The Religious Authority of the Mahābhārata

Vyāsa and Brahmā in the Hindu Scriptural Tradition

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In Hindu religious traditions, the most important author of sacred texts is Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa. He is traditionally credited with the arrangement of the Veda into four texts, as well as the composition of the epic Mahābhārata (MBh), many Purāṇas, and other works. Western-trained or influenced scholars, however, regard the texts attributed to Vyāsa as products of many contributors over the centuries. Vyāsa's authorship has accordingly been described as "symbolic,"1 and Vyāsa himself as "mythical."2 Yet in saying that Vyāsa is the editor or author of these many and various texts, Hindus have said something profoundly meaningful, namely, that their status and authority as religious texts are to some extent dependent on the status and authority of Vyāsa. For the Hindu tradition, religious authority is often personal, embodied in the figure of the guru, and Vyāsa stands at the head of the chain of teachers (guru-parampara) as the originator and authenticator of these teachings.

Vyāsa's career is most fully described in the epic MBh. Unlike the Purāṇas and other texts in which he appears as a static expositor or interlocutor, Vyāsa in the MBh is an important and active participant in the story attributed to him. In fact, he is the author of the MBh in a dual sense; not only is he the reputed composer of the text, but is also the creator of the Bhārata family on whom the

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1Van Buitenen (1: xxiii). In Dimock (52), van Buitenen refers to Vyāsa's authorship of multiple texts as follows: "The name is of course merely symbolic."

2Sukthankar, 1: ciii. All citations will be to this critical edition.
story is centered. The epic presents itself as the “fifth Veda,”3 a new Veda for a new era with Vyāsa as its ṛṣi, the seer who revealed the composition to humanity. Thus, for the epic, the roles of Brahmā who created,4 and the ṛṣis who promulgated, the four Vedas, are performed by Vyāsa for the “fifth Veda,” the MBh. This essay will show how the MBh’s depiction of Vyāsa serves to validate its claim to be the fifth Veda, and how Vyāsa augments the epic’s status and authority as a religious text.

Interestingly, Vyāsa has been identified with Nārāyaṇa by the later Hindu tradition. The Purāṇas have consistently identified Vyāsa as an incarnation of Nārāyaṇa Viṣṇu.5 The MBh also has explicit identifications of Vyāsa as an incarnation of Nārāyaṇa, but only two such citations are to be found. The first citation (12.334.9), with the reciter Vaiśampāyana posing the rhetorical question, states: “Know that Krṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa is Nārāyaṇa the Lord, for who other than the Lord could be the author of the Mahābhārata, O tiger among men, and who other than the Lord could enunciate truly the manifold dharmas?” In this single verse, Vyāsa’s pupil declares that his master is Nārāyaṇa Viṣṇu incarnate; the composition of the epic is evidence enough for him. A few chapters later (12.337), Vyāsa himself expounds upon his relationship to Nārāyaṇa. Vyāsa describes himself as born from Nārāyaṇa’s speech at the time of the creation. The passage goes on to foretell that Vyāsa would divide the Veda and that his offspring, the Bhāratas, would annihilate themselves in battle. Most significantly, however, this chapter asserts that Vyāsa is an incarnation of Nārāyaṇa Viṣṇu.6

Given the frequent identifications of Krṣṇa as an incarnation of Nārāyaṇa, it is surprising that Vyāsa is rarely so identified. These two references to Vyāsa as an incarnation of Nārāyaṇa are both found in the Nārāyanīya section of the Śānti Parvan, generally

4As in, e.g., 12.335.18-25. For a different view of the authorship of the Veda, see Clooney.
5See, e.g., Kūrma P. 1.51.48-50; Bhāgavata P. 1.3.21 and 2.7.36 and 6.8.19; Devībhāgavata P. 1.3.18-21; Viṣṇu P. 3.3-4, which repeats the lines of MBh 12.334.9. All Purāṇas cited are the editions of Veṅkaṭeśvara Press, Bombay.
6See Sullivan (1990a) for a more detailed treatment of Vyāsa; see pp. 120-23 for a complete translation of 12.337, and pp. 70-71 for discussion. See also Sullivan (1990b) for discussion of his role in fathering the Bhārata princes, and Sullivan (1992) on Vyāsa in various texts.
regarded as among the last sections incorporated into the MBh.\textsuperscript{7} Scholars who have commented on Vyāsa have consistently interpreted him as an incarnation of Nārāyaṇa Viṣṇu.\textsuperscript{8} However, in doing so, much has been made of a very few citations in the MBh. In fact, a thorough survey of Vyāsa’s actions in the MBh reveals that there are many correspondences between Vyāsa and another deity, Brahmā, correspondences which are structurally integral to the epic narrative, and which probably also were represented in the epic earlier than the depiction of Vyāsa as Nārāyaṇa’s incarnation.

A detailed comparison of Brahmā and Vyāsa is based on three important shared characteristics: (1) each is a brāhman who symbolically represents brāhmanical orthodoxy; (2) each creates and disseminates Veda; and (3) each is called pitāmaha, “grandfather,” because each is the progenitor of a family that splits into two factions which fight for sovereignty; Vyāsa is the pitāmaha of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas who fight a war often compared to the eternal war between Brahmā’s offspring, the gods and demons.

Brahmā appears in the MBh as the deity who created the world, as in the following typical verse (12.121.55): “Brahmā Prajāpati the Grandfather was of old the creator of all the worlds with their gods and asuras and rākṣasas and humans and snakes; indeed, he is the maker of creatures.” As the verse indicates, Brahmā and Prajāpati are simply two names for the same deity in the MBh.\textsuperscript{9} Brahmā both creates the cosmos and preserves cosmic order in the epic. A creator who is by no means otiose, Brahmā intervenes frequently in the activities of gods, demons, and humans. For example, when the gods go to him asking for help in crises such as their recurrent battles with the demons, Brahmā typically responds with a plan for them. When an ascetic (whether human, god, or demon) pleases Brahmā, the god grants the ascetic any boon he chooses on the condition that he discontinue his asceticism; the consequences

\textsuperscript{7}Esnoul (3) dates the Nārāyanīya section in the third century CE, describing it as among the most recent sections of the MBh, certainly composed after the Bhagavad-Gītā, and as contemporaneous with the Harivamsa.

\textsuperscript{8}Hopkins (216). Biardeau (1968:35) views Vyāsa as a “doublet” of Kṛṣṇa, another incarnation of Nārāyaṇa; see also her comments in Peterfalvi and Biardeau, 1:90, 1:173, and 2:379. See also Bailey (1983:183-84), and Hiltebeitel (1976:60-76); but see also his more recent comments in (1984:5-6), and (1985:71-72), in which he comments on the “consistent theological affinities” of Vyāsa with Brahmā. On Vyāsa in a Tamil context, see Hiltebeitel (1988).

\textsuperscript{9}See, e.g., 1.1.30 and 1.32, and cf. 3.81.177-78 and 3.129.22. See the important article by Gonda (1982), and his book (1986). Cf. Hopkins (189-202). Brahmā inherits not only the mythology of Prajāpati, but also that of the gods’ priest Brhaspati; see Bailey (1983:63-82).
of the boon usually necessitate further interventions by Brahmā. This sketch of Brahmā’s role in epic mythology is elaborated upon in the following analysis of specific correspondences between Brahmā and Vyāsa.

SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS OF BRAHMAN

The first point of comparison between Brahmā and Vyāsa is their similar relationship to brahman and the brāhmaṇ class. Both figures are symbolic representations of brahman and brāhmaṇical values of the most orthodox and orthoprax type. Not only do both figures represent the brāhmaṇ in general, but in the context of Vedic ritual, both Vyāsa and Brahmā perform a specific priestly role, that of the brahman priest. An analysis of Brahmā’s origin and meaning will enable a comparison with Vyāsa as the MBh depicts him.

The origin of the conception of the god Brahmā has been the subject of long scholarly debate. Brief references in some late Vedic texts, however, provide evidence that Brahmā was known at that time (perhaps 900 BCE) as a distinct deity comparable to the other devas. Scholars have usually assumed that the conception of Brahmā (brahman personalized as a god) was derived from the impersonal neuter brahman, yet in the absence of definite evidence, it remains an assumption. The impersonal neuter brahman and the god Brahmā are two different representations of the same concept: Brahmā is brahman with form and personality. Brahmā epitomizes brahman as a deity, while the brāhmaṇ epitomizes brahman among humanity. Both Brahmā and the brāhmaṇ possess brahman and are embodiments of brahman.

10 Uncertainty regarding the earliest citation of Brahmā is due in part to the fact that several similar and related words are difficult to differentiate. Brahmā is the conventional transliteration of the masculine noun brahman when it is used to refer to the god. However, the same word brahman may also be used to refer to a particular type of priest in Vedic rituals. Another word, the grammatically neuter noun brahman, has a range of meanings including (1) power of ritual speech and action; (2) Vedic erudition; (3) source of existence; and (4) the brāhmaṇ social class as a whole. Moreover, the difficulty of differentiating these words is increased by the fact that in certain declensional cases the forms for neuter and masculine brahman coincide. Thus, there can be uncertainty whether a particular occurrence of the word brahman is intended as the god Brahmā.

11 See AV 11.10.2 and 30; 19.22.21 and 19.23.30; see references to pitāmaha in 15.6.9 and 15.7.2. See also SB 10.1.3.8; Śāṅkhāyana Arānyaka (or Kausitaki Ā.) 15; and various Upaniṣuds, including BAU 4.4.4., and ChU 3.10; 3.11.4; and 8.15.

12 See Roth (85); Hopkins (189); and Thieme (126nl).
Brahmā is the brāhman among the gods; more specifically, he is a ritually active brāhman who adheres to pravṛtti values. As Biardeau observes, Brahmana "... is always the god of pravṛtti, of activity directed toward outward endeavors (particularly sacrificial acts), as opposed to the yogin and to those forms of divinity which are devoted to nivṛtti, to the cessation of all activity due to Śāṃkhyayoga."¹³ Two Śānti Parvan sermons attributed to Vyāsa emphasize the connection between Brahmana and outwardly-directed, world-affirming activity (pravṛtti). In 12.327, Vyāsa says that the gods, led by Brahmana, performed sacrifices to Nārāyaṇa, who was pleased by this and spoke to them. Nārāyaṇa decreed that these gods, and the men who performed similar sacrifices according to Vedic injunctions, would receive the rewards appropriate to this religion of pravṛtti, i.e., heaven followed by rebirth. On the other hand, Śāṃkhyayogins who followed the religion of nivṛtti would attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth (mokṣa). This passage (12.327.61-76) contrasts the religion of pravṛtti, characterized by ritual and presided over by Brahmana, with the religion of nivṛtti, which leads to mokṣa and is presided over by Nārāyaṇa.

The second sermon attributed to Vyāsa (12.336) makes a very similar point by emphasizing devotion (bhakti). Those persons who are devoted to Nārāyaṇa have the quality of sattva (purity) and will attain mokṣa through Nārāyaṇa's grace (12.336.61-70). But those whose natures are composed of rajas (passion) and/or tamas (darkness) and follow the path of pravṛtti, Nārāyaṇa does not look upon kindly (12.336.71). "Brahmā the Grandfather of the World watches over that human who is completely overwhelmed by rajas and tamas" (12.336.72). Again in this passage, Brahmana presides over the path of pravṛtti with its sacrificial activity leading to the temporary reward of heaven and the inevitable rebirth, with which is contrasted devotion to Nārāyaṇa which is said to lead to mokṣa and the permanent end of rebirth.

As these passages reveal, Brahmana is representative of the pravṛtti mode of religion as opposed to nivṛtti, and dharma as opposed to mokṣa. So strongly is Brahmana identified with the round of rebirth (samsāra) rather than release from rebirth (mokṣa) that the duration of the world's existence is conceived as coinciding with the life of Brahmana. The end of a day in the life of Brahmana is

the end of the world, its reabsorption preparatory to its recreation in the next day of Brahmā (as in 3.186.16-24).

Vyāsa is also identified strongly with pravṛtti and dharma rather than nivṛttī and mokṣa. Vyāsa did not seek to attain mokṣa; in fact, the attainment of mokṣa by his son Śuka troubled Vyāsa. Overcome with grief at the loss of his son, and with shame for his own loss of equanimity, Vyāsa was consoled by Śiva, but he neither received mokṣa as a boon from Śiva, nor did he attempt to attain mokṣa through his own efforts (12.320). As Nārāyaṇa said of Vyāsa at his creation, although he would be yoked to tapas, and though his son would be free from passion, Vyāsa himself would not be (12.337.43-46). Vyāsa’s reason for being was the dissemination of the Vedas in each creation, which necessitated his repeated rebirth. Since Vyāsa was not a sannyāsin striving for mokṣa, he could be summoned to father heirs for the Bhārata dynasty, serve as priest for the Pāṇḍavas’ royal rituals, and be the guru for the entire Bhārata family.14 Vyāsa’s activities in the epic reveal a consistent concern for dharma, and epitomize pravṛtti values.

While both Vyāsa and Brahmā represent ideals of brāhmanical orthodoxy, an even more specific correspondence can be adduced in the context of sacrificial ritual: both perform the role of brahman priest. Vyāsa is the brahman at Yudhīṣṭhira’s Royal Consecration (rājāṣṭhāna), presiding over that ritual which ended so disastrously for the Pāṇḍavas. Brahmā is also depicted as a brahman priest;15 since in Sanskrit the same word refers to both Brahmā and the brahman priest, he is the natural choice for that role. Moreover, the ritual role of the brahman priest is functionally congruent with the role of Brahmā in Hindu mythology. The brahman priest sits off to the side, observing the ritual, but in the event that something goes wrong, this master of the four Vedas would intervene decisively to set it right. In Hindu mythology, the Veda master Brahmā is equally aloof, yet observant, and intervenes when needed or asked to do so. Brahmā and Vyāsa are both depicted as aloof, detached brāhmans who occasionally and dramatically intervene in the action. Thus, it is quite appropriate that each is at times cast in the role of the brahman priest.

Vyāsa and Brahmā are symbolic representations of the same brāhmanical ideals. Both are depicted as brāhmans who adhere to

14For detailed treatment of these aspects of his career, see Sullivan (1990a:27-80).
15E.g., when Soma is installed as king, Brahmā is the brahman priest in Vāyu P. 2.28.1-47.
pravṛtti values. Both figures represent the dharma-oriented brāhmaṇa, Brahmā among the gods and Vyāsa among humanity.

CREATORS OF VEDA

As brāhmans, Vyāsa and Brahmā embody and epitomize brahmaṇa, but the similarity between the two figures is particularly clear with regard to brahmaṇ in the form of speech, i.e., the Vedas. Just as Brahmā created the world, according to the MBh, he also created the Vedas; indeed, for each new creation, Brahmā recreates the Vedas. Brahmā is said to have created the Vedas and their ancillary texts, the sacrifices, etc. (12.327.30-32). In another passage (12.181.1-5), Brahmā Prajāpati creates the Veda and then the world. For the epic, Brahmā is the source of the Vedas.

Brahmā is often described as having four faces, one turned in each direction, symbolic of his omniscience. Brahmā’s four faces are associated with the four Vedas; he is described as “the One of the four Vedas, the four forms, the four faces.” The four-faced Brahmā created the four Vedas as well as the world (12.335.18-25). Brahmā’s creation of the four Vedas at the beginning of each world-cycle is often described in the Purāṇas, where each mouth produces one Veda, Rg Veda from the eastern mouth, etc. The myth of Brahmā’s creation of the four Vedas is a continuation of the mythology of Puruṣa Prajāpati. In late Vedic texts, this deity is often credited with creation of the Vedas and the world. The first chapter of the dharmaśāstra of Manu includes verses similar to these late Vedic citations, but by Manu the creation of the triple Veda is attributed to Puruṣa Brahmā, indicating the identification with Brahmā of the mythology about the Vedas. The only statement within these three Vedas on the divine creation of the whole Veda is in the Puruṣa-sūkta, wherein the Vedas were created by the sacrifice of Puruṣa. “From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the verses and chants were born, from it the meters were

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16 Or “four mouths” (3.194.12). Brahmā is again caturmukha at 3.275.17; cf. caturvaktra, “who has four mouths” (12.330.56), which emphasizes his role in Veda creation.
17 Kārma 1.7.55 ff.; Viṣṇu 1.5.52 ff.; Bhāgavata 3.12.34-37; Matsya 1.28 ff.; Mārkaṇḍeya 48.31 ff.; 102.1-7.
18 SB 11.5.8; 6.1.1.8-10, where he is called Puruṣa Prajāpati; Aitareya Brāhmaṇa 5.32-34; ChU 4.17. That only three Vedas were created indicates that the AV had not been accepted as part of the Vedic collection by those composing these texts.
19 Manu 1.11; 1.21-23; cf. 2.76-77.
born, and from it the formulas were born." Puruṣa, described in this hymn’s first verse as having 1,000 heads and 1,000 eyes, is a precursor of the later figure Brahmā, whose four heads symbolize the same idea of omniscience. Prajāpati and Puruṣa of the late Vedic period subsequently came to be identified with Brahmā, and much of their mythology also came to be associated with Brahmā, particularly the theme of Veda-creation.

Brahmā is also the guardian of the Veda, ever interested in disseminating it among humanity. At the end of the world-cycle when the Vedas disappear, the seers regain the Vedas through the assistance of Brahmā (12.203.17). In another passage (12.335.18-67), Brahmā was interrupted in the act of creation, and the Vedas were stolen from him by two demons. Brahmā appealed to Nārāyaṇa for aid, asking how his otherwise excellent creation could possibly function without the Vedas. He devotedly praised Nārāyaṇa, who recovered the Vedas for Brahmā, thus allowing creation to proceed. Since the world could not function without the Veda, Brahmā must keep the Veda intact and in the possession of the brāhmans to preserve the world. Thus, in the MBh, the four-faced Brahmā is often depicted as having created the Veda and as being its guardian and disseminator among humanity.

In the epic, Vyāsa performs among humans the role that Brahmā performs in mythology. Kṛṣṇa Dvaipayana’s name Vyāsa was given him for his deed of dividing the Veda. "Recognizing that in each successive age the dharma loses one foot, and that humanity’s life and power correspond to the age, and wanting to show his grace to the brahman and brāhmans, he divided the Vedas, and is therefore remembered as ‘Vyāsa.’ " As another epic passage says of Vyāsa, “The famous sage learned the Vedas with their ancillary texts, as well as the histories . . . He was the greatest of the scholars of the Veda, and divided the one Veda into four” (1.54.3-5). Vyāsa then transmitted these texts to the rest of humanity through his brāhman pupils (1.57.72-73 and 12.314-15). In view of the imminent onset of Kaliyuga, Vyāsa rearranged the Veda to make it easier for mortals to learn and retain the text. Thus, at the beginning of

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20RV 10.90; "verses" (ṛcaḥ), "chants" (sāmāni), and "formulas" (yājus) are references to the Rg, Sāma, and Yajur Vedas, respectively.
21Brahmā is also the source of the four caste groups in the MBh (12.73.3-8), just as is Puruṣa in RV 10.90.
22MBh 1.57.72-73; cf. 1.1.52 and 1.99.14.
the yuga, Vyāsa disseminated among humanity the four Vedas which he had arranged, an obvious parallel to the myth of Brahmā creating the four Vedas at the beginning of creation, one Veda from each of his mouths.

In a further parallel to the mythology of Brahmā, Vyāsa also creates Veda, namely, the “fifth Veda,” the MBh. The epic says that Vyāsa “taught the Vedas and the MBh as the fifth Veda.”23 In its opening chapter, the epic describes itself as “… the Collection of Vyāsa the wonder-worker, a dharmic collection that removes the danger of evil and is combined with the four Vedas” (1.1.19). The MBh is “the Veda of Kṛṣṇa,”24 i.e., Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa’s Veda; “in this work, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana has uttered a holy Upaniṣad” (1.1.191). The epic not only associates itself with the Vedas, it also presents itself as their equal in efficacy, saying that the MBh is “a supreme means of purification equal to the Vedas” (1.56.15). At times the MBh even insists upon its superiority: “A brāhmaṇa who knows the four Vedas with their ancillary texts and Upaniṣads, but who does not know this epic, has no learning at all” (1.2.235). A similar attitude lies behind the following tale (1.1.208-9), which is revealing despite its false etymology: “Once the divine rṣis gathered and on a balance they placed the four Vedas in one scale and the Bhārata in the other scale, and both in size and weight it was greater. Therefore, because of its size (mahat) and its weight (bhāra) it is called the Mahābhārata; he who knows this etymology is freed from all sins.” The MBh is Vyāsa’s Veda, and he is often said to be the rṣi who revealed it to humanity.25 As the epic’s creator, Vyāsa is the source of this “fifth Veda,” newly created for the new age, and he is depicted in it supervising the dissemination of this new Veda through his students. The idea that there was a fifth Veda is not unique to the MBh.26 Indeed, the other major text referring to itself as the fifth Veda, the Nāṭyaśāstra, depicts itself and its subject, drama, as Brahmā’s creation, written down by the sage Bharata. Thus, both Brahmā and Vyāsa are said to have created a

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23 1.57.74; cf. 12.327.18. See also 5.43.23, in which reference is made to four Vedas and ākhyāṇa (“story,” a genre inclusive of the MBh) as the fifth Veda.

24 1.1.205 and 1.56.17; cf. notes to 18.5.52.

25 As in 1.2.95-231; see Sullivan (1990a:29-31).

26 The ChU (7.1, 7.2, and 7.7) says that the itiṭhāsa-pūrṇa literature was the fifth Veda, but does not refer to Vyāsa as the composer of it. Similarly, the Arthaśāstra (1.3.1-2) says that there are five Vedas, of which the fifth is itiṭhāśaveda. The MBh is the primary example of itiṭhāsa.
fifth *Veda*, and each is a text intended for all people and said to be the essence of the four *Vedas*.

Vyāsa and Brahmā both epitomize the function of guru. Brahmā is often described as the Guru of the World (*lokaguru*) for having created the *Vedas* and the other texts. In the MBh, Vyāsa is the foremost guru, both for brāhmans and for Bhārata warriors (Sullivan 1990a:44-50). Both are depicted as omniscient, Brahmā with his four heads and Vyāsa with his “divine eye” both having extraordinary vision. These two figures are credited with the creation and dissemination of much of the sacred literature of the Hindu tradition. Brahmā’s role as Guru of the World is paralleled by Vyāsa’s role as foremost guru in the world of the MBh.

**GRANDFATHER**

The third major motif of Brahmā’s mythology with which the epic career of Vyāsa corresponds is the role of grandfather. In the MBh, Brahmā is the Grandfather of the World (*lokapitāmahā*), the Grandfather of both the gods and demons who are eternally contending with each other. Vyāsa is also a grandfather, his royal sons having produced the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas who contend for sovereignty throughout the epic. Brahmā and Vyāsa have structurally parallel relationships with their contentious grandsons. Thus, it is both appropriate and meaningful that the appellation *pitāmaha* is shared by these two grandfathers, the one divine, the other human.

The war between the gods and demons is a frequent topic of Hindu literature; indeed, from the Vedas on, it has been the central myth of Indian civilization (Gonda 1969:162). As such, it has appeared in many different forms through the millennia, the one constant in many renditions of the myth being the opposition of the two related groups to each other. The gods and demons have similar powers and origins; they are “consubstantial” (Coomaraswamy). Despite their brotherhood, they are constantly in conflict.

In the *Brahmana* literature, Brahmā’s Vedic antecedent Prajāpati is the progenitor of the gods and demons. Many of the tellings of the myth set the scene with a statement such as the following: “The gods and demons, both born of Prajāpati, once contended for

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27As in 3.186.6; 3.194.11; and 12.327.46. He is also described as the *guru* of the gods, as in 1.1.30.
sovereignty," with each version then developing differently from that typical starting point. The Upaniṣads similarly refer to the conflict between Prajāpati’s offspring, the gods and demons (BAU 1.3; ChU 1.2). In the Vedic literature generally, and in the Brāhmaṇas particularly, the gods win their battles with the demons by means of the sacrifice, and win possession of the sacrifice, because Prajāpati gives them knowledge.

In the MBh and Purāṇas, as has been indicated above, Prajāpati had evolved into Brahmā Prajāpati. These texts often depict the gods and demons combatting each other by means of asceticism (tapas), the gods winning because eventually Brahmā limits the ascetic power of the demons. Typically, Brahmā persuades the demons to desist from ascetic practices for a boon which, although it seems good, has a loophole allowing the gods to win. Thus, in the epic and Purānic myths of the war between the gods and demons, Brahmā’s role is a direct development from Prajāpati’s role in Vedic texts.

The war between the gods and demons is certainly the central myth of the MBh. Very often the struggle between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas for sovereignty over the Bhārata kingdom is compared to the war between the gods and demons (e.g., 3.92; 6.20.5). The Bhārata war is repeatedly referred to as a “sacrifice of battle” (e.g., 5.139), an extended metaphor relating the Bhārata war to the myth of the war between the gods and demons. The site of the Bhārata war, Kurukṣetra, is considered Brahmā’s sacrificial altar (vedi; 3.81.177-78 and 3.129.22). The Pāṇḍavas are said to be sons of gods, or gods incarnate, while the Kauravas are said to be demons incarnate. Divine or demonic identities have been specified for many of the epic characters, indicating that the epic poets were conscious of correspondences and continuities between their characters and certain divine or demonic beings, and emphasized this in their text.

Recent interpretations of the MBh have centered on the meaning of the incarnation theme. Stig Wikander has shown that the five Pāṇḍava brothers, who are said to be the sons of deities in the epic, also represent symbolically, through their hierarchical

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28 From a single text, SB, six such tales beginning with the verse cited may be compared: 1.2.4.1; 1.2.5.1; 1.5.3.2; 1.7.2.22; 2.4.3.2; and 5.1.1.1.
29 See 1.57.76 through 1.61; 11.8; and 15.39. The relevant part of 11.8 is translated in Sullivan (1990a:119-20). See discussion of these passages, 57-80.
arrangement, the ideal of the properly ordered society: Yudhīṣṭhira represents the brāhmaṇ class, Bhīma and Arjuna the kṣatriya, and the twins the vaiśya. Georges Dumézil has expanded upon Wikander’s original insight, describing the incarnations as “transpositions” of Vedic gods into epic characters.30 Alf Hiltebeitel, while agreeing with Dumézil’s view that the MBh’s structure is shaped by myth, has objected to his use of the term “transposition” to describe the process of epic composition because the word conveys an overly mechanical sense (1976:358-60). In his view, the epic poets perceived “connections” or “correspondences” between two dynamic, evolving traditions, the Hindu heritage of mythology and the epic they were composing. Accordingly, in composing the MBh they emphasized the continuities they had perceived. These seers also perceived correspondences between the epic and Vedic rituals, and made them part of the epic as well. The epic poets’ perceptions of correspondences between epic characters and Vedic gods have resulted in the identification of almost every major character with a figure from earlier mythology.

Strikingly absent from the list of Vedic deities whose “transpositions” appear in the epic, however, is Prajāpāti, certainly one of the major deities of the later Vedic period. No son or incarnation of Prajāpāti appears in any of the MBh’s lists of the āṃśas who descended to the earth. Nor has any scholar suggested any such correspondence between an epic character and Prajāpāti. The same may also be said regarding Prajāpāti’s later counterpart Brahmadeva. As will soon become clear, however, Vyāsa is the epic character having the greatest degree of correspondence with Brahmadeva Prajāpāti, and should therefore be regarded as that deity’s “transposition” in the MBh.

30The most problematic figures in the Wikander/Dumézil interpretation are Pāṇdu (= Varuna’s “transposition”), Dhṛtarāṣṭra (= Bhaga), and Yudhīṣṭhira (= Mitra). Little evidence on Pāṇdu exists, but there is a South Indian tradition identifying him as born from the troop of Maruts; see Notes *560 and *561 to MBh 1.61. The identification of Dhṛtarāṣṭra with Bhaga is based primarily on both being blind, but Gösta Johnson maintained that Varuna was the more meaningful divine identity. Dumézil (1:170-75) responded. Finally, it is not clear that Mitra is the Vedic antecedent of Dharma. Though these details are in dispute, there is no question that the MBh articulates correspondences between epic characters and gods. Not all scholars, however, find the MBh’s expressions of such correspondences meaningful; see comments by van Buitenen (1: xix-xxi), decrying the “inept mythification” and “pious transformations . . . (which) take away a man’s virtue while adding nothing to the God’s.”
The correspondence between the divine Brahmā and the rṣi Vyāsa is particularly clear with regard to the use of the appellation pitāmaha (grandfather) to refer to both of them, and with regard to the role each has as the grandfather of the family. The epic’s evidence on these two grandfathers will be presented, first Brahmā and then Vyāsa. A specific correspondence between Brahmā’s role in a myth and Vyāsa’s role in an epic event will then be cited.

Brahmā in Indian mythology is the divine progenitor of both gods and demons, and is depicted as the formulator of the plan by which the Earth is saved from demonic oppression. In the MBh, the Earth, overrun by demons, approached Brahmā, who instructed the gods to send portions of themselves to Earth (1.58-59, and 11.8). The Rāma story, summarized in the MBh (3.257-76), reveals a similar pattern. The demon Rāvana practiced asceticism and pleased Brahmā, who offered a boon for the cessation of his practices (3.259.15-40). He chose never to be defeated by any kind of being, but because he thought so little of humans, he omitted them from his request. Brahmā granted him this boon, and the demon became invincible. The gods sought refuge with Brahmā, asking to be saved from Rāvana (3.260). Grandfather Brahmā told the gods that Viṣṇu has descended to earth taking human form as Rāma to subdue the demon, and that they should all send down to earth portions of themselves to assist him. As a result of Brahmā’s plan, eventually the demon, whose grandfather (pitāmaha) was said to be Prajāpati (3.258.11), was defeated. The pattern is that Brahmā deflects the demons from their threatening course of action by granting a boon, but by means of his knowledge assists the gods to circumvent that boon.31 In fact, Brahmā’s boons have the effect of rendering the demons vulnerable. Though he is usually above the action, or off to the side,32 Brahmā’s propensity for giving boons keeps him busy preserving the world from the consequences of his actions.

Any reference to Brahmā in the MBh, even the briefest, is likely to employ the word pitāmaha, which emphasizes his role as world-creator and benevolent preserver. The epic introduces him to its audience with the following line: “From it (the Cosmic Egg) was born the Grandfather, the Sole Lord Prajāpati, known as Brahmā,

31 Cf. the myths of Dhundhu (3.193-95), and of Sunda and Upasunda (1.201-04).
32 As in the myth (1.15-17) of the churning for the elixir of immortality (amṛta), and those noted above.
Guru of the Gods,” etc. (1.1.30). One chapter (1.32), in twenty-five verses, refers to him as pitāmaha five times, Prajāpati twice, and Brahmā once. The name pitāmaha is identified so strongly with Brahmā that this chapter uses it exclusively several times before using any other name for him, but there is no doubt to whom pitāmaha refers. Use of pitāmaha to refer to Brahmā would remind the epic’s audience of his role as progenitor of both gods and demons, as well as humanity. In accord with his benevolent supervisory function, Brahmā formulates the plan to restore the dharma to its proper balance by means of the incarnation of the gods on earth to subdue the demons.

The MBh also uses the word pitāmaha in reference to Vyāsa, sometimes in ways suggestive of a correspondence with pitāmaha Brahmā. Vyāsa is, in fact, the grandfather of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, having fathered Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra to save the dynasty from the imminent disaster of having no heir to the throne (1.99-100). When he later advises the Pāṇḍavas, he is appropriately called “grandfather” (e.g., 1.54.2; 1.144.5; 1.157.16). Yudhiṣṭhira addresses Vyāsa as pitāmaha in their discussions (e.g., 12.33.2-3 and 12), and the Pāṇḍavas are Vyāsa’s “grandsons” (pau-trāṇ: 3.245.11). Particularly suggestive of the divine pitāmaha, progenitor of the gods and demons, are those references to Vyāsa as the grandfather of both the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas (e.g., 6.4.13). With the same meaning, he is described as “the grandfather of the Bhāratas,” or “grandfather of the Kurus.”

There is a second pitāmaha in the Bhārata family, though. Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas alike respectfully address Bhīṣma as “grandfather” (5.23.8; 13.152-54), and the fact that he is the Bhārata family patriarch is often cited (6.14.3; 12.38.6). This is not due to confusion or carelessness on the part of the epic poets. In fact, Vyāsa the brāhman and Bhīṣma the kṣatriya are in many ways mirror-images of each other, and were surely intended to be regarded as complementary figures. King Saṃtanu’s extramarital

33Similarly, 1.34-35. Cf. 1.6.5; 1.7.23; 2.11.5 and 31 and 46. A variant of this epithet is lokapitāmaha, Grandfather of the World, which occurs frequently; see 1.6.7; 2.11.13 and 37; 12.327.30; other related variants include sarvalokapitāmaha, Grandfather of All the Worlds (3.193.20; 12.327.46), and sarvabhūtapitāmaha, Grandfather of All Creatures (1.58.37; 12.200.13).

34E.g., 6.2.2. and 10.14.12; in 6.2.15 he is kurūnāṃ prapitāmahah (great-grandfather of the Kurus), which is true of the next generation, Abhimanyu et al. Bhārata and Kuru are used synonymously.
son Bhīṣma is paralleled by Vyāsa, the extramarital son of Śaṃtanu’s wife Satyavatī. Bhīṣma was the son of the Ganga River goddess in human form, while Vyāsa was “Dvaipayana,” not exactly the son of the Yamunā River but born on an island in the Yamunā of a woman who was herself Yamunā-born. These two river-born sons, one on either parent’s side of the family, remained unmarried but were vigilant guardians of their family’s fortunes. Bhīṣma won the hands of two women to be the wives of his younger half-brother, but when they were left widowed and childless, a family member was needed to produce an heir. Because Bhīṣma had vowed celibacy, Vyāsa was summoned to substitute for Bhīṣma. Upon the birth of the Bhārata princes, Vyāsa disappeared, returning only occasionally, while Bhīṣma remained at court, substituting for Vyāsa in the role of father. Bhīṣma, the omnipresent family man, is a celibate ascetic in a social setting, while Vyāsa, though a father, is anything but a family man, and is an ascetic of a more solitary inclination. Both Vyāsa and Bhīṣma are called the father of Dhṛtarāṣṭra,35 and both are called “Grandfather” by Yudhiṣṭhira (3.30.45-46). The fact that the Bhārata family has these parallel patriarchs cannot be accidental. The composers of the MBh delighted in genealogy, and intentionally structured the epic this way. The complementarity of this pair of pitāmahas is meaningful, and deserves further consideration. Bhīṣma’s “several similarities” to Brahmā have been briefly noted (Bailey 1983:123, n.40), but Vyāsa’s more significant correspondence to Brahmā has gone unnoticed. Greg Bailey has observed that Bhīṣma and Brahmā share the appellation pitāmaha, are impartial in the conflicts between the Pāṇḍavas/gods and the Kauravas/demons, and that both “are great teachers of dharma.” Indeed, one could go further, citing the impassioned plea of Vidura, third son of Vyāsa at the Bhārata court, to his “father” Bhīṣma. “After creating Dhṛtarāṣṭra and me, O brilliant sir, like a painter creates a painting, do not destroy us now, as Prajāpati, creating creatures, then destroys them.” (5.146.22) But Bhīṣma’s correspondence with Brahmā Prajāpati is not as strong as this simile and Bailey’s note seem to indicate. For the epic poets, Bhīṣma was an incarnation of Dyaus Pitr,36 not Brahmā; just as these two deities are somewhat similar, so also are Bhīṣma and Vyāsa. With regard to Vyāsa, he

35 Compare 6.3.44 and 6.16.7 with 6.17.7.
36 See 1.93 for the story of Dyaus Pitr’s birth as Bhīṣma.
too is a great exponent and teacher of dharma; he is the grandfather of the Bharatas, and hence is called pitāmaha. Like Bhīṣma, Vyāsa too has declared that the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas are equal to him (1.144.9). Vyāsa and Bhīṣma are similar in these respects, and, to some extent, both are similar to Brahmā; Vyāsa corresponds much more closely, however.

Vyāsa’s relations with the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas demonstrate particularly well his correspondence to pitāmaha Brahmā. The Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas had developed considerable personal animosity for each other through a lifetime of insults and injuries. Their rivalry was political as well as personal; both sets of cousins thought that the legitimate right to rule the kingdom was theirs. When both sides chose a military solution to their conflict, Bhīṣma took up arms and fought for the Kauravas because they had been his support for a dozen years. He bemoaned his dependence on Kaurava wealth (6.41.30-83), but this does not alter the fact that Bhīṣma fought against dharma. So much for Bhīṣma’s impartiality. Vyāsa, though, remained neutral and counselled peace repeatedly, even advocating reconciliation after hostilities erupted. In this regard as well, Vyāsa corresponds to Brahmā more closely than does Bhīṣma.

Vyāsa gave boons to both the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas in the epic, and in so doing parallels Brahmā’s granting of boons to gods and demons alike. Vyāsa is the pitāmaha Prajāpati of the Bharatas, procreating Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, creating, even delivering, the Kauravas, and performing the role of guru of all the Bharatas. Vyāsa’s boon to Queen Gāndhārī that she should have 100 sons resulted in the birth of the demonic Kauravas (1.107), a birth that required Vyāsa’s further assistance in midwifery. This belligerent horde was Vyāsa’s creation, inevitably reminding one of Prajāpati Brahmā’s creation of the demons. In light of Vyāsa’s correspondence to Brahmā, perhaps his supervision of the disastrous rājasūya rite could be construed as a boon to the Kauravas; certainly it had the effect of strengthening them for the next thirteen years. Once the Pāṇḍavas were exiled and threatened, Vyāsa aided them against their rivals: “Both yourselves and they are equal before me, certainly, but relations love those who are young and suffering. Consequently, my love for you is stronger now, and because of that love I want to help you. Listen: this nearby town is pleasant and healthy; stay here in disguise awaiting my return (1.144.9-11).” The pattern is clear: like Brahmā’s boons to the
demons, Vyāsa’s boon of 100 sons to the Kauravas necessitated his further intervention on the side of dharma, aiding the Pāṇḍavas until they could overcome the demonic Kauravas. His advice to them is analogous to the knowledge Prajāpati gives the gods that helps them defeat the demons. Vyāsa is kept busy aiding the Pāṇḍavas in ways such as the following: he guarded them from trouble when the Kauravas were strong and aggressive (1.144; 2.69.12 perhaps; 3.8.22-3.11); he arranged the Pāṇḍavas’ wedding, which allied them with Drupada and the Pāñcālas (1.157; 1.187-89); he gave the Pāṇḍavas a secret spell to aid them in acquiring weapons from the gods (3.37-38); his advice and teachings aided the Pāṇḍavas in attaining and retaining sovereignty. Vyāsa’s generosity makes appropriate the epic descriptions of him as a “foremost granter of boons” (1.57.75) and “lord of boons” (6.2.8), phrases which might also be used to describe Brahmā. The pattern of pitāmaha Vyāsa’s boon-giving is similar to that of pitāmaha Brahmā, particularly in that his boons to the Kauravas necessitate his helping the Pāṇḍavas overcome them.

What is done in myth by Brahmā, grandfather of gods and demons, is paralleled in the epic tale by Vyāsa, grandfather of the incarnate gods and demons on earth.

MYTHIC AND EPIC PARALLELS

The correspondence between the mythology of Brahmā and the epic story of Vyāsa is illuminated by examination of the Sauuptika Parvan.37 This section of the epic’s narrative is clearly based on this myth, a version of which is told at the end of the Sauuptika Parvan. Its placement there serves to explain to the Pāṇḍavas, and to the epic’s audience, the meaning of the events which have just occurred; the text provides the key to its own exegesis.

The narrative is as follows. After the battle in which the Pāṇḍavas conquered the Kauravas, the victorious warriors went to sleep, Kṛṣṇa taking the five Pāṇḍava brothers to another place outside the camp. As they slept, their camp was invaded by the Kaurava ally Aśvatthāman, who massacred the sleeping warriors and left. The next morning, the Pāṇḍavas found and confronted Aśvatthāman; Vyāsa, with the sage Nārada, intervened to prevent

37Alf Hiltebeitel (1976:299-335) has shown the extensive correlation between the events of this part of the MBh’s narrative and the myth of Dakṣa’s sacrifice (cf. 1972).
combat. Vyāsa negotiated a resolution of the conflict, but the price was high: all the Pāṇḍavas’ offspring died, while Aśvatthāman was banished. Yudhiṣṭhira asked how it was possible for Aśvatthāman to slaughter all those great warriors, and Kṛṣṇa responded that Aśvatthāman had been born from Śiva (1.61.66), was devoted to Śiva (7.172.81-87), and eventually was possessed by Śiva (10.7.65; 10.17.6). Kṛṣṇa then revealed some of Śiva’s great deeds, primarily his destruction of Dakṣa’s sacrifice (10.18).

There are many versions of the myth of Dakṣa’s sacrifice, from the Atharva Veda through the Purāṇas, including a half dozen versions in the MBh.38 In general, the myth’s pattern is as follows. Dakṣa and the gods gathered for a sacrifice, but Śiva was excluded and was angered. He attacked the sacrifice and disrupted it. Brahmā intervened, reconciling Śiva and the sacrificing gods by offering Śiva a share of the sacrifice.39

The intervention by Brahmā between the angry Śiva and the sacrificing gods in the myth is analogous to the intervention by Vyāsa and Nārada between Aśvatthāman (= Śiva) and the Pāṇḍavas (= gods). Brahmā is often accompanied by rśis; in the epic account, Nārada represents those seers who form pitāmaha’s retinue, while Vyāsa, at the moment of intervention, is identified only as “the pitāmaha of the Bhārata” (10.14.12). They stop the hostilities with a joint request, but thereafter Vyāsa is in control, and only he speaks. Just as Brahmā resolves the dispute between Śiva and the gods, Vyāsa resolves the conflict between Aśvatthāman and the Pāṇḍavas; like Śiva, Aśvatthāman gets his share (he kills Draupadi’s brother Dhrṣṭadyumna) and is sent away. Thus, Brahmā’s role in most versions of this myth is paralleled by Vyāsa’s role in the epic narrative of the Sauptika Parvan. The pattern in the myth is complemented by a very similar pattern in the epic story.

Myths derive some of their meaning and longevity from rituals associated with them. Passages in the Brahmana's describe ritual offerings made to Rudra Śiva that are suggestive of this very myth; e.g., SB 1.7.4 describes the brahman priest making the offering that placates Śiva. This brahman priest does in the ritual what Brahmā

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38 O’Flaherty (324-25) lists fifty.
39 The Sauptika version of this myth is brief and primarily answers the question how Aśvatthāman could have done this, so it is focused on the identification of Aśvatthāman with Śiva. Most versions of the myth, however, including the MBh versions, feature Brahmā prominently in the role of intercessor. The version of 12.330 corresponds closely to the epic’s narrative.
Sullivan: Vyāsa and Brahmā

does in the myth and what Vyāsa does in the epic story; each one confronts and pacifies the dangerous “Outsider” Śiva, gives him his share, and thereby keeps him away, where he belongs. This is an example of correspondence between the brahman priest, Brahmā, and Vyāsa, each in his own domain performing an act which corresponds to the acts of the other two.

Myths and rituals of the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas have shaped the epic in many ways: the rājasūya ritual providing the structure of the Sabhā Parvan, and the myth of Dakṣa’s sacrifice providing the structure of the Sauptika Parvan. Similarly, many of the epic characters reflect correspondences or continuities with figures of earlier mythology. Many of these epic characters have been recognized in the epic itself as sons of, or “portions” of, the deities to whom they correspond, leading Dumézil to call them “transpositions” of those earlier figures. Epic characters incarnate important features of, and reenact the mythology of, deities. Although the MBh never does explicitly state that Vyāsa is an incarnation of Brahmā or a portion of the god or his son, it says in many subtle ways that Vyāsa corresponds to Brahmā. Indeed, the epic poets seem to be evoking Brahmā through the figure of Vyāsa, encouraging us to see Vyāsa as the earthly counterpart of Brahmā.

CONCLUSIONS

While Brahmā’s plan to defeat the demons by means of divine incarnations seems not to include reference to the incarnation of Brahmā himself, clearly the role that Brahmā would perform on earth is performed by Vyāsa in the MBh. As a brāhman who takes the role of brahman priest, as creator and disseminator of the fifth Veda, as grandfather of a warring family, Vyāsa reenacts on earth much of the deity’s mythology. The nature and function of Brahmā in mythology are strikingly similar to those of Vyāsa in the MBh. Both are brāhmans who adhere to world-affirming values, and for whom the dharma is fundamental. Both are Vedā creators and disseminators; each composed a fifth Veda for the benefit of all people in the present era. Both are gurus credited with omniscience. Each of these pitāmahas creates a family which feuds and then requires the intervention of the grandfather to restore order. Throughout India’s literature, Brahmā Prajāpati witnesses and occasionally intervenes in the struggle between the gods and demons; in a clear parallel to this pattern, Vyāsa in the MBh wit-
nesses and occasionally intervenes in the struggle between the Pândavas and the Kauravas. Brahmá’s functions, traits, and even epithets have been incarnated in the figure of Vyåsa in the MBh. Indeed, it appears that grandfather Vyåsa’s career in the epic has been consciously modelled on that of the divine grandfather, Brahmá.

The two even appear together at the beginning of the epic in a scene in which the composition is put in writing.40 Brahmá appears before Vyåsa, gives his endorsement of the composition, and recommends Gañësa as scribe. The auspicious presence of Gañësa at the beginning of the epic is a further endorsement of this new revelation, created and disseminated by the seer Vyåsa as the fifth Veda, and intended to benefit all people. In creating and disseminating this new Veda, Vyåsa is functioning as would Brahmá, and here receives the god’s explicit approval for his literary creation.

If Vyåsa was identified with Brahmá to increase the religious authority of the author and thereby of his text, why does the MBh not more clearly articulate their identity? Apparently all the divine/human correspondences were once expressed more subtly than we now find them in the MBh. The text shows evidence of developing in the direction of greater specificity in this regard: Kṛṣṇa’s divinity emerged with ever greater clarity, and lists of incarnations were added comparatively late in the history of the text.41 Thus the subtle and suggestive expressions of the early epic became explicit, even to the extent of listing incarnations. More-

40Clearly a fairly late passage, excluded from the critical edition due to its absence from certain manuscripts, it is in Adi Parvan, Appendix I, No. 1, and is translated in Sullivan (1990a:118-19). It is noteworthy that putting the composition in written form would not much augment its status and authority. The Hindu text with the most authority and status was of course the Veda, which was not written until comparatively recent times. This passage, in fact, says that writing the MBh was desired to make teaching it easier.

41Goldman (41-49) observes of the Rāmâyana that “The deification of Rāma appears to belong to the very latest stratum of the conflated epic. The great bulk of the text in the central five books is almost wholly unaware of his identification with Viṣṇu . . .” (p. 43) and “. . . there is little evidence to oppose the theory that an explicit Vaiṣṇava reference is a sign of a relatively late stratum of text formation in the Rāmâyana.” (note, p. 44). A similar conclusion was drawn by Jacobi.

The same process of explicit deification occurred in the MBh as well. Van Buitenen (1: xx-xxi) argues that the lists of incarnations are a late feature. The development is particularly clear with regard to Kṛṣṇa; see Hildebeitel’s discussion (1979). Cf. van Buitenen (2:14, 21, and especially 24-26), where he comments on “the elevation of Kṛṣṇa to a level close to that of a deity” in Book 2. The progressive identification with Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa is evident in the depiction of Vyåsa also.
over, as the epic was being composed, a paradigm shift occurred within the Hindu religious tradition. During the period of the epic’s composition, worship of Brahmā declined while devotion to Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa increased. The two passages in which Vyāsa is said to be an incarnation of Nārāyaṇa were apparently incorporated in the last phase of epic redaction, when the relative importance of the two deities had changed. By then, even Brahmā himself came to be seen by Viṣṇa worshipers as a portion of Viṣṇu; he is depicted seated on a lotus emerging from the recumbent Viṣṇu’s navel, as if he were an appendage. It is ironic that Brahmā, so often described as “self-created” or “self-born” (svayambhu), became, with the rise of a new cosmology and worldview centered on devotion to Viṣṇu, a son and functionary of that god. This transformation of Brahmā from creator of the universe to a “portion” of Viṣṇu is paralleled in the case of Vyāsa: we find two references in the MBh identifying Vyāsa with Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa. In this regard too, then, Brahmā and Vyāsa have a theological affinity. Noteworthy as well is that for Viṣṇu worshipers, the identification of Brahmā and Vyāsa as “portions” of Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa would have augmented their status and religious authority to a degree that nothing else could have; this is why they were so identified.

While the MBh is subtle in its evocation of Brahmā through the figure of Vyāsa, the Vāyu Purāṇa is explicit in recognizing Vyāsa as an incarnation of Brahmā. This early Purāṇa, which is contemporaneous with the last phase of epic redaction, contains a two-verse passage identifying Vyāsa as “the perpetuator of the lineage of

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\text{Vāyu P. 2.15.74-75 contains a number of interesting elements. Perhaps “caturtho brahmaṇaścāmsah” is a reference to the quarter of Puruṣa which is said to be here below, while the other three-quarters remains immortal in heaven (RV 10.90). The unusual name given for Vyāsa’s mother, Gandhakālī, occurs once in the } MBh (1.90.51) \text{ and is a combination of two or her names, Gandhavati and Kāli.}
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Parāśara, the divider of the Veda into four parts, and a quarter-portion of Brahmā.” Although this passage has certain minor problems which suggest emendation, it is in accord with the epic depiction of Vyāsa and articulates the relationship between Brahmā and Vyāsa even more clearly than does the epic. Thus, while the recognition of Vyāsa as an incarnation of Brahmā is not explicit in the MBh, it is explicit in the Vāyu Purāṇa.

Vyāsa is the symbolic representation of all the anonymous poets who contributed to the composition of the epic MBh. The epic poets attributed authorship of the text to Vyāsa, and through Vyāsa evoked the image of the presiding deity of creation and knowledge, Brahmā. In so doing, they linked Vyāsa’s MBh with Brahmā’s Veda, for just as Vyāsa’s career recapitulates the mythology of Brahmā, Vyāsa’s text is regarded as recapitulating Brahmā’s Veda. In short, the depiction of Vyāsa validated the idea of the MBh being the fifth Veda, a new Veda for a new era and for all people, and augmented the status and religious authority of the MBh.

ABBREVIATIONS

AV Atharva Veda
BAU Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
BEFEO Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient
B.O.R.I. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute
ChU Chāndogya Upaniṣad
HR History of Religions
JAAR Journal of the American Academy of Religion
JAOS Journal of the American Oriental Society
JSAL Journal of South Asian Literature
MBh Mahābhārata
P. Purāṇa
RV Rg Veda
ŚB Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa
ZDMG Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft

45 All editions of the text consulted (Venkatesvara and Anandairama Press editions and that of Rajendralal Mitra) have the same reading. There is a variant reading of “yogā” as “yogād,” which is preferable. “Yo” should be emended to “yā.” Word order is the major problem with the passage as printed, however. Clearly the first and last lines constitute one verse, while the two middle lines are another verse. With or without emendation, the identification of Vyāsa as a quarter-portion of Brahmā is perfectly clear.
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