

Title

**THE  
VISHNÚ  
PURÁÑA**

**The Fifth Book**

*A System of Hindu Mythology and Tradition  
Translated from the original Sanscrit  
and  
illustrated by Notes derived chiefly from other Puranas*

*by  
H. H. Wilson*

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## **About this eBook**

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The Fifth Book

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## Chapter I

*The death of Kansa announced. Earth, oppressed by the Daityas, applies to the gods. They accompany her to Vishnú, who promises to give her relief. Kansa imprisons Vasudeva and Devakí. Vishnú's instructions to Yoganidrá.*

**MAITREYA.**<sup>1</sup> - You have related to me a full account of all the different dynasties of kings, and of their successive transactions. I wish now to hear a more particular description, holy Rishi, of the portion of Vishnú<sup>2</sup> that came down upon earth, and was born in the family of Yadu. Tell me also what actions he performed in his descent, as a part of a part of the supreme, upon the earth<sup>3</sup>.

**PARÁŚARA.** - I will relate to you, Maitreya, the account which you have requested; the birth of a part of a part of Vishnú, and the benefits which his actions conferred upon the world.

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<sup>1</sup> The whole of this book is dedicated to the biography of Krishńa. Many of the Purńas omit this subject altogether, or only allude to it occasionally. In others it is equally prominent. The Brńhma P. gives the story exactly in the same words as our text: which has the best right to them may be questioned; but, as it is usually met with, the Brńhma P. is a very heterogeneous compilation. The Hari Vanśa has a narrative more detailed than that of the text, with additions and embellishments of its own. The Brahma Vaivartta throughout celebrates the acts of Krishńa; and one portion of it, the Krishńa Janma Khańda, especially describes his boyhood and youth. The incidents are the same in general as those in the text, but they are lost amidst interminable descriptions of Krishńa's sports with the Gopís and with his mistress Rńdhń, a person not noticed elsewhere; the whole is in a style indicative of a modern origin. The Agni P. and Padma P. (Uttara Khańda) have accounts of Krishńa, but they are mere summaries, compiled evidently from other works. The principal authority for the adventures of Krishńa is the Bhńgavata, the tenth book of which is exclusively devoted to him. It is this work which has, no doubt, mainly extended the worship of Krishńa, as its popularity is evinced by its having been translated into all the spoken languages of India professing to have a literature. The Prem-sagar, its Hindi version, is well known; but there are also translations in Mahratta, Telugu, Tamil, &c. It does not seem likely, however, that the Vishńu P. has copied the Bhńgavata; for although its greater conciseness may sometimes look like abridgment, yet the descriptions are generally of a more simple and antiquated character. Here, as usual, the Mahńbhńrata is no doubt the earliest extant authority; but it is not the earliest, for whilst it omits to narrate most of his personal adventures unconnected with his alliance with the Pńńdavvas, it often alludes to them, and names repeatedly his capital, his wives, and his progeny. It also devotes a section, the Mauńala P., to the destruction of the Yńdavvas. The story of Krishńa the prince and hero must have been complete when the Mahńbhńrata was compiled. It is doubtful, however, if Krishńa the boy, and his adventures at Vrindńvan, were not subsequent inventions. There are no allusions to them in the poem, of an unsuspecting nature. The only ones that I have met with are contained in a speech by Śisupńla, Sabhń P., vol. I. p. 360, in which he reviles Krishńa; but they may easily have been interpolated. There may be others scattered through the poem, but I have not observed them.

<sup>2</sup> The notices of Krishńa's origin and character in various passages of the Mahńbhńrata are by no means consistent, and indicate different dates at least. In an address to him by Arjuna, Vana P., vol. I. p. 436, he is said to have passed thousands of years in various holy places, engaged in arduous penances. He is frequently identified with the Rishi Nńrńyańa, or he and Arjuna are said to be Nara and Nńrńyańa. In the Dńna-dharma he is represented as a worshipper of Śiva, and propitiating him and his wife Umń, and receiving as boons from them wives and children. As a warrior and prince he is always on the scene; but he is repeatedly called an Anśa, or portion of Vishńu; whilst in a great number of places he is identified with Vishńu or Nńrńyańa, and is consequently 'all things.' This latter is his character, of course, amongst the Vaishńnavas, agreeably to the text of the Bhńgavata: 'Krishńa is the lord (Vishńu) himself.'

<sup>3</sup> This is a still farther diminution of Krishńa's dignity; he is not even a part, but 'a part of a part,' Anśńńśavatńra: but this, the commentator maintains, is to be understood only of his form or condition as man, not of his power, as it suffered no diminution, either in its primary or secondary state, as light by suffusion suffers no decrease; and a verse of the Veda is cited to this effect: 'Though that which is full be taken from what is full, yet the remainder is undiminished;' 'Krishńa is nevertheless the very supreme Brahma, though it be a mystery how the supreme should assume the form of a man.' So the Bhńgavata in one passage predicts that the Para-purusha, Purushottama or Vishńu, will be born visibly in the dwelling of Vasudeva.

Vasudeva formerly married the daughter of Devaka, the illustrious Devaki, a maiden of celestial beauty. After their nuptials, Kansa, the increaser of the race of Bhoja, drove their car as their charioteer. As they were going along, a voice in the sky, sounding aloud and deep as thunder, addressed Kansa, and said, "Fool that you are, the eighth child of the damsel whom you are driving in the car shall take away your life<sup>4</sup>!" On hearing this, Kansa drew his sword, and was about to put Devaki to death; but Vasudeva interposed, saying, "Kill not Devaki, great warrior; spare her life, and I will deliver to you every child that she may bring forth." Appeased by which promise, and relying on the character of Vasudeva, Kansa desisted from the attempt.

At that time, Earth, overburdened by her load, repaired to mount Meru to an assembly of the gods, and addressing the divinities, with Brahmá at their head, related in piteous accents all her distress. "Agni," said Earth, "is the progenitor of gold; Surya, of rays of light<sup>5</sup>: the parent and guide of me and of all spheres is the supreme Náráyaña, who is Brahmá, the lord of the lord of patriarchs; the eldest of the eldest born; one with minutes and hours; one with time; having form, though indiscrete. This assemblage of yourselves, O gods, is but a part of him. The sun, the winds, the saints, the Rudras, the Vasus, the Aswins, fire, the patriarch creators of the universe, of whom Atri is the first, all are but forms of the mighty and inscrutable Vishnú. The Yakshas, Rákshasas, Daityas, spirits of evil, serpents, and children of Danu, the singers and nymphs of heaven, are forms of the great spirit, Vishnú. The heavens painted with planets, constellations, and stars; fire, water, wind, and myself, and every perceptible thing; the whole universe itself - consists of Vishnú. The multifarious forms of that manifold being encounter and succeed one another, night and day, like the waves of the sea. At this present season many demons, of whom Kálanemi is the chief, have overrun, and continually harrass, the region of mortals. The great Asura Kálanemi<sup>6</sup>, that was killed by the powerful Vishnú, has revived in Kansa, the son of Ugrasena, and many other mighty demons, more than I can enumerate, as Arish́ta, Dhenuka, Keśin, Pralamba, Naraka, Sunda, and the fierce Báña, the son of Bali<sup>7</sup>, are born in the palaces of kings. Countless hosts of proud and powerful spirits, chiefs of the demon race, assuming celestial forms, now walk the earth; and, unable to support myself beneath the incumbent load, I come to you for succour. Illustrious deities, do you so act that I may be relieved from my burden, lest helpless I sink into the nethermost abyss."

When the gods had heard these complaints of Earth, Brahmá at their request explained to them how her burden might be lightened. "Celestials," said Brahmá, "all that Earth has said is undoubtedly true. I, Mahádeva, and you all, are but Náráyaña; but the impersonations of his power are forever mutually fluctuating, and excess or diminution is indicated by the predominance of the strong, and the depression of the weak. Come therefore, let us repair to the northern coast of the milky sea, and having glorified Hari, report to him what we have heard. He, who is the spirit of all, and of whom the universe consists, constantly, for the sake of Earth, descends in a small portion of his essence to establish righteousness below." Accordingly Brahmá, attended by the gods, went to the milky sea, and there, with minds intent upon him, praised him whose emblem is Garúda.

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<sup>4</sup> The Bhágavata tells the circumstance as in the text. The Hari Vanśa makes Nárada apprise Kansa of his danger. Nárada's interposition is not mentioned until afterwards by our authority. Devakí is the cousin of Kansa.

<sup>5</sup> Agni, or fire, refines gold, burns away the dross, according to the commentator. The sun is the lord of the rays of light; or, as the cause of rain and vegetation, the lord of cattle.

<sup>6</sup> According to the Váyu, Kálanemi or Kayabaddha was a son of Virochana, the grandson of Hirańyakaśipu: his death is described in the Hari Vanśa.

<sup>7</sup> These appear subsequently in the narration, and are destroyed by Krishńa.

"O thou," said Brahmá, "who art distinct from holy writ<sup>8</sup>; whose double nature is twofold wisdom<sup>9</sup>, superior and inferior, and who art the essential end of both; who, alike devoid and possessed of form, art the twofold Brahma<sup>10</sup>; smallest of the least, and largest of the large; all, and knowing all things; that spirit which is language; that spirit which is supreme; that which is Brahma, and of which Brahma is composed! Thou art the Rich, the Yajush, the Sáman, and the Atharvan Vedas. Thou art accentuation, ritual, signification, metre, and astronomy; history, tradition, grammar, theology, logic, and law: thou who art inscrutable. Thou art the doctrine that investigates the distinctions between soul, and life, and body, and matter endowed with qualities<sup>11</sup>; and that doctrine is nothing else but thy nature inherent in and presiding over it<sup>12</sup>. Thou art imperceptible, indescribable, inconceivable; without name, or colour, or hands, or feet; pure, eternal, and infinite. Thou hearest without ears, and seest without eyes. Thou art one and multiform. Thou movest without feet; thou seizest without hands. Thou knowest all, but art not by all to be known<sup>13</sup>. He who beholds thee as the most subtile of atoms, not substantially existent, puts an end to ignorance; and final emancipation is the reward of that wise man whose understanding cherishes nothing other than thee in the form of supreme delight<sup>14</sup>. Thou art the common centre of all<sup>15</sup>, the protector of the world; and all beings exist in thee: all that has been, or will be, thou art. Thou art the atom of atoms; thou art spirit; thou only art distinct from primeval nature<sup>16</sup>. Thou, as the lord of fire in four manifestations<sup>17</sup>, givest light and fertility to Earth. Thou art the eye of all, and wearer of many shapes, and unobstructedly traversest the three regions of the universe. As fire, though one, is variously kindled, and, though unchangeable in its essence, is modified in many ways, so thou, lord, who art one omnipresent form, takest upon thee all modifications that exist. Thou art one supreme; thou art that supreme and eternal state which the wise behold with the eye of knowledge. There is nothing else but thou, O lord; nothing else has been or will be. Thou art both discrete and indiscrete, universal and individual, omniscient, all-seeing, omnipotent, possessed of all wisdom and strength and power. Thou art liable neither to diminution nor increase; thou art independent and without beginning; thou art the subjugator of all. Thou art unaffected by weariness, sloth, fear, anger, or desire. Thou art free from soil, supreme,

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<sup>8</sup> Anámnáya; not the immediate object of the Vedas, which is devotion, not abstraction; ritual or worship, not knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> The two kinds of knowledge are termed Pará, 'supreme,' and Apará, 'other' or 'subordinate;' the first is knowledge of Para Brahma, of spirit abstractedly considered, perfect knowledge derived from abstraction; the second is knowledge of Śabda Brahma, of spirit as described and taught in the Vedas, or their supplementary branches. The identity of the supreme with both descriptions of holy knowledge pervades the whole of the address.

<sup>10</sup> Para Brahma and Śabda Brahma: see the preceding note.

<sup>11</sup> The doctrine alluded to may be either intended generally, or in the several instances, the discussion of the spiritual soul and living soul, of body subtile and sensible, and of matter endowed with qualities, reference may be purposed to the Vedánta, Yoga, and Sánkhyá systems.

<sup>12</sup> That is, as the Śabda Brahma, the supreme is identical with philosophical doctrines, being the object, the instigator, and the result.

<sup>13</sup> This is taken from the Vedas, the original of which is quoted and translated by Sir Win. Jones: see his Works, XIII. 368. The passage is thus cited by the commentator on our text: 'Without hand or foot he runs, he grasps; without eyes he sees; and without ears he hears: he knoweth all that may be known, and no one knoweth him. Him they call the first great spirit.'

<sup>14</sup> Varenya rúpa, explained by Paramánanda múrtti; he whose form or impersonation is supreme felicity.

<sup>15</sup> Literally 'navel of all. The passage is also read 'Thou art all and the first;' the cause or creator.

<sup>16</sup> Or the passage is understood, 'Thou art one subsequently to Prakriti;' that is, thou art Brahmá, the active will of the supreme, creating forms from rudimental matter.

<sup>17</sup> As the three fires enjoined by the Vedas, and the fire metaphorically of devotion; or lightnings, solar heat, fire generated artificially, and the fire of digestion or animal fire; or Vishnú in that character bestows beauty, vigour, power, and wealth.



merciful<sup>18</sup>, uniform, undecaying, lord over all, the stay of all, the fountain of light, imperishable. To thee, uninvested by material envelopes<sup>19</sup>, unexposed to sensible imaginings, aggregate of elemental substance<sup>20</sup>, spirit supreme, be adoration. Thou assumest a shape, O pervader of the universe, not as the consequence of virtue or vice, nor from any mixture of the two, but for the sole object of maintaining piety in the world<sup>21</sup>."

The unborn, universal Hari, having heard with his mental ear these eulogiums, was pleased, and thus spake to Brahmá: "Tell me, Brahmá, what you and the gods desire: speak boldly, certain of success." Brahmá, beholding the divine, universal form of Hari, quickly prostrated himself, and again renewed his praises. "Glory to thee, the thousand-formed, the thousand-armed, the many-visaged, many-footed; to thee, the illimitable author of creation, preservation, and destruction; most subtile of the subtile, most vast of the great: to thee, who art nature, intellect, and consciousness; and who art other spirit even than the spiritual root of those principles<sup>22</sup>. Do thou shew favour upon us. Behold, lord, this earth, oppressed by mighty Asuras, and shaken to her mountain basements, comes to thee, who art her invincible defender, to be relieved from her burden. Behold me, Indra, the Aswins, Varuṇa, and Yama, the Rudras, the Vasus, the suns, the winds, fire, and all other celestials, prepared to execute whatever thou shalt will that we shall do. Do thou, in whom there is no imperfection, O sovereign of the deities, give thy orders to thy servants: lo, we are ready."

When Brahmá had ended, the supreme lord plucked off two hairs, one white and one black, and said to the gods, "These my hairs shall descend upon earth, and shall relieve her of the burden of her distress<sup>23</sup>. Let all the gods also, in their own portions, go down to earth, and wage war with the haughty Asuras, who are there incorporate, and who shall every one of them be destroyed. Doubt not of this: they shall perish before the withering glance of mine eyes. This my (black) hair shall be impersonated in the eighth conception of the wife of Vasudeva, Devaki, who is like a goddess; and shall slay Kansa, who is the demon Kalanemi." Thus having spoken, Hari disappeared; and the gods bowing to him, though invisible, returned to the summit of mount Meru, from whence they descended upon earth.

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<sup>18</sup> Prīta: one copy has Śánta, 'calm,' 'undisturbed.'

<sup>19</sup> Beyond the separate layers or envelopes of elementary substances; or, according to the Vedánta notions, uninvested by those grosser sheaths or coverings, derived from food and the like, by which subtile body is enclosed.

<sup>20</sup> Mahāvibhūti sansthána. Vibhūti is explained by Prapancha, sensible, material, or elementary substance, constituting body.

<sup>21</sup> The passage is somewhat obscurely expressed, and is differently interpreted; it is, 'Not from no cause, nor from cause, nor from cause and no cause.' The term 'no cause' may, the commentator says, designate fixed prescribed duties, the Nityakarma; 'cause' may signify occasional sacrifices, the Kámya-karma: neither of these can form any necessity for Vishnú's descent, as they might of a mere mortal's being born on the earth: or Káraṇa is explained to mean 'obtaining pleasure,' from Ka and Áraṇa, 'obtaining;' obtaining happiness, or the cause of it, piety, virtue; and with the negative, Akáraṇa, the reverse, pain, the consequence of wickedness. The purport is clear enough; it is merely meant to state that Vishnú is not subject to the necessity which is the cause of human birth.

<sup>22</sup> The term Pradhána, which is repeated in this passage, is explained in the second place to mean Pumán, 'soul' or 'spirit.'

<sup>23</sup> The same account of the origin of Krishńa is given in the Mahábhárate, Ádi P., vol. I. p. 266. The white hair is impersonated as Balaráma; the black, as Krishńa. The commentator on our text maintains that this is not to be literally understood: 'Vishnú did not intend that the two hairs should become incarnate, but he meant to signify, that, should he send them, they would be more than sufficient to destroy Kansa and his demons: or the birth of Ráma and Krishńa was a double illusion, typified by the two hairs.' This seems to be a refinement upon an older and somewhat undignified account of the origin of Krishńa and his brother. The commentator on the Mahábhárate argues that they are to be understood merely as the media by which Devakí and Rohíní conceived.

The Muni Nárada informed Kansa that the supporter of the earth, Vishnú, would be the eighth child of Devakí; and his wrath being excited by this report, he placed both Vasudeva and Devakí in confinement. Agreeably to his promise, the former delivered to Kansa each infant as soon as it was born. It is said that these, to the number of six, were the children of the demon Hirańyakaśipu, who were introduced into the womb of Devakí, at the command of Vishnú, during the hours of Devakí's repose, by the goddess Yoganidr<sup>24</sup>, the great illusory energy of Vishnú, by whom, as utter ignorance, the whole world is beguiled. To her Vishnú said, "Go, Nidr<sup>24</sup>, to the nether regions, and by my command conduct successively six of their princes to be conceived of Devakí. When these shall have been put to death by Kansa, the seventh conception shall be formed of a portion of Śesha, who is a part of me; and this you shall transfer, before the time of birth, to Rohińí, another wife of Vasudeva, who resides at Gokula. The report shall run, that Devakí miscarries, through the anxiety of imprisonment, and dread of the Rájá of the Bhojas. From being extracted from his mother's womb, the child shall be known by the name of Sankarshańa, and he shall be valiant and strong, and like the peak of the white mountain in bulk and complexion. I will myself become incarnate in the eighth conception of Devakí; and you shall immediately take a similar character as the embryo offspring of Yaśodá. In the night of the eighth lunation of the dark half of the month Nabhas, in the season of the rains, I shall be born. You shall receive birth on the ninth. Impelled and aided by my power, Vasudeva shall bear me to the bed of Yaśodá, and you to that of Devakí. Kansa shall take you, and hold you up to dash you against a stone; but you shall escape from his grasp into the sky, where the hundred-eyed Indra shall meet and do homage to you, through reverence for me, and shall bow before you, and acknowledge you as his sister. Having slain Sumbha, Nisumbha, and numerous other demons<sup>25</sup>, you shall sanctify the earth in many places<sup>26</sup>. Thou art wealth, progeny, fame, patience, heaven and earth, fortitude, modesty, nutrition, dawn, and every other female (form or property). They who address thee morning and afternoon with reverence and praise, and call thee Áryá, Durgá, Vedagarbhá, Ambiká, Bhadrá, Bhadrakálí, Kshemí, or Kshemankarí, shall receive from my bounty whatever they desire. Propitiated with offerings of wine and flesh and various viands, thou shalt bestow upon mankind all their prayers. Through my favour all men shall ever have faith in thee. Assured of this, go, goddess, and execute my commands."

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<sup>24</sup> Yoganidr<sup>24</sup> is the sleep of devotion or abstraction, the active principle of illusion, personified, and also termed M<sup>24</sup>yá and Maham<sup>24</sup>yá, also Avidyá or ignorance. In the Durgá M<sup>24</sup>hátmya of the Márkańdeya Puráńa a she appears as Deví or Durgá, the Śakti or bride of Śiva; but in our text as Vaishńavi, or the Śakti of Vishnú.

<sup>25</sup> Allusion is here made to the exploits of Durgá, as celebrated especially in the Durgá M<sup>24</sup>hátmya; and it must be posterior to the date of that or some similar composition. The passage may be an interpolation, as the Márkańdeya P. in general has the appearance of being a more recent compilation than the Vishnú.

<sup>26</sup> This refers to the Píńha sthánas, 'fifty-one places,' where, according to the Tantras, the limbs of Śatí fell, when scattered by her husband Śiva, as he bore her dead body about, and tore it to pieces, after she had put an end to her existence at Daksha's sacrifice. This part of the legend seems to be an addition to the original fable made by the Tantras, as it is not in the Puráńas (see the story of Daksha's sacrifice). It bears some analogy to the Egyptian fable of Isis and Osiris. At the Píńha sthánas, however, of Jwálámukhí, Vindhyavásiní, Kálíghát, and others, temples are erected to the different forms of Deví or Śatí, not to the phallic emblem of Mahádeva, which, if present, is there as an accessory and embellishment, not as a principal, and the chief object of worship is a figure of the goddess; a circumstance in which there is an essential difference between the temples of Durgá and shrines of Osiris.