

Excerpt from the Ramayana

(1000-600 BCE)

Source

The Ramayana is one of India's most ancient literary products. The stories and poems define heroism, love and wisdom for that civilization and are popular to the present. This short excerpt from the introduction sets the heroic tone for what is to come.

Valmiki addresses Narad, the eloquent messenger of the Gods, asking if there be any one in the world who is "virtuous, heroic, true," and Narad answers, reciting the virtues and deeds of Rama.

"To sainted Narad prince of those
Whose lore in words of wisdom flows,
Whose constant care and chief delight
Were Scripture and ascetic rite.
The good Valmiki, first and best
Of hermit saints, these words addressed:
'In all this world, I pray thee, who
Is virtuous, heroic, true?
Firm in his vows, of grateful mind,
To every creature good and kind?
Bounteous and holy, just and wise,
Alone most fair to all men's eyes?
Devoid of envy, firm, and sage,
Whose tranquil soul ne'er yields to rage?
Whom, when his warrior wrath is high,
Do Gods embattled fear and fly?
Whose noble might and gentle skill
The triple world can guard from ill?
Who is the best of princes, he
Who loves his people's good to see?
The store of bliss, the living mine,
Where brightest joys and virtues shine!
Queen Fortune's best and dearest friend,
Whose steps her choicest gifts attend!
Who may with sun and moon compare,
With Indra, Vishnu, Fire and Air?
Grant saint divine, the boon I ask,

For thee I weep, and easy task,
To whom the power is given to know
If such a man breathe here below.
"Then Narad, clear before whose eye
The present, past, and future lie,
Made ready answer: 'Hermit, where
Are graces found so high and rare?
Yet listen, and my tongue shall tell
In whom alone these virtues dwell.
From old Ikshvaku's line he came,
Known to the world by Rama's name;
With soul subdued, a chief of might,
In scriptures versed, in glory bright.
His steps in virtue's paths are bent,
Obedient, pure, and eloquent.
In each emprise he wins success,
And dying foes his power confess.
Tall and broad-shouldered, strong of limb,
Fortune has set her mark on him,
Graced with a conch-shell's triple line,
His throat displays the auspicious sign.
High destiny is clear impressed
On massive jaws and ample chest.
His mighty shafts he truly aims,
And foemen in the battle tames.
Deep in the muscle, scarcely shown,
Embedded lies his collar bone.
His lordly steps are firm and free,
His strong arms reach below his knee;
All fairest graces join to deck
His head, his brow, his stately neck,
And limbs in fair proportion set:
The manliest form e'er fashioned yet.
Graced with each high imperial mark,
His skin is soft and lustrous dark.
Large are his eyes that sweetly shine
With majesty almost divine.
His plighted word he ne'er forgets;

On erring sense a watch he sets.
By nature wise, his teacher's skill
Has trained him to subdue his will.
Good, resolute and pure, and strong,
He guards mankind from scathe and wrong,
And lends his aid, and ne'er in vain,
The cause of justice to maintain.
Well has he studied o'er and o'er
The Vedas and their kindred lore.
Well skilled is he the bow to draw,
Well trained in arts and versed in law;
High-souled and meet for happy fate,
Most tender and compassionate;
The noblest of all lordly givers,
Whom good men follow, as the rivers
Follow the King of Floods, the sea:
So liberal, so just is he.
The joy of Queen Kausalya's heart,
In every virtue he has part:
Firm as Himalaya's snowy steep,
Unfathomed like the mighty deep;
The peer of Vishnu's power and might,
And lovely as the Lord of Night;
Patient as Earth, but, roused to ire,
Fierce as the world-destroying fire;
In bounty like the Lord of Gold,
And Justice 'self in human mould."
"With him, his best and eldest son,
By all his princely virtues won
King Dasaratha willed to share
His kingdom as the Regent Heir.

Analysis Questions

1. What key physical attributes are expected of a ruler such as Rama?
2. What are Rama's virtues as a ruler?
3. Why do Rama's military capabilities (physical and leadership) play such a crucial role in this list of virtues?



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