Rama and the Ramayana: Crash Course World Mythology #27

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hi, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and today we continue our discussion of heroes and heroism. This time, we're looking at the hero king Rama, whose story is told in one of the core texts of the Hindu tradition.

That's right! We're discussing a living religious tradition. Thoth and I would like to remind you that we will be focusing on the narrative and cultural aspects of Rama's story, rather than its religious meaning or potential historical truth.

Also, a quick note on pronunciation: There aren't any Sanskrit scholars around Crash Course HQ, so we're gonna do our best, but I can guarantee that I'm not gonna be perfect. We've put the sources that we've used for pronunciation in the dooblydoo, if you're curious how we arrived at what I'm attempting to say. Thank you in advance for all of your kind and helpful comments.

So, who is this Rama, anyway? Rama is an avatar of the god Vishnu. He's brave, philosophical, and really good at archery. And also blue! Which is very classy. Oh! Very, fashionable Thoth!

[Opening music]

The story of the hero king Rama comes from an epic poem known as the *Ramayana*. Like many other stories of antiquity, this one started as an oral tradition and was only written down later. So there are a number of different versions.

Today, we're mostly referencing the version recorded by the poet Valmiki between 400 and 200 BCE, when the story was already at least 300 years old.

We'll talk about the significance of this myth to the Hindu tradition, but not all versions of Rama's story are Hindu. He shows up in Buddhist mythology too. It's also worth noting that there's some debate over how well this story represents Hindu culture, values, and principles generally.

We're not going to do the same heroes journey blow by blow as we did with Gilgamesh, but you'll definitely find plenty of those archetypal seeds. Spoiler alert: there's at least five instances of supernatural aid, some of it from monkeys. And we are going to come back to Campbell later to ask, "Who really is the hero of the Ramayana?" Keep that question in mind.

Our version of the Ramayan is a truncated version from Thury and Devinney's *Introduction to Mythology* textbook. And we start our story right at the beginning, from Rama's birth. His family is really important and there are lots of them. So, it actually might not hurt to take notes. Have you got a pen? No? It's okay, I'll wait.

Okay, you ready? Let's do this.

Rama is born the son of Dasharatha, the King of Kosola. He has an auspicious birth. The first of four sons after a long period of kingly infertility. And the king has three principle wives: Kausalya, Rama's mama; Kaikeyi, who gives birth to Rama's brother, Bharata; and Sumitra, who has twins, Lakshmana and Satrughna. All four princes are very princely: smart, polite, they look real sharp in fancy dress. But Rama is clearly the princeliest.

One day, the sage, Vishvamitra comes looking for help dealing with the rakshashas, a group of demons who are just generally bad news. Rama, who is old enough to do something about it, pledges to help Vishvamitra. He and his brother, Lakshmana, assist Vishvamitra in an important sacrifice first, though, earning top marks for both piety and general heroic character.

Afterward, Vishvamitra takes Rama and Lakshmana to a neighboring kingdom where they meet the beautiful princess, Sita. Her father, the king, had promised Sita's hand in marriage to any man who could string Shiva's bow. And no, that is not a euphemism. Shiva has an incredible, divine, massive bow. For arrows.

So, here's where Rama really distinguishes himself. He not only strings the bow, he draws it with so much force that it breaks apart in his hands. The king is satisfied, Rama and Sita are married.

Twelve years later, Dashratha decides to give up his throne and names Rama as successor. In a moment of familial, political intrigue though, Manthara, the maidservant to Queen Kaikeyi convinces her that her son, Bharata, Rama's younger brother, would be a better king.

Kaikeyi goes to Dashratha and begs him to fulfill a promise he made years before. Dashratha resists at first, but is stuck between his commitments. He makes Bharata king and banishes Rama to the forest for fourteen years. Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana, the loyal brother, head out together, in exile. The trio go to the Dandaka Forest, where, over the next ten years, they adventure like, woah!

They defeat a demon named Viradha, they visit a hermitage, they receive a magical bow and quiver with infinite arrows from the sage Agastya Rama, they even make friends with a celestial eagle named Jatayu, who promises to watch over Sita whenever the two brothers go out hunting.

Sadly, the peace doesn't last. The rakshashas learn of Rama's exile in the Dandaka and send a 14,000 strong army after him. Rama, armed with his magic bow, defeats them all! And in the face of such an upset, the demon Ravana, who has ten heads, resolves to get back at Rama. The weakness he can exploit? Sita.

Ravana orders the demon Maricha to change into a beautiful golden deer and prance through the forest. When Sita sees it, she's entranced. So, Rama and Lankshmana go out to catch it. With Sita alone, Ravana shows up disguised as a hermit. He proposes marriage to Sita, who refuses. Da-doy.

Ravana then reveals his true form and swipes her, carrying her off in his flying chariot. All Sita can do as she struggles is drop bits of her jewelry to a group of monkeys in the trees below, hoping that Rama will figure out what has happened.

Back in the forest, Rama kills the golden deer and returns to find Sita gone. He and Lankshmana discover the wounded Jatayu, who relates the whole story before expiring. Swearing to rescue Sita, the two travel to seek out Ravana's lair.

Their search brings them to the Monkey Kingdom, where they meet Sugriv, the monkey king. At first, Sugriv mistrusts the two humans, but after reassurance from his chief counsellor, Hanuman, he decides to give them a chance. So Rama does what he does best: boss archery feats and Sugriv is so impressed that they all become friends.

The monkeys are happy to help Rama rescue Sita, but there's one problem: it's monsoon season, which makes travel very difficult. While he waits, Rama pines away for his missing wife.

Finally, as the rains abate, Hanuman talks to Jatayu's brother, the vulture Sampaati, and learns that Sita is being held in Lanka, far across the sea, guarded by a group of titans. And it just so happens that Hanuman isn't any old monkey, but the son of the wind. So he agrees to fly across the ocean and help locate Sita.

Hanuman arrives in Lanka only to discover a grief-stricken women

in ragged clothes, sitting beneath a tree in the Ashoka garden. It's Sita! He watches as Ravana enters the garden and tries to convince her to marry him. Sita rebuffs him yet again and he flies into a rage, saying she has two months to change her mind or he'll slice her up, cook her, and eat her.

This brings us to the Thought Bubble.

After Ravana makes his threat and leaves, Sita is stricken with grief. Her thoughts turn to suicide, but at this exact moment Hanuman steps from his hiding place. He tells Sita he brings Rama's good wishes, but Sita balks. What is this is Ravana in yet another disguise, trying to trick her?

Hanuman proves who he is by presenting Rama's signet ring, and offers Sita an escape, but Sita refuses. It's only proper that Rama be the one to rescue her. Hanuman flies back to Rama with this news. Rama is overjoyed to learn that his wife is safe, so he leads a monkey army across the sea to Lanka.

They battle Ravana's forces for several days. The struggle is dire. In the end, it all comes down to Rama's awesome archery expertise. He finally slays Ravana, ending the skirmish. Sounds like a happy ending, right? Well, not exactly.

When Rama sees Sita, he says, "I have defeated my enemy and avenged the insult to me. This campaign was not undertaken wholly for your sake. It was to uphold the honor of my illustrious family. Your very sight is now painful to me. For no man of honor can take back a beautiful woman who lived for a year in the house of a titan."

But Sita is undaunted. To prove her faithfulness to Rama during her captivity, she says she will undergo a fire ordeal. She has Lakshmana raise a pyre and enters the flames. She is immediately taken up by the fire god, unscathed, thus proving her purity beyond any fire-cast shadow of a doubt.

Thank you Thought Bubble!

Rama accepts Sita and even backpedals a bit, saying he knew all along, she was worthy. Just kidding baby, I knew you were legit. Dasharatha even appears from heaven and asks Sita to forgive Rama, because he only questioned her to preserve dharma, which has to do with the duties and responsibilities of each individual within the cosmic pattern. More on that in a minute!

Rama, in turn, begs Dasharatha to forgive Kaikeyi and Bharata. Dasharatha agrees. Then Rama asks the god Indra to bring all the monkeys who died in the war back to life. Which he does. Live my pretties! Live! So, maybe it's a happy ending after all.

Now reunited, Rama and Sita fly with Lankshmana and all the monkeys to Ayodhya, where Rama is finally crowned king. He gives Sita a pearl necklace, which she passes on to Hanuman and Rama rules wisely and happily over his kingdom for 10,000 years.

We've only barely scratched the surface of this epic story. But even in a truncated form you can see how many characters get to take important and meaningful actions. And that's why we wanted to ask, who's the real hero here?

Rama is the easy answer. He has a ton of qualities recognized through Campbell's framework: he has a miraculous birth, he journeys away from a comfortable life, he crosses a threshold into a dark forest, he's helped by a wise people, supernatural companions, and returns to his homeland a changed person.

But Campbell's theory isn't the only way to identify a hero. Rama is also a hero in the specific context of Hindu belief and practice. Specifically, he's a hero in that he follows his dharma, behaving as his role in life dictates.

Again, we turn to mythology scholars Thury and Devinney. "In the Ramayana, in accordance with this principle of [dharma], we see that Rama must behave appropriately as a son, a brother, a military leader, a protector of his beloved, as each situation demands. He is heroic because he finally succeeds in being the faithful and dutiful son, loving husband, and caring brother while also being a stern leader and powerful warrior."

Taken in this light, almost everything Rama does, especially abdicating his throne in favor of his brother, since it's his father's wish, makes Rama heroic. It's even supposedly heroic for him to spurn Sita. But maybe Sita is the hero of the Ramayana.

If following dharma is what makes someone heroic, then Sita is just as qualified. She dutifully follows Rama to the forest and resists Ravana's advances, even when he threatens to cook and eat her. When Hanuman offers to sneak her out, she chooses to remain captive to give Rama the chance to fulfill his dharma. She's so virtuous that when she throws herself on a pyre, she's saved by the god of fire himself. That's the sort of divine assistance awarded to heroes.

We might make similar arguments for Hanuman, who undertakes his own very Campbellian hero's journey. Or for Lankshmana, who follows his own dharma along Rama. In this version of the Ramayana, which, remember is only one of many possible stories of Rama and Sita, we see many of the tropes that Campbell and others identify in heroic stories.

But we also see duty as a heroic imperative. There isn't one way of defining a hero. And the fact that heroic qualities are divided between this story's participants. Maybe that's a suggestion that one need not be an avatar of Vishnu to demonstrate heroism. However you define it.

Thanks for watching and come back next week as we continue talking about heroes. We'll swing up through Europe to learn about one particular, remarkable magic cup: the Holy Grail. Ni!

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Thanks for watching and, yes, you're right, the Wicked Witch never did call those flying monkeys 'my pretties!'.