

The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki

AN EPIC OF ANCIENT INDIA

Volume I  Bālakāṇḍa

Introduction and Translation by Robert P. Goldman

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For Jesse and Seth

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Viśvāmitra. From the "Jagat Singh Ramayana," 17th c. British Library Add.
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The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India

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4. The *Rāmāyaṇa* Text and the Critical Edition

DESPITE its great antiquity, we probably know as much about the origin and development of Vālmīki's epic as of any other ancient or early medieval work of Sanskrit literature. A substantial body of testimony and numerous parallel versions in addition to the long and self-conscious *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition aid us considerably in our effort to reconstruct its past. The publication at the Oriental Institute, Baroda, between 1960 and 1975 of the first critical edition of the poem—the basis of our new translation—has given us ready access to all of the manuscript evidence for the work that we are ever likely to have and enables us to draw some new conclusions about the nature of its transmission. It will be necessary to consider at some length the character of this edition, its rationale, value, and limitations. But before we do this, let us recall briefly what we know about the history of the poem beyond its strictly textual tradition.

In the late *upodghāta*, Vālmīki is represented as having created his masterpiece out of the terse narrative provided to him by the sage Nārada. He recasts this in a new metrical form and inspired by the god Brahmā, expands the story. "The whole *Rāmāyaṇa* poem" is taught by Vālmīki to two disciples chosen because they are "retentive and thoroughly versed in the *veda*." They learn the poem by heart and perform it in public, singing it back "just as they were taught" to the accompaniment of the *viṇā*, or Indian lute.¹

The tradition thus represents Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* as an individ-

¹ See 1.1ff. on Nārada; 1.2.40 on the new metrical form; 1.3 on Brahmā; 1.2.40, 7.84.5 on the whole *Rāmāyaṇa* poem. In the northern variant of 1.3.1 Vālmīki is said to discover the other events in Rāma's life—to supplement the account of Nārada—"from the world," though we need not, with Agrawala, view the poet as an early folklorist "who collected the several versions of the legend from what was current as folklore" (Agrawala 1962, p. 578). See 1.4.5 on the performers and 1.4.12, 7.84.9,16 on memorization. The singers are to recite twenty chapters per day (7.84.9), or about some 1,200 sixteen-syllable lines; the performance is said to take many days. (Excluding Book Seven, there are 500 chapters, according to 7.85.20, and thus the performance would extend over approximately a month.) For the various types of duo oral recitation, cf. Chadwick 1932, p. 574; Lord 1960, p. 125 and note. It is not clear from the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself how we are to picture the recitation.

ual artistic elaboration of a pre-existing narrative, composed and transmitted orally in a more or less memorized form. There is little in this account that is not in keeping with the unitary character of most of the poem and with what we can infer about its sources. That the *Rāmāyaṇa* is an oral composition has now been statistically demonstrated, and indeed, as we shall see, our manuscript evidence implies a long antecedent period of oral transmission.²

The history of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in its written form effectively commences in the eleventh century. The probable date of our earliest exemplar, a palm-leaf manuscript from Nepal representing the northwest tradition, is A.D. 1020. No earlier manuscript fragments have been discovered. Ancient epigraphical documentation is wholly lacking except for the commemoration, in a Sanskrit temple inscription from Cambodia dating about A.D. 600, of the presentation of a *Rāmāyaṇa* codex.³

Between 1020 and the introduction of printing in India in the early nineteenth century, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was copied by hand repeatedly in all parts of the country, and at present more than two thousand manuscripts of the poem, in whole or in part, are known to exist. The sheer size of the text, the enormous number of manuscripts, and their often discrepant testimony, make for a text-historical problem equalled in complexity, perhaps, only by that of the New Testament.

Like the *Mahābhārata*, the second great epic of ancient India, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been handed down in two principal recensions, one from northern and one from southern India.⁴ These recensions

² See P. A. Grintser 1974 (English summary, pp. 416ff.) on the genesis of the oral poem. That the transmission of the *Rāmāyaṇa* cannot be reconciled with the image of a wholly memorized original is not a serious contradiction. Although exact reproduction is an ideal that performers of oral poetry envision, in reality a certain amount of personal modification occurs in any given performance.

³ See Shah 1975, pp. 50-51 and references. The Buddhist poet *Aśvaghōṣa* (fl. A.D. 50) might have known a written *Rāmāyaṇa*, for the close agreement in verbal and narrative detail between his *Buddhacarita* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* argues for the kind of "consultability" that only a written text allows. Cf. also Gawrónski 1914-1915, pp. 280-81.

⁴ This was already apparent to the editors of the incomplete *editio princeps*, Carey and Marshman, in 1806; see Gorresio 1843, p. xx. Sometimes it appears as if we must speak rather of three recensions, distinguishing a NW (Kashmir and west) from a NE (Nepal and east), cf. especially Shastri 1940, pp. 58 and 75. But there is so much contamination among N manuscripts that it is difficult to decide for certain. Ruben, additionally, wished to divide the southern recension into two, one

consist of often heterogeneous versions written in the various regional scripts. Manuscripts of the northern recension come from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Kashmir, Nepal, Bihar, and Bengal; those of the southern recension from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, with Devanāgarī manuscripts variously affiliated to the northern and/or southern tradition. Unlike the *Mahābhārata* (and this is of primary significance for the text criticism of our poem), the recensions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* display disagreements of a sort that cannot be accounted for by the inevitable accidents of written transmission.⁵

Although the phenomenon of recensional divergence has long engaged the attention of scholars, adequate scrutiny has become possible only with the appearance of the critical edition. Our understanding of the complicated character of the variations is still imperfect. One explanation that has come to have wide scholarly currency since Jacobi first offered it in 1893 is that the northern recension represents a purification, a polishing of an archaic southern recension.⁶ According to this theory, the northern schoolmasters or learned reciters were the custodians of a pristine Sanskrit tradition. They held the *Rāmāyaṇa* to be not so much a sacred document as the archetypal poem and expected it to observe all the canons of linguistic and rhetorical usage that had come to be regarded as standard in post-epic times. When the *Rāmāyaṇa* departed from these norms, the northerners were prepared to alter it.⁷

represented by the commentators Vaṃśīdhara Śivasahāya (*Rāmāyaṇaśiromaṇi*), Maheśvaratīrtha (*Tattvadiṭṭika*), and Govindarāja (*Bhūṣaṇa*), and the other by Kataka Mādhava Yogīndra (*Kataka*) and Nageśa Bhaṭṭa (*Tilaka*). The editors of the critical edition are not unanimous in their understanding of these problems, and, in fact, the whole notion of "recensions" with regard to the Indian epics is somewhat indeterminate (see Johnston 1933, pp. 182-83).

⁵ Ruben 1936, pp. ix, xi, and Bhatt 1960, p. xxxiv, do not adequately appreciate this signal difference. Bhatt's editorial practice, in fact, contradicts his theoretical statements; contrast his remarks in volume 1 with Vaidya's statement (Vaidya 1971, p. xxx).

⁶ The most recent major work on the subject, van Daalen 1980, takes issue with the theory but not, in our opinion, in an adequate fashion. For a detailed discussion, see Goldman 1982.

⁷ See Jacobi 1893, p. 9; repeated with approval by Bhatt 1960, p. xv, Burrow 1959, p. 78, Renou 1963, p. 283, and, most importantly, Bulcke 1955, p. 92, and 1960, p. 38. The editors of the critical edition, when they do not simply parrot this theory (as Mankad 1965, p. xxiv; Jhala 1966, p. xxiii; Vaidya 1971, p. xxx), have only trivial examples to offer in support of it (Bhatt 1960, p. xiii, Suppl. Intro.).

The basic suggestion—that the northern recension presents some sort of revision—we feel to be correct, but not necessarily for the reasons usually given. For the argument supporting that theory is based on the preservation in the southern recension of grammatical irregularities and no longer seems tenable.⁸

If we closely examine the northern recension, we observe two phenomena that are far more common than any attempt to bring the poem into conformity with the rules of classical grammar or rhetoric and tell us a great deal about the history of the poem's transmission and the value of the northern recension in the reconstruction of the original. First, the wording of the northern recension frequently differs from that of the southern without appreciably altering the text's grammatical regularity or poetic acceptability. The northern recension, moreover, often tends toward a popularization or glossing of the southern text.

The critical apparatus on virtually every page of the *Rāmāyaṇa* indicates how the northern recension rephrases the southern recension almost gratuitously; without eliminating solecisms or enriching the poetic quality of the text. The density of this divergence is highly variable, anywhere from 0 to 66 percent for different sections of the poem. It seems that the only way we can account for these variations is to posit a long period of oral transmission after, as well as before, the split in the tradition had occurred.⁹

Although this first feature has been appreciated to some extent by other scholars, the apparent tendency of the northern recension to gloss southern recension readings appears to have gone unnoticed. The text came to be viewed as obscure in places; as the learned medieval commentators amply attest. The northern singers seem to have been particularly sensitive to this, and in the course of centuries, they evolved a somewhat simpler idiom, vulgarizing Vāl-

⁸ It is not clear how much reliance is to be placed on the so-called linguistic archaisms preserved in the southern recensions, as indicating an earlier date. A very large percentage of the archaisms that have been examined (Böhlingk 1887, 1889; Michelson 1904; Roussel 1910; Satya Vrat 1964, pp. 173ff.; N. M. Sen, all items in bibliography; van Daalen 1980, especially pp. 72-117) are contained only in the first or seventh book, of which substantial portions are later additions, and; more remarkably, in passages that the critical edition excludes from the constituted text as more recent interpolations. The northern recension, moreover, frequently preserves archaisms that appear in the southern recension, and quite often "archaizes" where the southern recension does not. See also van Daalen 1980, pp. 27-32.

⁹ In essence, the critical edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has collected the fullest record anywhere of the stages of growth and development of a great oral epic tradition.

mīki's poem for the sake of their audiences.¹⁰ Instances of this are very common.¹¹ This tendency does not, however, generally involve an effort to regularize grammatical usage. It is, rather a simplification of the text, a transposition into a more popular idiom, a close paraphrase of passages that, although grammatically correct, are nonetheless difficult or obscure for lexical, syntactical, or other reasons. In fact, in many ways, the northern recension acts as our oldest commentary on the *Rāmāyaṇa*.¹²

This tendency of the northern recension to modernize and gloss a text perceived as archaic offers decisive support to the position adopted by the editors of the critical edition that the southern recension preserves an older state of the text, and consequently must serve as the basis for any reconstruction. We have been able to find no passages that would indicate such a tendency on the part of the southern recension. Indeed, we would appear to have in the type of variation found in the northern recension the first sign of the popularizing impulse that leads ultimately to the great vernacular translations and adaptations of medieval times.

How these recensions are related to one another, or, indeed, whether they are related at all, forms the central problem of *Rāmāyaṇa* textual criticism. With the publication of the northeastern and southern recensions in the mid-nineteenth century and the northwestern version in the early twentieth, a fairly complete picture of the text's history began to emerge and with it a certain pessimism about the possibility of recovering the original poem. Thus Hopkins argued that "all our classical notions of a fixed original from which manuscripts vary by the slightest alteration vanish into thin air before such freedom of transmission as instanced here. . . . The

¹⁰ In the south the religious significance imputed to the text lent it an almost scriptural status, insulating it to a greater extent from alteration. The commentators, attracted to the text for this same reason, would have been particularly instrumental in preserving the poem in its archaic state. Just the opposite is true of the *Mahābhārata*. There the southern recension revises rather freely, whereas the northern recension (the NW version in particular) preserves more authentically the tradition of the archetype.

¹¹ See Pollock 1981. For examples, see the notes on 1.8.9, 2.17.7, 21.11, 47.26, 94.49 (lexical glosses); 2.24.7, 51.12 (syntactical glosses).

¹² Like any commentary, the northern recension must be used with discretion as a gloss. The glossers were not invariably right, though as participants in a continuous and ancient tradition of recitation they can claim weightier authority than our medieval commentators. The general editor of the critical edition seems to have been aware of this feature, but the examples he provides are trivial (e.g. *dhanuḥ* replacing *sarāsanam*, Bhatt 1960, p. xxxiii).

hope of getting at any *ādi*-[original] *Rāmāyaṇa* by working back from the textual variations handed down in the several recensions is quite vain. There can be no plausible original reconstructed."¹³

Other scholars, although they acknowledge textual fluidity, have argued in just the opposite way on the grounds of the remarkable congruence that often does appear between recensions. Jacobi, for instance, maintained that the various local versions must "all have descended from an old recension, and one can adduce no reason why this Ur-recension should not have been one that was set down in writing."¹⁴

On the one hand, then, we have the denial that the *Rāmāyaṇa* ever existed in any stable form, and on the other, the assertion that not only was its form stabilized at an early date but it was fixed in a written archetype. Each position has some truth in it, but obviously both cannot be wholly correct.

Disagreement among the recensions, as we have noted, is sometimes stark—in fact, irreducible. Nonetheless, the different versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are unquestionably versions of the same poem. This is the basic postulate that underlies the critical edition.¹⁵ Although substitutions do occur, and although their density some-

¹³ Hopkins 1926, pp. 206, 219. As early as 1870, Weber argued that "there are as many *Rāmāyaṇas*, as there are manuscripts" (p. 21; cited in Ruben 1936, p. x; cf. Burrow 1959, p. 78). Recent work on oral poetry might appear to support Hopkins' impression. For example, Lord concludes that "it is impossible to retrace the work of generations of singers to that moment where some singer first sang a particular song. . . . There was an original, of course, but we must be content with the works that we have and not endeavor to 'correct' or 'perfect' them in accordance with a purely arbitrary guess at what the original might have been" (Lord 1960, p. 100). It seems to us, however, that the type and quality of manuscript congruence in important sections of the *Rāmāyaṇa* suggest that the sort of transmission here may be of a different order from what we see, for example, in Slavic or French literary history. Very possibly the mnemonic tradition of vedic transmission exerted some influence upon the performers of secular heroic poetry. The text may preserve an historical reminiscence when it states that the first performers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* were deeply grounded in the *vedas* (1.4.5). In any case, broad arguments from the nature of oral poetry in general should not be applied uncritically to the Indian evidence, where a reconstruction may not be "purely arbitrary."

¹⁴ Jacobi 1893, p. 11 (this position is somewhat contradicted by what we find on pp. x, 5). Lévi also speaks of a written archetype: "Our *Rāmāyaṇa*, composed at a still undetermined period, derives in its multiple recensions from an edition published sometime around [the commencement of] the Christian era" (Lévi 1918, p. 150). Ruben's *Studien* are predicated on the existence of an archetype; Agrawal, too, assumes one, without explanation (1963, p. 577).

¹⁵ See Bhatt 1960, p. xxx.

times reaches two lines in three; it frequently drops to as low as 2 or 3 percent, or disappears altogether. In some places we find dozens of consecutive verses or even whole chapters for which there are no significant parallel passages. Thus, though variable to a degree, agreements between the recensions in wording, sequence of verses, chapters, and incidents are often remarkably close, and the only way to account for this continuous concord is to posit a common descent. This in turn implies that the source must be to some extent recoverable.

But if convergence is too marked to deny a genetic relationship between the recensions and thus the possibility of reconstruction, divergence is likewise too pronounced to allow the assumption of a written archetype.¹⁶ Moreover, were such an archetype admitted, we should expect the original to be potentially always recoverable, which is patently not the case.¹⁷ We must, therefore, postulate a mode of transmission that can account for both features of the *Rāmāyaṇa* textual tradition. The recensions must have been handed down through oral transmission—perhaps influenced in a distinctive way by the vedic mnemonic tradition—from the oral composition attributed to Vālmīki, that is, the monumental poem that was a *remaniement* of an ancient Rāma story. The resulting versions were then independently fixed in writing at different times and places.¹⁸ This hypothesis alone would allow for both the divergences and agreements, and although it is not consistently upheld by the editors of the critical edition,¹⁹ it is what study of the critical apparatus clearly and emphatically confirms.

¹⁶ The agreements among the recensions in the *Sundara* passage noticed by Jacobi (1893, pp. 17ff.), for example, can be as conveniently explained by postulating an oral transmission, which saves us from the real contradictions involved in the archetype theory. We may then interpret the data in Jacobi's passage by the special dynamic of an oral tradition, which in one place gives rein to variation, in another inhibits it, which permits deviation in wording to some extent but demands conservation of the significant structures of significant passages.

¹⁷ One need only glance at Ruben's *Textproben* to confirm this (1936, pp. 84-222).

¹⁸ Such is also more or less the opinion of Bulcke 1955, p. 66, and 1960, pp. 37-38. The versions continued to grow, perhaps orally, and to interact throughout the period of written transmission, both within and, to a lesser extent, across recensional boundaries. A number of passages that on the grounds of higher criticism must be considered quite late additions to the text are sometimes, especially when they have a powerful sectarian thrust, unusually well represented in all the recensions, with a minimum of variation. A good example is Brahmā's hymn in praise of Rāma as Viṣṇu at 6.105.

¹⁹ Bhatt 1960, p. xiv and particularly Vaidya 1971, p. xxx understood this. Contrast

Under these special conditions of textual transmission, stemmatic analysis is clearly inappropriate. For the many verses in irreducible disagreement of a neutral sort (that is, in the absence of linguistic, stylistic, contextual, or historical features that would allow discrimination), an *a priori* choice on the basis of the generally best version is not only admissible but necessary.²⁰ But the absence of stemmatic compulsion also requires that where the choice between versions is not neutral, we must review the recensions with care; for if they all ultimately derive more or less independently from the same oral source, then the correct reading in any given case may be preserved by any one of them.

In countless instances it appears that the ordering of the verses and the readings of the southern recension are far more intelligible and authentic than those of the northern recension, while its transmission, in general, seems considerably more uniform.²¹ And thus, despite some literary and historical arguments that have been made to the contrary, it recommends itself as the basis of a critical edition.²² But the southern recension, too, is marred by corruptions,

however Mankad (1965, p. xxiv) and Jhala (1966, p. xxvi).

²⁰ This principle was clearly enunciated by Sukthankar with respect to the *Mahābhārata*. "The peculiar conditions of the transmission of the epic force upon us an eclectic but cautious utilization of all manuscript classes. . . . Each variant has to be judged on its own merits." But where the tradition is irreducibly divided, a choice on the basis of otherwise generally best versions must be followed (Sukthankar 1944, pp. 243, 248). It is even more compelling in the case of the *Rāmāyana* than the *Mahābhārata*, for which a written archetype must have existed.

²¹ Granted the circularity involved in applying standards of authenticity to correct a text from which those same standards are derived, nevertheless, as Kenney puts it, "critical argument is by its very nature circular," and it is not "necessarily vicious, providing, as Lachmann said, that the circle is trodden with care and discretion" (Kenney 1974, pp. 126, 135). Ruben adduces other grounds for the relative antiquity and sincerity of the southern recension, such as the agreement in parallel passages of the *Mahābhārata* with the southern recension against the northern recension (Ruben 1936, pp. 47, 54, etc.; but n.b. his caution, p. 55).

²² Sylvain Lévi, in a fascinating article on the geographical data of the *Rāmāyana*, determined that a text of the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa* (39-43) was used by a Buddhist work, the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna-sūtra*, which was translated into Chinese in A.D. 593; and since, he says, the translator only worked with materials of great authority, the *Sūtra* must be far older than that (Lévi 1918, p. 15; Lin Li-Kouang, however, has shown that the *Sūtra* is a composite work and that chapter VII, the one in question, is the latest, see 1949, pp. 111-12). He concluded that, although the southern recension alone does preserve some readings and details that are in harmony with the *Sūtra*, the northwestern recension is in fact closest to it (p. 135), and he considers this fact "the most ancient datum with regard to the recensions and a datum de-

false emendations, accretions, and the like, and does not invariably give us the right text. The northern recension can help correct it and thereby reveal the oral original.²³

We can show the truth of this at every level of the text in the case of individual words and phrases as well as large interpolations. One small paradigmatic example may serve as demonstration. In 2.63.4 we read in the vulgate:

*vādayanti tathā śāntim (lāsayanty api cāpare
nātakāṅy apāre prāhur . . .)*

The reading *śāntim* is that of the entire southern recension. The commentators try desperately to explain its sense: "Some caused *śānti*; peace; to sound (others danced or staged dramatic pieces . . .)" but obviously, without success; for here the word has no sense. It is a stop-gap emendation, an early one, faithfully reproduced throughout the whole southern tradition. Northern manuscripts, for the most part, offer:

(avādayaṅ) jagruś cānye . . .

replacing the meaningless *śāntim* with "(some made music) and sang." The northern recension is, in fact, glossing an obsolescent verbal form preserved for us in three other northern manuscripts, one from the northeast, one from the northwest, one from the west:

(vādayanti tathā) gānti . . .

This form (classical *gāyanti*), as we now know, was current in the epic dialect, for the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* repeatedly attests to it.²⁴

Even such a minor example should suffice to answer Hopkins'

cisively in favor of the western recension" (p. 14). It is only reasonable, however, that the Sūtra should employ the version current in the area in which it itself was composed. This would apply also to the arguments adduced in favor of the northwestern recension by Śtużkiewicz 1938, pp. 266-73. Furthermore, the evidence can only serve to confirm the fact that the split in the transmission of the *Rāmāyaṇa* occurred at a relatively early date; it cannot prove which branch of the tradition was more conservative.

²³ Because the northern recension transposed or vulgarized in one place does not mean that it did so in another, nor is the southern recension's conservatism absolute. Furthermore, the problems inherent in transcribing an oral poem would affect the southern recension no less than the northern.

²⁴ See the note on 2.63.4; unfortunately the editor of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* mistook this