

Review

The Viṣṇu Purāṇa: Ancient Annals of the God with Lotus Eyes, translated from the Sanskrit by McComas Taylor. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2021. xvi + 562 pp., \$75 (print), free download (press.anu.edu.au). ISBN 9781760464400 (print), 9781760464417 (online).

Reviewed by: Simon Brodbeck, Cardiff University, UK
brodbecksp@cardiff.ac.uk

Keywords: critical edition; English translation; Purāṇa; Sanskrit.

Although there has been a recent translation into German (by Peter Schreiner), McComas Taylor's new book is the first English translation of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* to be published since those of H. H. Wilson and M. N. Dutt in the nineteenth century. Taylor translates the version that was critically reconstituted in Vadodara on the basis of a collation of forty-three selected manuscripts in eight different scripts. According to the critical editor M. M. Pathak, 'the MSS. of different regions agree with each other' (*The Critical Edition of the Viṣṇupurāṇam* vol. 1, 1997, p. 50); hence the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* critical-edition project did not identify (by means of their relatively poor attestation) any great quantity of interpolated passages, and Pathak's text is not much different from that translated by Horace Hayman Wilson. But Wilson's translation is schematic (he left vocatives and epithets untranslated), a new translation has long been a desideratum, and Taylor's elegant and economical rendering is an extremely useful contribution. It is aimed at 'the inquisitive non-specialist reader' (p. 35), but it will be appreciated by various audiences including students of religion and literature, specialized researchers, and Vaiṣṇava devotees. It will be appreciated all the more because while academic books are more overpriced than ever, it is available for PDF download, in toto and free of charge, from the publisher's website.

The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* dates perhaps from the fourth or fifth century CE, and is one of the earliest and most accessible examples of the Purāṇa genre. It encompasses the five allegedly traditional topics better than many Puranas do (*sarga*, *pratisarga*, *vaṃśa*, *manvantara*, and *vaṃśānucarita*, i.e. creation, secondary creation, genealogy, Manu periods, and dynastic history), and its theology has often been seen to represent a developmental stage somewhere in between the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. It is a socially conservative text and is highly discriminatory in terms of gender and class (*varṇa*,

translated by Taylor as 'community' or 'order', p. 36). In its six books (*aṃśas*) it outlines a Brahmanical scheme of cosmogony, cosmology, anthropology (including Dharmaśāstra, 3.8–16), history, theology and eschatology, all organized around the mythological principle of Viṣṇu.

The text is in the form of a dialogue, set during the reign of King Parīkṣit (4.20.13), between the brahmin sage Parāśara and his disciple Maitreya. Maitreya asks questions, and Parāśara, wise from heeding his grandfather Vasiṣṭha, answers them at length, informed by discourse originating from Brahmā himself (1.2.8–9; 6.8.42–49). Parāśara is known in the *Mahābhārata* as the sage who persuaded Satyavatī, the Yamunā ferrywoman, to have sex with him during the crossing, and who thereby sired Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, who later sired Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura and Pāṇḍu. But the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* hardly tells the story of the Pāṇḍavas (4.20.11–13). Its account of Kṛṣṇa (5.1–38) concentrates not on his friendship with Arjuna but on his miraculous childhood, his slaying of numerous demons (Keśin, Kaṃsa, Naraka, etc.), his activities within his own family, and his divine context as Viṣṇu. Other *avatāras* are mentioned but not elaborated: the story of Rāma is told only briefly (4.4.49–58). There are various hymns extolling the glories of Viṣṇu, and passages promising rewards to those who engage with the text.

Taylor's translation is accompanied by occasional explanatory footnotes, and is framed by a glossary of untranslated words, an introduction (pp. 1–41, including bibliography), a list of 'Errors in the Baroda Critical Edition', and an extensive index (pp. 491–562). The introduction smoothly condenses a vast amount of context with the aim of preparing and enabling the reader to move on as quickly as possible to the enjoyment of the text itself. It places the text in the historical context of religious competition between the Brahmanical tradition and the soteriological traditions of Buddhism and Jainism. The index is keyed to the text by chapter and verse, and will thus simultaneously serve as an index to the Sanskrit text, but locating indexed verses can be difficult because within the translation the chapter numbers are only presented at the start and end of each chapter; for this indexing method to work smoothly, they really need to be in the running heads as well.

Most of the Sanskrit text is in *śloka* verse. Taylor translates each numbered verse as a separate short paragraph, in the manner of the Princeton translation of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*. This is faithful to the format of the Sanskrit, but it has an unfortunate staccato effect, and it obscures contours of the narrative that would ordinarily be revealed at a glance, in English prose, by the paragraph structure. The style is different in book 4, 'The Royal Dynasties', which is largely in Sanskrit prose, and where Taylor aggregates the numbered prose units into longer paragraphs, thus improving readability. The translation is well signposted by the titles and subtitles that Taylor has supplied for chapters and for subsections within them. The extra-metrical speech credits are represented by the name of the speaker followed by a colon, in the style of a theatrical script.

Taylor's *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* is a considerable achievement, but an understated one. Resisting any temptation to advertise his erudition to his colleagues, Taylor has tailored the whole package to its non-specialist target audience. But despite not being the primary target audience, many researchers, whether or not they specialize in Purāṇic literature, will have cause to be grateful to him for producing this important item of academic infrastructure, even if some learned users will inevitably want to quibble with his interpretation of specific words or verses.