

Jethro, the Druze and Vedic Origins

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Abstract

A serendipitous, though intensive, case study of Israeli Druze reveals striking similarities between Vedic and Druze philosophy and culture. This article uses these congruities as a springboard for researching Druze origins. Jethro, commonly known as the father-in-law of Moses, is the greatest saint in the pantheon of Druze prophets. He is a Midianite, a tribe descending from the sons of Keturah who were sent by Abraham to the East. Analysis of the relationship between Moses and Jethro reveals that Moses oftentimes accepted the role of Jethro's student. It is suggested that Moses was the disciple of Jethro in practical as well as spiritual matters. This conforms with the Midianite-Kenite hypothesis about the origin of the Hebrew religious system. The author relates this idea to the Druze connection with India, and suggests that Druze oral and written traditions be studied, alongside a reexamination of the Midianite-Kenite hypothesis, to determine the extent of Vedic influence on Judaic history.

In 1988 I went to northern Israel, not as a student of religious history, but as a book-seller. With a team of six other Vaisnavas, I visited the towns, cities and villages of the Galil, presenting Hebrew translations of the books of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada to the Jewish population. In the process, we stumbled upon the Druze, and entered a world of fascinating interethnic experiences, which became the subject of a book I published in 1994, entitled *Krsna, Israel and the Druze- An Inter-religious Odyssey*. This book describes many occurrences, some of which will be narrated below, suggesting a connection between Vedic and Druze culture and philosophy. Further, this paper attempts to indicate a relationship between Vedic civilization and Judaism, through Jethro, the major prophet of the Druze, and urges scholars of Judaic and Indic studies to pursue this line of inquiry.

On several occasions we met with the late Sheik Tarif Amin, former world spiritual leader of the Druze. He expressed genuine appreciation that hundreds of Druze households were placing sets of Vedic books in their homes. Sheik Amin stated that he wanted the Druze people to work with the Hare Krsna movement

“as one race.” This is an amazing declaration, considering that the Druze are primarily known for their isolation and clandestine religious practices.

Salman Falach, Druze Minister of Education in Israel, purchased hundreds of Srila Prabhupada’s books for Druze schools and libraries. For his personal collection, Mr. Falach bought all the books we had in English, and, after paging through the Srimad-Bhagavatam, stated “I think after reading these books I will discover that our religion is coming from them.” All segments of Druze society, including farmers, political leaders, educators, sheiks and businessmen, became fascinated by the Vaisnavas and the Vedic literatures they presented. Within a short time, Druze were accepting these Sanskrit literatures as their own scriptures. What is the explanation for this?

We spoke with many Druze sheiks and intellectuals, and they shared deeply with us. Although Druze are considered by the academic community to be an Arabic sect of Islam (Firro, 1992), albeit an unorthodox one, most Druze consider their roots to be Indian. Their beliefs are pervaded by characteristically Vedic conceptions. For instance, their scriptures, like the Vedic puranas and itihisas, and unlike chronicles of Middle Eastern religions, describe history dating back hundreds of millions of years, with incarnations of God in a human form appearing at regular intervals. This is akin to the Vedic idea of regular appearances of avataras. Also, transmigration of the soul is a central tenet of Druze philosophy. In fact, to describe this principle the Druze use the same analogy as Krsna uses in the *Bhagavad-gita* [2:22]: “As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones.”

Kamal Jumbalat, the late Druze political hero and renowned spiritualist, often extolled Krsna, the *Bhagavad-gita*, the *Ramayana*, and other Vedic books and personalities in his writings (Dasa, 1994, p. 219). He also spoke of Druze going to India and taking sannyasa (Jumbalat, I Speak for Lebanon, p. 34), and Jumbalat was himself a vegetarian and considered himself, in his later years, to be living as a vanaprastha, the retired order of life in the Vedic social system.

Even on esoteric points, sheiks would surprise us with parallels between Vedic and Druze understandings. For instance, Sheik Farhoud, an eminent Druze religious leader in the northern Galil, commenting on the ontology of Jesus Christ, explained that the Christ on the cross was an illusory Christ. His exposition was strikingly similar in quality to the Vaisnava understanding, based on *the Kurma Purana* (*Caitanya-Caritamrta*, Madhya-lila, 1: 117), that the Sita stolen by Ravana was maya-Sita, or an illusory representation of the real Sita. Occasionally sheiks expounded on Druze astronomy, and the descriptions were very similar to those of the 5th Canto of the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*.

Actually, the term "Druze," like the word "Hindu," was coined by the Muslims. Almost 1,000 years ago El Drazi was a heretic to the emerging Druze faith, and Muslims, to deride this new sect, derisively referred to the group by the name of their dissident. Druze consider themselves as Muwahidoon, which translates as "the one, eternal religion, (Abu-Izzeddin, 1984; Betts, 1988; Firro, 1992)" much as a practitioner of Vedic religion is performing sanatana-dharma, the eternal occupation of the soul, rather than any temporally or geographically based religion (Prabhupada, 1972- from Introduction). The current manifestation of the Muwahidoon, known as the Druze, originates from al Hakim Bi-Amr Allah, the sixth Fatimid Caliph, who ruled Egypt during the late 10th and early 11th Centuries (Abu-Izzeddin). According to the sheiks, there are other manifestations of the Muwahidoon.

To avoid persecution, as well as to prevent unqualified persons from obtaining knowledge, Druze conceal their beliefs. They have developed a philosophy of social interaction called taquiyya, meaning that one should perform duties according to the national milieu, while internally remembering one's identity as a member of the Muwahidoon. Even Druze are not permitted to read their scriptures until they take vows of initiation (Dana, 1980). Yet, top sheiks were revealing confidential information to us, considering us to be Muwahidoon from India. Some Druze pundits revealed that the original language of their scriptures was Sanskrit, and indicated that incarnations such as Buddha and Krsna are described in these books.

In 1928, Richard Gottheil (Hitti, 1928, Foreword) declared "The Druze have been the wonder of scholars,... All sorts of theories have been advanced by scholars to account for their particular tenets and customs... The scholars have been unsuccessful.. and the Druze still remain the great mystery." Modern-day research has done little to uncover the origins of the Druze, though Abu-Izzeddin (1984, p. 121) states "Recently discovered manuscripts throw new light on influences from India," and provides strong evidence of the Muwahidoon culture extending to India during the middle of the 11th Century. Also, the story of the disappearance of al Hakim is vague, and many scholars and Druze believe that he left Cairo and went to India to meditate during the final stage of his appearance on Earth (Abu-Izzeddin).

To find a spiritual culture with such unmistakable Vedic influence in Israel was astonishing, and this impromptu ethnographic research should be valuable for scholars investigating the connection between India and the Middle East. This author has done some examination of relevant literature, and would like to share findings that may have profound implications for the major Western religions.

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law¹, is the foremost prophet for the Druze. Their largest annual celebration is held at the tomb of Jethro, near Tiberias (Dana, 1980). Jethro, known as Nabi Schweib by the Druze, was a Midianite (Exodus 18:1), a tribe descending from Keturah, a wife of Abraham (Genesis 25:1-2). Genesis (25:6) describes that Abraham sent the sons of Keturah to the East. Rabbi Menashe Ben Israel (Glazerson, 1984) asserts that Abraham sent them to India. This is more evidence linking the Druze with India, or at least the East. If we examine the relationship between Moses and Jethro, the story becomes even more interesting.

Jethro is commonly understood as an idol-worshipping pagan, a Midianite priest, who converted to Judaism by associating with Moses. If we study the role of Jethro, however, this description seems unsatisfying. In Exodus (Chapter 18), Jethro brings Zipporah and her two sons to Moses, and Moses bows down and kisses Jethro. Then Jethro praises the God of the Jews and "took a burnt-offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came, and all the elders of Israel, to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God." It is interesting to conjecture why the elders of Israel are eating food that was sacrificed by an idol worshipper. On the next day Jethro instructs Moses on the formation of an administrative structure for the Israeli people. Some scholars assert that he also helped set up the system of worship (Auerbach, 1975). Before giving instruction, Jethro admonishes Moses for placing himself (Moses) as direct arbitrator for all decisions, great and small. Also, he introduces his remarks by stating "Hearken now unto my voice, I will give thee counsel, and God be with thee." It sounds like Jethro has quite a bit of authority, granted by God Himself. According to Exodus, "Moses did all that he [Jethro] had said." Albright (Beegle, 1972) claims that the twelve tribes of Israel formed as a result of Jethro's reorganization of the people.

Before returning to Egypt, Moses asks Jethro's permission to embark on the journey (Exodus 4:18). Furthermore, Auerbach (1975, p. 205) writes "The first sacrifice in Israel was offered up not by Moses but by the Midianite priest Jethro. He too was apparently the one who came to fashion the ark." Thus, Jethro was the first priest of the Israeli nation, and many scholars suggest that he instructed Moses and Aaron in the practices of priesthood. Auerbach (p. 122) concludes that "a strong Midianite influence on Israel's cult and law is undeniable..." In addition, the Ark of the Covenant is directly connected with Jethro and is considered to be of Midianite origin (Auerbach, 1985). Moreover, when Moses asks Jethro to be a guide, he is literally asking him to "be for us as eyes." (Baskin, 1983, p. 59) Baskin, quoting the Sipre on Numbers, expresses the request of the Hebrews to Jethro as follows. "In everything that is hidden from our eyes, you shall enlighten us." Baskin goes on to explain "Jethro will bring to light things that have been neglected or forgotten." (Baskin, 1983, p. 59) In summary, the idol-worshipping

¹ According to the Druze, Jethro was the guardian of Zipporah, not her father. Therefore, they do not consider Jethro to be the father-in-law of Moses.

pagan from the East has an astonishingly easy and profound influence on the Israelite nation and Moses, the prophet of prophets.

I propose that Jethro instructed Moses, not only about administering justice, but also about spiritual knowledge and practices. That is, Moses' prime preceptor for understanding how to please and worship God was Jethro, priest of the Midianites. In Exodus, Jethro takes the initiative in offering sacrifices to YHVH (Exodus 18:12) because he was more familiar with the God of Moses than Moses himself. Interestingly, this is not a particularly original hypothesis.

Many scholars have asserted that the Israelites received their religion from the Kenites, a tribe associated with Jethro (Judges 1:16, 4:11) and a part of the Midianites. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* summarizes the theories of these scholars. "Jethro initiates Moses and Aaron into the worship of YHVH. Several modern scholars believe, in consequence of this statement, that YHVH was a Kenite deity, and that from the Kenites through the agency of Moses his worship passed to the Israelites. The Kenites, then, were a nomadic tribe, more advanced in the arts of life than Israel." (*The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1916, p. 467) Ben-Sasson calls this the "Midianite-Kenite" hypothesis on the origin of the name Yahweh (Malamat, 1976, p. 45).

To summarize the line of reasoning, many scholars have believed that the Hebrew nation acquired their religion from the Kenites. These scholars apparently were unaware of the similarity between Druze culture and philosophy and the Vedas. Nor did they seem much concerned with the connection between the Kenites and the East. In light of recent ethnological findings regarding the Druze (Dasa, 1994), and the intriguing status and role of Nabi Schweib in relation to Moses, the Kenite theory acquires a fresh cogency.

Jethro was a Kenite, a tribe from the East, and with roots perhaps stemming from India. He is the major preceptor of the Druze, whose present philosophy and lifestyle are remarkably Vedic, considering they are situated in the Middle East. The interaction between Jethro and Moses suggests that Moses, at least in some capacity, was Jethro's disciple. This hypothesis conforms with the theory of Kenite origins of the Hebrew religion. Thus, the Vedas may be the source of the Judaic religious tradition.

In many Midrashim, the East, in comparison with any other direction, is hallowed as a source of light and knowledge. For example, in *The Midrash Rabbah* (1977, Vol. 3: Numbers, p. 90) it is stated "The east is the source from which light goes forth into the world, and there camped the standard of Judah which bred kings, scholars, and men of pious deeds. For this reason Moses and Aaron and his sons camped there... The three tribes of the South, however, who were close to quarrelsome men, perished together..." Also, Jewish commentators throughout the ages have described India as a land of potency and paradise. *The Legends of the*

Jews (1925, Vol. 5, p. 196) delineates stories of sages who went to India to obtain "plants of paradise," and narrates how Solomon (Vol. 4, p. 149) secured water with special healing powers from India. And in Volume 1, page 11, of *The Legends of the Jews*, it is written "Beyond the inhabited parts to the east is Paradise with its seven divisions, each assigned to the pious of a certain degree." Genesis (2:8) places Eden in the East. Additionally, Keturah, whose sons went to the East, is especially characterized for fine qualities. According to the *Midrashim (The Midrash Rabbah*, Vol. 1, p. 543), "[the name Keturah] implies that she united piety and nobility... she was like one who seals up a treasure..." "Keturah," according to *The Legends of the Jews* (Vol. 5, p. 264), means "sweet like incense."

In many fields, such as linguistics (e.g., Kak, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990), astronomy (e.g., Thompson, 1989, 1997; Kak, 1987), archaeology (e.g., Rao, 1988, 1991, 1993; Jacobi, 1894; Hicks and Anderson, 1990), mathematics (e.g., Seidenberg, 1962), and Indology (e.g., Rajaram and Frawley, 1995; Burrow, 1973; Jarrige and Meadow, 1980), there is compelling evidence for an original Vedic culture. This article has presented a case for an East to West flow of religious and spiritual knowledge, emanating from ancient India. This hypothesis helps to answer many questions, such as those concerning the relationship between Moses and Jethro, and the origins of the Druze. The community of religious scholars may benefit from pursuing the line of inquiry outlined herein. This would require reviving and rethinking the Midianite-Kenite theory, with reference to Torah, midrashim, agaddah, and scholarly analysis that has been done on this topic throughout the generations. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, fruitful investigation would entail researching the oral and written traditions of the Druze, which may be a formidable task, considering their heritage of secrecy.

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