence to the Silver Man. It can be argued that in bowing to the Silver Man, Fleete is now indirectly paying respect to or worshipping Hanuman, whom he earlier called a beast.

The effects of Fleete bearing the mark of the leper arguably cause both the narrator and Strickland to think in ways they wouldn't as typical civilized and cultured Englishmen in the 19th century. This begins with the narrator being unable to lie himself to rationalize what is happening to Fleete anymore: "I tried to say 'Hydrophobia', but the word wouldn't come, because I knew that I was lying" (Kipling 91). The fact that he is both mentally and physically unable to convince himself to find an alternate meaning to what is happening to Fleete suggests that the narrator knows what is happening to Fleete is supernatural. However, he is unwilling to admit such "wildly improbable" ideas out loud as he is "ashamed of owning" them (Kipling 92). It is after hearing Strickland's suspicion of the reason for Fleete's change, that the narrator finally gives credit to the Silver man for "bewitch[ing] Fleete for polluting the image of Hanuman" (Kipling 92). The moment the narrator and Strickland admit to themselves that the leper's mark is the reason Fleete is turning into a beast and dying in the process, they acknowledge the power of the leper and thus, the power and validity of Hanuman as well.

Another way the leper gets Strickland and the narrator to acknowledge Hanuman's power is with his strength. The strength of the Silver Man (the leper) and how he manages to get the Englishmen to behave suggests he is anything but ordinary. The leper's atypical strength could be related to Hanuman, who is known in Hindu legends as "the epitome of strength and vitality" (Johnson 653). It can be argued that since the purpose of the Silver Man and the second beast in the Bible are similar, the source of their power could also be analogous. If the second beast was

“given power to act on behalf of the first beast” (Revelation 13:14), it can be argued that Hanuman gave the leper his power to act on his behalf and get people to acknowledge him. During their struggle, the narrator recognizes the leper is “wonderfully strong,” a trait he notes is opposite to typical lepers who are known as “frail creatures” (Kipling 93). It can be argued that the narrator is indirectly praising Hanuman since the leper possesses Hanuman’s power.

In addition to that, the leper successfully uses Hanuman’s power during the fight between him, the narrator and Strickland and causes them to act in ways they regret. When Strickland and the narrator finally capture the leper and the leper is unwilling to reverse his curse on Fleete, the narrator, and Strickland result to torture:

Strickland wrapped a towel round his hand and took the gun-barrels out of the fire. I put the half of the broken walking stick through the loop of fishing-line and buckled the leper comfortably to Strickland’s bedstead [...] though the Silver Man had no face, you could see horrible feelings passing through the slab that took its place, exactly as waves of heat play across red-hot iron — gun-barrels for instance (Kipling 93).

It is implied that this is only the beginning of the torment the two men inflict on the Silver Man as the narrator says: “Strickland shaded his eyes with his hands for a moment and we got to work. This part is not to be printed” (Kipling 94). This implies that both Strickland and the narrator were ashamed of their actions in that moment. Here, the leper, powered by Hanuman is able to get two civilized Englishmen to do horrendous things they initially weren’t planning to do with the goal to save their friend.

Ultimately, Strickland and the narrator get the Silver Man to “take away the evil spirit” (Kipling 94) he put in Fleete. This may come across as though the Englishmen were victorious in overpowering the Silver Man. However, in fighting with the Silver Man to save Fleete’s life,

Strickland and the narrator unleash their inner beast and act in ways they regret. Thus, it can be argued that it is rather the Silver Man who emerges victorious in this situation as his purpose of getting the Englishmen to respect Hanuman is fulfilled. After Fleete turns back into a human, Strickland calls the temple to apologize on behalf of Fleete for “pollut[ing Hanuman]” (Kipling 95). It can be argued that Strickland apologizing is a form of showing respect to Hanuman. The Silver Man overpowers the Englishmen by erasing their humanity either literally (Fleete) or figuratively (Strickland and the narrator). In degrading the Englishmen to look or act like beasts, the Silver Man succeeds in getting them to recognize and pay respect to Hanuman.

The narrator’s attitude in Kipling’s story “The Mark of the Beast” along with the Biblical references made in the story strengthen the predominant views against Hinduism. Analyzing a popular statue of Hanuman in Tantra, an aspect of Hinduism shows striking basic resemblance to the first beast of Revelation. In addition to this, the portrayal of the major Hindu character in the story, the leper, and how he overpowers the Englishmen suggest he is equivalent to the giver of the Mark of the beast in the Bible — the second beast of Revelation. Christians believe that both beasts are enemies of God. Thus, reading Kipling’s story through a Biblical lens endorses the negative ideas propagated by the Christian missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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