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The *aṃśāvatarāṇa* Intervention: from the Ādiparvan to Kṣemendra

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Abstract

The *Mahābhārata*'s Ādiparvan description of the descent of the gods (*aṃśāvatarāṇa*, MBh 1.57-61) is retold in the *Harivaṃśa* (HV 30-45), which expands significantly upon the epic's plan of and rationale for divine intervention. The first task of this paper is to underscore how and why the *Harivaṃśa* modifies and amplifies the *Mahābhārata aṃśāvatarāṇa*. Secondly, however, I treat a number of sources that refine the divine intervention account; some of these have been treated already by Paul Hacker, whose short 1960 study provides an important basis for this paper in general. In particular I seek to illustrate, with special reference to the *Bhāratamañjarī* and *Daśāvatāracarita* of Kṣemendra (ca. 11th century), the persisting impact of the *Harivaṃśa* on the popular reception and understanding of the epic story itself.

Abbreviations

BhG	<i>Bhagavad Gītā</i>
BhM-HV	<i>Bhāratamañjarī</i> of Kṣemendra, <i>Harivaṃśa</i> section
BhM-MBh	<i>Bhāratamañjarī</i> of Kṣemendra, <i>Mahābhārata</i> section
BrP	<i>Brahma Purāṇa</i>
CE	Critical Edition
DAC	<i>Daśāvatāracarita</i> of Kṣemendra
HV	<i>Harivaṃśa</i>
MBh	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
ViP	<i>Viṣṇu Purāṇa</i>

Introduction

In art school, I was taught: “Paint what you see, not what you know.” A certain self-consciousness and discipline is required to see only what is present in an object, and to resist importing what our expectations may demand. In the case of the *Mahābhārata* [MBh], many basic elements of Vaiṣṇava theism are present, others are not. The challenge is not to decide whether the epic is a “Vaiṣṇava” text — that would be to frame the issue absurdly as an either-or choice — but the degree to which the epic can be understood as fundamentally turning around the person of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa. My own arguments have been that when the MBh is held up against the classical articulations of the *daśāvatāra* theology of Viṣṇu that inform most popular understandings of Hindu mythology, what we see is a roughly three-quarters degree of development (Austin 2023a; 2023b; forthcoming). In other words, the MBh should not be reduced to the terms of popular Viṣṇu mythology, even if that mythology has its roots in the MBh, and is largely formed there (i.e. in our Bhandarkar critical text) already. If I have felt compelled to highlight those aspects of the MBh that belie an overhasty reduction of the epic to Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa theological terms, it is in part in order to direct my readers' attention to the the *Harivaṃśa* [HV] and to illustrate how consequential it has been in shaping the reading and perception of the MBh as a Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa text.

This paper takes up an important issue developed in Hacker's 1960 “Zur Entwicklung der Avatāralehre,” revisiting some of the material treated therein in a more thoroughgoing manner and introducing the poet Kṣemendra as a reference point against whom the patterns of theological development noted by Hacker can be measured. The issue here is the mythic-narrative representation of the reason for the MBh war and descent of the gods, including Viṣṇu's birth as Kṛṣṇa. This is established first in the *Mahābhārata*'s Ādiparvan *aṃśāvataṛaṇa* (MBh 1.57-61). It is then retold in the HV (30-45), which expands significantly upon the epic's plan of and rationale for divine intervention. The first task of this paper is to underscore how and why the HV modifies and amplifies the *Mahābhārata aṃśāvataṛaṇa*. I then review one or two other key sources, treated already in Hacker 1960. These refine the divine descent account, effectively advancing it towards a more uniform framing as a dharmic-corrective intervention of Viṣṇu. Into this set of evidence I then introduce Kṣemendra's *Bhāratamañjarī* and *Daśāvatāracarita*, which provide a different kind of witness to the refining process at work over time. I propose here that Kṣemendra's handling and retelling of the original MBh Ādiparvan and HV materials, together with his *Daśāvatāracarita*, may help to attest the impact of the HV on the popular reception and understanding of the epic story itself.

In this way, I hope to bring the HV more squarely into the forefront of epic studies, which I feel have not been served by the notion that it forms an organic whole with the MBh.

The HV's mythology and understanding of the meaning of the descent of Viṣṇu and the gods is different from the MBh's, and serves as a vector agent in turning Kṛṣṇa mythology away from the dark and disorienting world of the MBh towards a more morally uncomplicated Viṣṇu theism.

1. The *aṃśāvatarāṇa* in MBh 1.57-61

Most readers and participants in this seminar will be familiar with the epic's cast of mythic identities, established in the Ādiparvan as part of the preliminary and background materials to the Pāṇḍava story. I summarize this here and draw out a few points thereafter for emphasis:

1.57.1-31: the story of Vasu Uparicara

1.57.32-75: the birth of Vyāsa

1.57.76-105: A first pass is made at identifying key characters and their divine origins.

This includes the identification of Kṛṣṇ as Nārāyaṇa Viṣṇu (83-87), whose birth is characterized by a phrase highly reminiscent of the BhG: he is born among the Andhakas and Vṛṣṇis “for the sake of the promotion of Dharma” (*dharmasamvardhanārthāya*, MBh 1.57.87c; compare BhG 4.8c *dharmasamsthāpanārthāya*). Several of the major epic characters are identified with a divine figure.

1.58.1-2: Janamejaya feels this has been incomplete; he asks for *all* the details (*samyak*)

1.58.3-34: Vaiśampāyana begins anew: Rāma Jāmadagnya slaughters the Kṣatriyas twenty-one times, and the Brahmins father a new generation upon the Kṣatriya widows. A golden age of virtue ensues, and human life is enormously extended due this moral perfection (*tato 'vardhanta dharmeṇa sahasraśatajīvinaḥ*, 10); it is the Kṛta Yuga, and it is for this reason that the world fills up with creatures (*evam kṛtayuge samyag vartamāne tadā nṛpa | āpūryata mahī kṛtsnā prāṇibhir bahubhir bhṛśam*, 24). Additionally, the demons previously defeated by the gods take birth on earth, who thus becomes overburdened (*na śasākātmanātmānam iyaṃ dhārayituṃ dharā*, 29).

1.58.35-48: Earth goes to Brahmā for help. He knew of the problem already and orders the gods to descend in portions in order to relieve her burden (*asyā bhūmer nirasituṃ bhāraṃ*, 46). Gandharvas and Apsarases are likewise dispatched in portions (*svair aṃśaiḥ samprasūyadhvaṃ*, 47).

1.58.49-1.59.6: The gods go to Nārāyaṇa Vaikuṅṭha; for the purifying of the earth, Indra commands Viṣṇu to descend (*bhuvāḥ śodhanāyendra uvāca puruṣottamam | aṃśenāvatarasv[a]*, 51). Indra makes a pact (*samvidam*, 1.59.1) with Nārāyaṇa to descend

in *aṃśas*. They begin their descent “for the sake of the destruction of the enemies of the gods and the welfare of all the worlds” ([*a*]marārivināśāya sarvalokahitāya, 3) and take birth in various lineages.

1.59.7-60.69: Janamejaya asks for a full account of all the origins of all creatures. A purāṇic-style cosmogony ensues, detailing the origins of all gods and supernatural beings. All of this turns around Brahmā Prajāpati as the matrix-creator (about 115 verses).

1.61: Janamejaya now asks about how these many creatures became men.

Vaiśaṃpāyana's reply reads like a casting sheet, identifying each epic character with a god or divine being. This resumes the material of 1.57.76-105 above, but now more thoroughly. The list begins with demon incarnations, followed by the more central protagonist characters of the epic. Towards the end, we have the identification of Vāsudeva as the *aṃśa* of Nārāyaṇa (*yas tu nārāyaṇo nāma devadevaḥ sanātanaḥ | tasyāṃśo mānuṣeṣv āsīd vāsudevaḥ pratāpavān*, 90). The “casting sheet” (1.61.4-98) is concluded with a *phalaśruti*, and the story of Śakuntalā then follows (1.62-69).

These descent myth materials are typically read as a Viṣṇu *avatāra* myth, or at least as one chiefly concerned with Viṣṇu, and transpiring at the end of the Dvāpara Yuga:

As the mythical and theological framing of the *Mahābhārata* makes clear, the political and military conflict between the sons of Pāṇḍu and those of Dhṛtarāṣṭra is merely the occasion for a cosmic event that Lord Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) orchestrates in the guise of Kṛṣṇa, the warrior-sage. The real purpose of the war is the massive extermination of the kings of the *dvāparayuga* (the third of four ages in the cosmic cycle of time), whose excesses and depredations have become too great for the Earth goddess herself to bear.

Goldman 2022: 41

Normally, it would be only with considerable trepidation that I part ways with Goldman on any matter concerning the Sanskrit epics. But I would challenge aspects of his reading of the myth here, emphasizing three things:

1. As has been noted and addressed by others (Hacker 1960; Brodbeck 2022; Austin 2023b), the earth's problem is not clearly moral: she is first of all overpopulated by the excessively long lives of virtuous people. It is the Kṛta Yuga (MBh 1.58.24), not the Dvāpara. To this weight, demons are added – they become kings in great numbers. The demons could be said to represent a chaotic or even “adharmic” disorder, and indeed

the “casting sheet” of 1.61 begins with demon incarnations, and passes only thereafter into the characters born of gods. This would appear to lay emphasis on the demonic presence as the chief problem. However, this reading is weakened by two factors. First, there is no getting around the fact that the age in which they appear is so morally perfect that the burden also includes the weight of the excessively long-lived population (MBh 1.58.10). Secondly, once the list of demons-as-kings gets underway, some of them are described as virtuous, *dharm*-knowing, etc. (*dharmārthatattvavit*, 1.61.52; *dharmātmā sarvabhūtahite rataḥ*, 53). The issue of what exactly is troubling the earth – mere physical overpopulation by the super-virtuous, or a more morally troublesome demonic presence that can be framed as a *dharm* problem – is not clear.

2. The demons burdening the earth have little or no connection to Viṣṇu in particular. I note that the first two mentioned are Vipracitti and Hiranyakaśipu, respectively taking birth as Jarāsaṃdha and Śiśupāla (MBh 1.61.4-5), both, we know, enemies of Kṛṣṇa, although this is not stated here. All of the many following identifications (MBh 1.61.6-61) are of fairly minor king characters of the epic. They are not enemies of Viṣṇu taking birth as enemies of Kṛṣṇa but a generic stock of demons who have been defeated by the gods (*āditair hi tadā daityā bahuśo nirjitā*, 1.58.26).
3. Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa is not the central figure around whom the descent revolves, and it is not clear to me that the MBh's *aṃśāvatarāṇa* can be framed as a Viṣṇu intervention myth. Hacker stresses this point, but perhaps carries it too far, and moreover binds with his observation the, in my view, indefensible stress on the name Nārāyaṇa as distinct from Viṣṇu (1960: 53-54). Like the epic itself broadly speaking, Viṣṇu (whom I do not think can be distinguished from Nārāyaṇa in the epic, distinct as those two names may be in earlier sources) has a role to play here, but not to the extent that the entire affair can be reduced to Vaiṣṇava terms. Brahmā is the first and chief authority figure receiving the complaint of the earth, and it is he who then directs the gods to descend. A great deal of the 1.57-61 material centers of Brahmā in his mode as Prajāpati, and represents a fairly generic purāṇic account of the origins of deities and supernatural beings (1.59-60). Again, the problem to be solved is by no means clearly one of *dharm*, nor are the incarnating demons linked to Viṣṇu. And yet Viṣṇu is not ignored entirely: two short passages appear to highlight his role. In the first and shorter attempt at enumerating the divine incarnations, Viṣṇu (=Vāsudeva) is praised briefly as the absolute (1.57.83-87). But I note that this passage has the fingerprints of the BhG on it (MBh 1.57.87c / BhG 4.8c), and so may well represent a post-Gītā glossing on the

aṁśāvatarāṇa section.¹ Secondly, the concluding passage of 1.58 and the beginning of 59 turn the attention to Nārāyaṇa, who is roped into the descent project by Indra with a pact formation. Two verses (1.58.49-51) describe him as Vaikuṅṭha, Puruṣottama, Hari, the holder of the discus and mace (*cakraḡadāpāṇiḡ*), having a dark splendour and yellow robes (*pītavāsāsitaḡrabhaḡ*), and lotus-naveled (*padmanābhaḡ*). I thus certainly do not mean to say that the MBh's *aṁśāvatarāṇa* has nothing to do with Viṣṇu. But neither do these ten verses (1.57.83-87 and 1.58.49-51/1.59.1-2) spotlighting Viṣṇu provide warrant for reducing the entire descent myth to Vaiṣṇava terms.

My concern here is not with the “original meaning” of the MBh descent myth or its possible roots in earlier, and very likely Indo-European mythology.² Nor do I think there have yet been presented any good reasons for wholesale “secularizing” readings of the epic in the manner of McGrath 2013, which tend to dismiss such mythic-identity structures as “late” or superficial additions.³ What I seek to understand and illustrate rather is the degree to which the descent account can be framed around *dharma* and Viṣṇu, and its reception and Vaiṣṇava appropriation over time. What I would like to stress at the moment is the paucity of evidence for supporting a reading of the MBh descent myth as a Viṣṇu, “*avatāra*” or *dharma* affair, and the presence of elements greatly troubling to a simplistic or reductive Vaiṣṇava reading of the descent and, by extension, of the epic as a whole. It is by no means clear that the earth's problem is one of a failing *dharma*, and Viṣṇu remains too far in the background. It will be the *Harivaṁśa* that advances the framing of the Mahābhārata war and appearance of Kṛṣṇa in more explicitly and fulsomely Vaiṣṇava terms.

¹ It is of course very difficult to reconcile the *aṁśāvatarāṇa* construction of Kṛṣṇa's identity with the Gītā: the passing Nārāyaṇa = Vāsudeva *aṁśa* identification at 1.61.90 configures the relationship between Nārāyaṇa and Kṛṣṇa as the same as that obtaining between any other divine-human identity like Br̥haspati = Droṇa, i.e. in terms of portion-embodiment. Meanwhile Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā asserts his own supreme and absolute divinity directly and without reference to Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa (see Malinar 2007: 95-100). It is hardly the purpose of BhG 11 to announce that Kṛṣṇa is a temporary portion-embodiment of Nārāyaṇa on earth in the same way that Arjuna is a portion-embodiment of Indra.

² On this point see, e.g., Pisani 1953: 127-128; De Jong 1985; Vielle 1996; Viethsen 2009: 226 note 17; Vassilkov 2022: 14. Couture 2001 provides an entirely different reading, indeed one that advances significantly on Hacker 1960.

³ For excellent replies to this tendency in reading, see Goldman 1995 and Vassilkov 2022. See Austin 2015 on McGrath 2013 in particular.

2. The *aṃśāvatarāṇa* in HV 30-45

The HV is the *khila* or supplement of the MBh, and so closely connected to it, but does not form an organic whole with it (*pace* Brodbeck 2021). Rather, it follows after the MBh as a separate narrative event, and indeed presents itself in this way at both the discourse levels of Ugraśravas to Śaunaka and Vaiśampāyana to Janamejaya. In the very first verses of the HV, Śaunaka states to his narrator that the great story has now been related by him (*sumahad ākhyānaṃ bhavatā parikīrtitam*, HV 1.1; *kathitaṃ bhavatā puṇyaṃ purāṇaṃ*, HV 1.4). It is now over, but he desires to hear about the birth of the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas. This is the outer frame prompt for a new recitation. Ugraśravas then obliges, saying that in fact this is exactly what Janamejaya had asked at the snake sacrifice: the same request was made at the inner level of recitation, where again it is stressed by Janamejaya that the story of the Bhāratas is complete (*śrutvetihāsaṃ kārtsnyena bharatānām*, HV 1.7; *mahābhāratam ākhyānaṃ ... kathitaṃ bhavatā ... vistareṇa mayā śrutam*, HV 1.8), but he as well wants to hear more about the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas. The HV's unique stylistic, tonal and theological features already make it obvious that it is distinct and separate from the MBh, but we see as well here that the authors frame it as a separate and later text, following after the MBh.

Consequently, it should not surprise us that the HV's re-rendering of the *aṃśāvatarāṇa* is distinct from the MBh's, and should be thought of as an innovation upon the received and earlier epic account. The MBh's *aṃśāvatarāṇa* is refashioned for the purposes of the HV, which are not the same as those of the MBh. How it does this – reconfigures this myth, shifts emphasis and introduces a new set of purposes for the divine intervention – are of great consequence for the history of Vaiṣṇava mythology, as noted already in Hacker 1960. As such I will not hesitate to frame the MBh's account as earlier and the HV's as later: the HV knows and adapts the MBh account, while the MBh *aṃśāvatarāṇa* shows little or no awareness of the HV's.

More narrowly defined, the HV's *aṃśāvatarāṇa* section unfolds across *adhyāyas* 40-45, although I will argue that it really begins at chapter 30. Prior to this, the text is occupied with purāṇic style cosmogony (1-7) the solar (8-10) and lunar (20-27) dynasties, a set of myths concerning the *pitṛs* or ancestral fathers (11-19), and the story of Kṛṣṇa and the Syamantaka gem (28-29). Following this, Janamejaya asks to be told how and why the supreme Viṣṇu – who has taken on various forms in the past such as the boar and man-lion for the sake of the gods and the earth – could become human. The extended question, functioning as a kind of Viṣṇu-*stuti*, includes yet more cosmogony and metaphysics (30). Vaiśampāyana responds with more theological Viṣṇu-*stuti* type material and a review of Viṣṇu's prior *prādurbhāvas* or appearances, some of whom Janamejaya invoked in his question. The narratives of the man-lion, dwarf, Rāma Jāmadagnya and Dāśarathi Rāma are quite extensive and illustrate Viṣṇu's

repeated interventions for the sake of the gods and the earth (31). Vaiśampāyana then turns to the story of the “Tārakāmaya” war or battle concerning Tārakā.⁴ When the gods were faring poorly against the demons, they thought of Nārāyaṇa. He agrees to assist them (32). Descriptions of the demons and gods preparing for battle then follow (32-33), the gods are described further and Viṣṇu mounts upon Garuḍa (34). Once the battle begins, the demon Maya deploys the Aurva *māyā* against the gods; this prompts a back-story about the Aurva fire (35). Cooling divinities save the gods from the fire; volleys are exchanged and the great demon leader Kālanemi appears (36). He expands, the armies clash and Kālanemi continues to grow so as to threaten the entire cosmos, becoming a kind of evil reverse Prajāpati taking all creation into himself. The gods are paralyzed (37). Kālanemi delivers a kind of Viṣṇu-contempt-*stotra*. He and Viṣṇu fight; the latter beheads the other with his *cakra*. The remaining demons are destroyed. The gods return to their proper places in victory (38). Janamejaya asks about Viṣṇu's sleep in heaven, and a theology of Viṣṇu and his relation to Brahmā follows. Viṣṇu is discribed in Brahmāloka, participating with the gods in a sacrifice to himself (39).

It is at this moment of universal stability and peace that the HV introduces and retells the MBh descent account, now linking it directly with the cosmic-scale Kālanemi battle just described, and representing the descent of Viṣṇu and the gods for the Mahābhārata war as another of Viṣṇu's many interventions.

40. Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa is described in his sleeping pose upon the cosmic serpent, with Brahmā arising from his navel. The goddess Nidrā (Sleep) is praised at length. Viṣṇu sleeps through until the end of the Dvāpara, awaking to find the gods saluting him and requesting he rise.

41. Although we have just been told it is the end of the Dvāpara, Brahmā now describes to Viṣṇu the situation on earth, just as in MBh 1.57-58: the earth is suffering overpopulation due to the exaggerated virtue, health and longevity of proliferating kings who are effectively bringing about a new Kṛta age (*bhūyaḥ kṛtayugaṃ kartum utsahante narādhipāḥ*, 12). Earth herself has come, together with an emaciated and underfed Kāla (Death) to ask for help. Brahmā stresses that they must devise a plan that does not endanger the flourishing dharma (*yathā dharmavadho na syāt tathā mantraḥ pravartatām*, 30). They will destroy the kings (*rājñāṃ caiva vadhaḥ kāryo*, 31).

42. At Mount Meru, the earth herself delivers an impassioned plea to Viṣṇu, asking him to save her as he has done so often in the past. She invokes here his slaying of the

⁴ Nothing is said here about who Tārakā is. Earlier, a "Tārakāmaya" war is described at HV 20 in the context of the lunar lineage. This appears to have little to do with the events of HV 32-38, however much the events may be tagged with the phrase "*saṃgrām[a] tārakāmay[a]*" (30.17; 32.10; 38.55; 38.80; 44.20; 44.61). The war is not about Tārakā but Kālanemi.

demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha, the boar and the defeat of the Daitya Bali (35). She recalls that Rāma Jāmadagnya slew the Kṣatriyas twenty-one times “with a desire for the 'descent' of my burden” (*bhārāvatarāṇepsayā*, 39; see Hacker 1960 and Austin 2023b: 922-923), and now she is overburdened yet again (*bhārasaṃtaptā*).

43. The gods ask Brahmā how to perform the portion-descent (*aṃśāvatarāṇaṃ kurmaḥ*, 9), and he tells them to emit portions and descend. They do this, but Viṣṇu will follow the gods only after the circumstances of the human family into which he will be born are more fully explained. Brahmā delivers the back-story explaining how he once cursed the Ocean and Gaṅgā river to be born on earth, establishing thereby the lineage into which the gods can be born in *aṃśas*. The gods will take birth within the two major factions of the war and destroy themselves, and the earth will be relieved. A few identities in the manner of MBh 1.61 are offered.

44. Viṣṇu's special role is now defined at length. Nārada comes to prompt him, saying that the gods will have no success in this endeavor without him. More importantly, those demons whom Viṣṇu slew in the Tārakāmaya war have now been born on earth (20). Nārada delivers a substantial back-story of the founding of Mathurā, concluding it by identifying its present evil king Kaṃsa as the rebirth of Kālanemi. All the other demons killed in the Tārakāmaya are now reborn and plaguing the Mathurā region. These are the demons whom Kṛṣṇa will kill throughout the course of his life: the cosmic Asura Hayagrīva is now Keśin on earth; Ariṣṭa now has the form of a bull, etc. (67-74).

45. Viṣṇu confirms he understands the situation already, repeating the demonic incarnations whom he will destroy yet again on earth. Brahmā then identifies the human parents appropriate for his *aṃśa* birth: Vasudeva, Devakī and Rohiṇī, themselves the rebirths of Kaśyapa, Aditi and Surabhi, and another back-story is provided to explain how and why they have already been cursed to take human birth (20-36). Brahmā prompts Viṣṇu to descend, take birth as a child, and then grow “just as in the three strides of the past” (*vardhayasva mahābāho purā traivikrame yathā*, 39). Viṣṇu leaves his body in a cave on the Northern shore of the ocean of milk and descends.

On the whole, this section has received little attention in epic scholarship. One exception is Viethsen 2009, who has noted already some of the points I will stress below, for example correctly recognizing that here, as in the MBh *aṃśāvatarāṇa*, the matter of what precisely the earth is suffering from – too much *dharma* or too many (presumably adharmic) demons – is not clear (Viethsen 2009: 229-230).⁵ Above I stressed three features of the MBh's *aṃśāvatarāṇa*

⁵ Ultimately, Viethsen arrives at conclusions that differ from my own. Speaking to the HV's double rationale for divine intervention, i.e. the matter of a dharmically-burdened earth (mainly HV 40-43) and demonic

episode: (a) it does not clearly present the burdening of the earth as a moral or *dharma* problem; (b) those demons proliferating as human kings are generic Asuras and not enemies of Viṣṇu in particular; (c) Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa's role in the descent is understated at best. The HV receives and refashions this divine intervention account in such a way as to frame the birth of Kṛṣṇa and the Mahābhārata war as one of many earth-saving interventions of Viṣṇu. With respect to point (c), it should be clear how much more radically Viṣṇu-centric HV 30-45 are in contrast to MBh 1.57-61. Arguably, this kind of redirection of attention to Viṣṇu is what the HV is for in the first place.

The recentering of the descent around Viṣṇu involves the identity of the demons (point (b)): while the moral cloudiness of too-much-virtue/incarnating demons is carried over into the HV from the MBh (e.g. HV 41.12), it now receives a decisive framing around Viṣṇu as a benevolent deity with a substantial career of repeated salvific interventions on behalf of the gods and earth. We noted above that MBh 1.61 began the full “casting sheet” list with demons, and only thereafter proceeded to the main protagonist characters; the first two such demons were Vipracitti = Jarāsaṃdha and Hiraṇyakaśipu = Śiśupāla (MBh 1.61.4-5). These are enemies of Kṛṣṇa, although again this was not stated outright in MBh 1.61, and none of the following demons, all incarnating as fairly minor (even obscure) kings (MBh 1.61.6-61), had any particular relation to Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa. But now in HV 44 and 45, the incarnating demons are all branded specifically as those whom Viṣṇu had slain in HV 35-38, the chief of course being Kālanemi = Kaṃsa (*ye tvayā nihatā daityāḥ saṃgrāme tārakāmaye | teṣāṃ śṛṇu gatim viṣṇo ye gatāḥ pṛthivītaḥ || 44.20; [ugrasenasya] putratvam āpanno yo 'sau viṣṇo tvayā hataḥ | kālanemir mahādaityāḥ saṃgrāme tārakāmaye || HV 44.61*). The only time in the MBh that the name Kālanemi is ever mentioned is in the Viṣṇu Sahasranāma Stotra (MBh 13.135), where one of the names is Kālaneminihan (MBh 13.135.82). The construct that Viṣṇu's intervention as Kṛṣṇa has as its purpose the destruction of Kaṃsa, who is the rebirth of Kālanemi, is entirely an innovation of the *Harivaṃśa*.⁶ This is crucial for understanding how Hindu mythological

incarnations (HV 44-45), Vietsen states: "In my opinion, this form of our passage can be explained on the basis of the supposition that its author has taken great pains to connect two different textual traditions: the Kṛṣṇacarita of the HV and the MBh. In the former, Kṛṣṇa is unquestionably the main character; in the latter, he also plays an important role. Viṣṇu must *first* accomplish the deeds of Kṛṣṇa's adolescence told in the *adhyaḥ* following HV 45, *and then* he must play his role as a mature hero in the MBh story, as a friend of the Pāṇḍavas. This complicated structure of the prelude in heaven to the Kṛṣṇacarita of the HV presumably reflects the fact that the text-historical development of the MBh tradition went in exactly the inverse way: At first Kṛṣṇa began to play a role in the main action of the Epic which role became more and more important. Then a comprehensive account of young Kṛṣṇa's deeds was inserted into its appendix, too. But in spite of its complicated form, the passage under examination here proves to be a unity which owes its essential form to one redactor" (Vietsen 2009: 233).

⁶ For a possible reading of the meaning of this demon's name and identity, see Couture 1982: 143-145.

tradition advanced from the image of a deceptive Kṛṣṇa advocating ignominious conduct amidst the dark and morally complex world of the MBh to that of a *dharma*-restoring *avatāra* whose demon-killing deeds reproduce the simpler interventionist corrections of the boar or Rāma Dāśarathi.

The HV's *aṁśāvatarāṇa* myth still combines excess virtue, Kṛta Yuga mythemes and demonic woes in a way that may trouble some readers expecting to find a monolithic and flawlessly uniform world-view in the MBh-HV. As Viethsen notes as well, the HV is no more clear than the MBh on this point: Brahmā describes the happy state of affairs down on earth (HV 41.2-16); Kāla (Death) accompanies the earth on her mission to request help since humans are not dying, and so he is weak and wasting away (*nirāmiṣaṁ ... niśceṣṭaṁ*, HV 41.23). Brahmā registers this when he expresses the need for a solution that will not harm *dharma*, which is the cause of the present flourishing of humankind (*evaṁ jagati vartante manuṣyā dharmakāraṇāt | yathā dharmavadho na syāt tathā mantraḥ pravartatām ||* 41.30). But with the HV and its elaborate Kālanemi narrative, we turn a corner in the reception and shaping of the Mahābhārata story that advances at least on this point, moving us closer to a conception of the whole affair as a dharmic restoration: the demon problem is a Viṣṇu problem, and the proposed solution thereto reproduces the salvific interventions of Viṣṇu's prior *prādurbhāvas* such as the boar or man-lion. We all know that the MBh in fact perpetually agonizes over the unknowability of *dharma*, and is stamped through and through by a morally tortured world-view, in which Kṛṣṇa infamously acts in questionable ways. But the HV poets are invested in a far more uncomplicated hero-deity, whose deeds and interventions are viewed as uniformly righteous, always repeating the same gestures of earth-saving and/or *dharma* restoration.

It is the earth herself at HV 42 who establishes, by anticipation, the functional identity of Viṣṇu's imminent burden-removing descent as Kṛṣṇa with Viṣṇu's prior *prādurbhāvas*. This point has already been examined in Hacker 1960: from this point forward in purāṇic mythology, the problems solved by Viṣṇu's appearances come increasingly to be characterized as “burdens”, whatever shape they take, or whether the goddess earth is directly involved or not. HV 41-42, receiving and adapting MBh 1.57-61, establishes this new language for expressing any and all demonic moral problems as “burdens” that need to be “descended”, even though in most cases (man-lion, dwarf, boar, etc.), there is no element of physical burdening or downward vertical movement in Viṣṇu's shape-taking (Hacker 1960; Austin 2023b: 923-924). But I would stress a feature of HV 42 here that Hacker appears to miss: it is Rāma Jāmadagnya in particular who provides the momentum for this “burdenification” of all Viṣṇu's problems. Among the *prādurbhāvas* reviewed by the earth in her pitch for a new intervention, it is only Rāma Jāmadagnya whose salvific deed involves the elimination of an unwanted mass of population. Indeed, this myth already formed part of the MBh *aṁśāvatarāṇa*

materials (MBh 1.58.4-8). But there, Jāmadagnya's slaughter has no direct relation to Viṣṇu, and the violence is not said to have been undertaken in order to relieve an overburdened earth. The issue in MBh 1.58 was rather how Brahmins generated an (all-too) prosperous stock of kings by fathering children upon the widowed Kṣatriyas.⁷ This event is repositioned in HV 42, invoked by the earth as an occasion on which she was saved by Jāmadagnya, i.e. Viṣṇu, from an actual physical burden of Kṣatriyas. This is what the earth also presently desires when pleading before the gods in HV 42, and so Rāma Jāmadagnya's repeated slaughter of the warriors, undertaken “with the desire for the 'descent' of her burden” (*bhārāvataraneṣayā*, 42.39) provides a key precedent for the current problem and, consequently, an important prompt for characterizing all of the god's salvific deeds as “burden-removals”.

Broadly what we are seeing here in HV 30-45 is a decisive turn away from the MBh's preoccupation with uncertainty, moral agony and elusive *dharma*. The life of Kṛṣṇa that follows from HV 46 onwards is sunny, celebratory and free of the quandaries and hand-wringing that so powerfully define the MBh. Chaos-causing demons appear (Pūtanā, Kāliya, etc.), and Kṛṣṇa destroys and subjugates them one by one. As we see in HV 44-45, they are none other than the demons defeated in the Tārakāmaya war who have taken birth and caused (along with virtuous people) the burden problem for the earth. Kṛṣṇa's life story in the HV eventually concludes not with his death, but a happy return home to Dvārakā after saving his grandson (Austin 2022; Austin 2023a: 428-431). As far as the poets of the HV are concerned, the descent of Viṣṇu and the gods is a fairly straightforward divine intervention serving to protect the righteous and preserve *dharma*. This is reflected in and established by its re-rendering of the descent account at HV 30-45 and throughout the entire life story of Kṛṣṇa. Such moral optimism is seldom found in the MBh, but that is neither here nor there: the HV is its own text, closely related to but completely distinct from the MBh. It is my purpose not to resolve the inner tensions in these sources, but to demonstrate how such inner tensions are ironed out over the course of the repeated refashioning of such key episodes as the *amśāvataṛaṇa*. If it is difficult to reconcile Kṛṣṇa's *dharmasamsthāpanārthāya* promise in the Gītā with the moral darkness of the MBh, this is far less the case in the HV, where the Gītā's doctrine, now advancing more fully towards a classical proto-*avatāra* theology of Kṛṣṇa's ontological subordination to Viṣṇu, shapes and renders more uniform and uncomplicated the understanding of the life of Kṛṣṇa.

⁷ See Fitzgerald 2002 for an extensive survey of Jāmadagnya Rāma's roles and mythic cycle in the MBh broadly speaking. For a more concentrated study of the myth of Jāmadagnya's decapitation of his mother Reṇukā, see Collins 2021.

3. The *aṁśāvataṛaṇa* in *Brahma Purāṇa* 180-181 and *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 5.1

The *Brahma Purāṇa* [BrP]⁸ and *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* [ViP] do not likely represent much later texts than the HV, but nonetheless advance us yet further towards a clearer configuration of the descent of Viṣṇu and the gods during the Mahābhārata war as a squarely moral affair concerned with demons and *dharma*. BrP 180-181 has been treated briefly in Hacker 1960: 64-65, which I have followed up on elsewhere (Austin 2023b: 911-912), and so I will try not to repeat myself too much here. But the BrP's own unique contribution to the evolving mythology must be recognized, along with important details about the cause of Viṣṇu's descent that are identical in the BrP and ViP.

With BrP 180-181, we have again a cosmic scene that anticipates the life-of-Kṛṣṇa narrative by identifying various earlier forms of Viṣṇu such as the boar, Rāma and others in the terms of BhG 4.7 (*yadā yadā ca dharmasya glāniḥ samupajāyate || abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānaṁ sṛjaty asau |* BrP 180.26cd-27ab). This prepares us to understand that the “*māthura*” *avatāra* (the term is now used) of Viṣṇu, which is about to be narrated, represents yet another intervention of a moral and *dharma*-restoring nature. The following *adhyāya* invokes the *Gītā* yet again, stating that the *avatāra* of Hari will appear “with a desire for the 'descent' of the burden” (*bhārāvataṛaṇecchayā*, 181.1), since “Whenever there occurs an increase of *adharmā*, O Brahmins, and *dharma* diminishes, then does the god Janārdana create an *avatāra*, having divided his body in two. In order to protect the virtuous and restore *dharma*, in order to suppress the wicked and other enemies of the gods, in order to protect creatures, he is born time and again” (*yadā yadā tv adharmasya vṛddhir bhavati bho dvijāḥ | dharmāś ca hrāsam abhyeti tadā devo janārdanaḥ || avatāraṁ karoty atra dvidhā kṛtvātmanas tanum | sādḥūnāṁ rakṣaṇārthāya dharmasamsthāpanāya ca || duṣṭānāṁ nigrahārthāya anyeṣāṁ ca suradviṣām | prajānāṁ rakṣaṇārthāya jāyate 'sau yuge yuge ||* BrP 181.2-4). In the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa had not explained exactly what he meant by “*tadātmānaṁ sṛjāmy aham ... sambhavāmi yuge yuge*”, but certainly there he made no mention of Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa or *aṁśās*, much less *avatāras* or earlier forms such as the boar and so on. These BrP passages show us the tradition thinking this through and tying the *Gītā*'s moral program, rooted initially in a Kṛṣṇa-centric “cosmological monotheism” (Malinar 2007: 237-241) explicitly to the MBh's *aṁśāvataṛaṇa* mythology, received through the moralizing (and “burdenifying”, if I may be permitted so awkward a term) mediation of the HV. And even more explicitly than in the HV, Viṣṇu's earlier *prādurbhāvas* are now framed by the

⁸ I refer to the critical edition (Schreiner and Söhnen 1987).

BrP against the interventionist promise of the *Gītā*, all in the context of a preparation for the story of Kṛṣṇa, whose purpose in descending to earth was demon-burden-removal.

We then have the scene of the earth, suffering from her burden (*bhūribhārāvapīḍitā*), coming to the gods. The most important elements of this passage are identical in BrP 181 and ViP 5.1 (BrP 181.5b-7 = ViP 5.1.12b-14; BrP 181.8-14 = ViP 5.1.22-28)⁹: her complaint is purely about demonic beings directly tagged as the enemies of Viṣṇu, the foremost being Kālanemi (*daityāḥ kālanemipurogamāḥ | martyalokaṃ samāgamya bādhanṭe ... prajāḥ || kālanemir hato yo 'sau viṣṇunā ... kaṃsaḥ saṃbhūtaḥ sumahāsuraḥ; avatīrya ca tatrāyaṃ kaṃsaṃ ghātayitā bhuvī | kālanemiṃ samudbhūtam*), and others now born as Ariṣṭa, Dhenuka and so on, whom Kṛṣṇa will kill in due course from childhood onwards. Gone are any matters of a Kṛta Yuga or a pious and excessively long-lived population to complicate the understanding of why this divine intervention is occurring.

From this point forward, we largely leave the MBh's more complex world behind, at least insofar as the representation of what ails the earth and prompts the descent is framed as a matter of demons, *dharma*, and the preservation of Kṛṣṇa's *Gītā* promise. The popular reading of the *Gītā* of course is that Kṛṣṇa is there already conceived of as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, and that at 4.7-8 he is speaking as Kṛṣṇa-as-Viṣṇu, referring to his multiple *avatāras*. This popular reading is standard in much Indological scholarship as well (e.g. Goldman 2021: 42; Brodbeck 2022). But the BhG does not support this reading.¹⁰ In this regard it is important to recall that down until today, the BhG is a prime authority for Gauḍīya and other Bhāgavata traditions that reject the more popular *avatāra* model and insist upon the absolute supremacy of Kṛṣṇa as “*svayaṃ bhagavān*,” subordinate to no one, precisely because the *Gītā* indeed constructs Kṛṣṇa in this way, without reference to notions of “descent” or derivation from a higher being as a temporary manifestation. But it becomes clear through passages like BrP 180-181 and ViP 5.1 why and how the *Gītā*'s Kṛṣṇa monotheism is redirected into the theology of Viṣṇu's multiple

⁹ The BrP and ViP differ in this passage only insofar as the ViP includes a small section (ViP 5.1.15-21), absent from BrP. Rather than recite Viṣṇu's former *prādurbhāvas* as in HV 42, the earth praises him with a *stotra* characteristic of the ViP's "cosmo-theology" (Schreiner 2023: 52), according to which any and everything, including even demons, are fundamentally Viṣṇu, who nonetheless transcends all things. "In historical perspective it appears that the ViP is probably the first Purāṇa that uses *stotras* to such an extent and uses them to express mainly Viṣṇu's allness" (Schreiner 2023: 59 note 12). For concordance of the BrP (181-212)-ViP (5.1-38) Kṛṣṇacarita content, see Schreiner and Söhnen 1987: 818-820.

¹⁰ "For some scholars, *BhG* 4.6-8 summarises the '*avatāra doctrine*', the notion of the multiple embodiments or 'descents' of gods for specific purposes. While those who originally proposed this view, such as Hacker (1960: 47), presented a rather complex and differentiated picture, this has subsequently resulted in a rather inaccurate use of the word *avatāra* with regard to the *BhG*. Not only are *BhG* 4.6-8 regularly summarised as the *Gītā*'s '*avatāra doctrine*', but Kṛṣṇa is even regarded as an *avatāra* of the god Viṣṇu. However, there is no textual basis for either claim." (Malinar 2007: 99).

prādurbhāvas, which indeed only come to be called *avatāras* in the BrP, ViP and thereafter.¹¹ Again, the importance of this BrP passage has already been flagged in Hacker 1960. My concern here is to build upon such observations and identify the HV's Kālanemi narrative in particular as a key, or perhaps the principal, pivot point for this turn towards a more uniform theology of Kṛṣṇa amongst the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu.

4. Kṣemendra's *Bhāratamañjarī* and *Daśāvatāracarita* casting of the *aṃśāvatarāṇa*

Many purāṇic sources could speak further to the development I seek to illustrate here, although I will pass directly now to Kṣemendra, a Kashmiri poet flourishing over the period 1015-1065 CE or so. He is perhaps best known for his satires and didactic works, but scholars of the Sanskrit epics and *bṛhatkathā* narrative are familiar with his ambitious abridgements of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata* (including the *Harivaṃśa*), and *Bṛhatkathā*. Kṣemendra appears to have undertaken his abridgements as a kind of exercise in composition rather than carefully crafted *kāvya*,¹² and so they are typically not examined with the same keen eye to form and construction as are his satires (or when they are, they are freely critiqued as underwhelming¹³). Kṣemendra was not a theological game-changer in the manner of a Tulsīdās. Rather, his value lies in the fact that he engaged all of this mythology both in a mode of digesting the MBh and HV in his *Bhāratamañjarī* [BhM], and in a more creative mode in his *Daśāvatāracarita* [DAC]. In the former case we have a kind of direct witness of a reading and representing of the MBh's and HV's *aṃśāvatarāṇa* passages, and in the latter a more freely structured poetic composition that can be deemed to reflect Kṣemendra's own understanding of the meaning and purpose of Viṣṇu's descent, unconstrained as it is by any single source text.

The MBh and HV manuscripts providing the basis for Kṣemendra's epitomizing work appear to correspond fairly closely to the Śāradā sources consulted by the Bhandarkar editorial

¹¹ The Gītā's continuing impact on the reception of these root narratives can be seen in any number of places in the critical apparatus of the MBh and HV. For example, at CE HV 42, right at the very beginning of the earth's speech (42.14), many manuscripts insert a set of 14 lines (*542 = K_{1,3}, Ñ_{2,3}, V, B₂, D_N, D_{2,3,5}, T₃ and B₁), including the following "yuge yuge" construction: *tvam eva kuruse deva nārāyaṇa yuge yuge | mahābhārāvatarāṇaṃ jagato hitakāmyayā*, *542 lines 7-8.

¹² *abhyāsahetoḥ padasamniveśair vākyārthasūnyair vidadhīta vṛttam | ślokaṃ parāvṛttipadaiḥ purāṇaṃ yathāsthithārthaṃ paripūrayec ca ||* "For the sake of practice, he should compose in a metre, by putting together words even if they do not mean anything, when read as a sentence. He may also change the words of an already composed stanza keeping on to the same meaning." *Kavikañthābharaṇa* 1.21, trans. Suryakanta 1954: 95.

¹³ Thus Suryakanta states that the BhM "has little literary merit or poetic value. Though a good summary, it is characteristically barren and lifeless" (Suryakanta 1954: 17).

team. Vaidya in particular is especially confident in the value of Kṣemendra's BhM-HV epitome for constituting his own critical HV text (Vaidya vol. I: xv). Kṣemendra's abridgement of the MBh's Ādiparvan descent episode falls within his 6th sub-parvan section (6. *aṃśāvatarāṇam*, BhM 198-225), and makes short work of the epic's corresponding material. The parentage and conception of Vyāsa is related (202-215), then the account of the earth's problem and the descent:

216. Now, when the *kṣattra* slain by Rāma had once again arisen from Brahmins, the demons, dispersed by Purāri (Viṣṇu), descended onto earth in portions (*bhūmāv aṃśair avātaran*).

217. The earth, oppressed by their weight (*tadbhārapīḍitā*), sought refuge with Brahmā. She obtained Nārāyaṇa as her protector -- him who had himself gone to earth together with Indra by a portion (*aṃśena*).

218. The gods, together with the Siddhas and Gandharvas, working for the dispelling (-*dalana*-) of the enemies of the gods, descended directly after Viṣṇu (*viṣṇum evānvavātaran*) into various lineages of sage-kings.

219. In the past, the emission (*sargaḥ*), arranged by the 4-faced one, was emitted by Svayaṃbhū. In that emission the gods and demons arose among humans.

220. The great demons such as Vipracitti, Hiraṇyākṣa, and Prahlāda became [humans, namely] Jarāśmḍha, the Caidya [Śiśupāla], and Śalya.

221. A portion (*aṃśo*) of the king of Gandharvas [became] King Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Dharma, because of the curse of Aṇīmāṇḍavya, became Vidura.

222. The portion of the Bharadvāja sage Bṛhaspati was born in a pot. That was Droṇa of great wisdom, guru of all archers. And a portion of Rudra [became] Aśvatthāman, and Vasu became Śāntanava [*sic*].

223. Kṛpācārya was a follower of Rudra (*raudra eva*), Śakuni was the Dvāpara Yuga (*śakunir dvāparo yugaḥ*). Sātyaki, Hāridkya [Kṛtavarma] and Drupada were all portions of the Maruts.

224. The portion of Kali, enacting the destruction of all kings (*sarvakṣitīśakṣayakṛtkaler*), was Suyodhana. The portions of Dharma, Anila [Vāyu], and Indra were the sons of Pāṇḍu and likewise of the Aśvins.

225. Dhṛṣṭadyumna was a portion of Anala [Agni], Karṇa of the sun. The portion of Nārāyaṇa was the Blessed Lord Vāsudeva, crusher of his enemies.

The story of Śakuntalā begins immediately thereafter.

Kṣemendra obviously shortens the material radically, for example reducing the 115 or so verses of MBh 1.59-60 to a single verse (219). There is no mention of excessive virtue or the burden of a long-lived population; the weight upon the earth is entirely demonic, and now very clearly the demons are enemies of Viṣṇu (*purāridalitā daityā*, 216). The only demons mentioned by name are the first three at the start of the MBh's long list of incarnating Daityas (MBh 1.61.4-6). In the MBh, these were Vipracitti = Jarāsaṃdha, Hiranyakaśipu = Śiśupāla, and Saṃhrāda (younger brother of Prahrāda) = Śalya. Kṣemendra preserves these, only slipping from Hiranyakaśipu to Hiranyākṣa, and identifying Śalya as Prahlāda.¹⁴ The MBh's *aṃśāvataṛaṇa* of course had never mentioned Kālanemi or any of the demons slain by Kṛṣṇa in the Mathurā area, and so neither does Kṣemendra. Viṣṇu nonetheless comes forward in the whole affair, however briefly it may be summarized.

Kṣemendra's rendering of HV 30-45 is more extensive, although likewise subject to the same practices of selection and omission. There is too much material to translate here in full, but the following table captures the basic scale of Kṣemendra's digest of the HV 30-45 material, which renders 975 HV verses into 181 in the sections tagged Prādurbhāvasaṃgrahaḥ (BhM-HV section 9, v. 292-320), Kālanemivadhaḥ (10, v. 321-406), and Kṛṣṇotpattiḥ (11, v. 407-518):

¹⁴ Śalya was not in fact a true enemy of the Pāṇḍavas, and by Kṣemendra's time, Prahlāda had become most famous not as an enemy of Viṣṇu but as a model *bhakta* (ViP 1.16-20; see Hacker 1959: 60-97). I wonder if it is for this reason that in his digest, the MBh's "*saṃhrāda[ḥ] ... prahrādasyānujas*" (MBh 1.61.6) becomes simply Prahlāda. See also Dumézil 1968: 252.

CE HV	BhM-HV
30. 1-57	9. 292-295
31. 1-153	(9 cont'd.) 296-318
32. 1-39	10. 321-322
33. 1-32	(10 cont'd.) 323-326
34. 1-51	(10 cont'd.) 327-337
35. 1-74	(10 cont'd.) 338-351
36. 1-60	(10 cont'd.) 352-374
37. 1-59	(10 cont'd.) 375-384
38. 1-80	(10 cont'd.) 385-406
39. 1-29	11. 407
40. 1-47	(11 cont'd.) 408-428
41. 1-32	(11 cont'd.) 429-434
42. 1-53	(11 cont'd.) 435-448
43. 1-77	(11 cont'd.) 449-457
44. 1-83	(11 cont'd.) 458-466
45. 1-49	(11 cont'd.) 467-472

From these 181 verses of the BhM-HV I will highlight the following:

- In the précis of HV 31, which relates the multiple forms of Viṣṇu, Kṣemendra constructs a long string of relatives (*yaḥ [viṣṇuḥ], yasya*, etc) and concludes: “... that [Viṣṇu] became Kṛṣṇa in the Vṛṣṇi family for the sake of the *avatāra* of the burden of the earth (*bhuvo bhārāvātārāya*)¹⁵, by whom the Asuras were shattered [and who became] the death of the kings such as Śiśupāla and so on (*śiśupālādibhūpālakāḥ*), (BhM-HV 314); that Kṛṣṇa will slay Ariṣṭa, Kāliya, Bāṇa, etc.” (BhM-HV 315-317).
- The Kālanemi battle is related extensively (BhM-HV 321-406), while other elements of HV 30-39 are omitted or so radically shortened as to be unintelligible without a previous knowledge of the episode (e.g. the Aurva fire, HV 35.23-74 = BhM-HV 351). He thus recognizes Kālanemi as the central feature of this portion of the text.

¹⁵ See Hacker 1960: 64-65 on this broadening of the terms *avataraṇa* and, as here, *avatāra* to include the *purpose* of the descent (i.e. the elimination of the burden), in addition to the sense of the *event* of the divine descent and the *person* descending.

- Unlike his abridgement of the MBh *aṁśāvataṛaṇa*, Kṣemendra preserves the HV's complex moral situation: when Viṣṇu awakens to hear the earth's plea, it is the end of the Dvāpara (BhM-HV 415); he anticipates that the problem the gods are about to report to him is that the regions are being overrun by demon kings (*daityendriḥ krāntās*). This is of course the case, but, as in the HV, Brahmā also states that righteous kings have proliferated on earth (*vivṛddhāḥ sarvabhūpālāḥ sadācārānuvartinaḥ*, BhM-HV 432), and so the earth is burdened. Again, Brahmā's concern is whether well-behaved kings will be destroyed (*sadvṛttānāṁ narendrāṇāṁ kṣaye*, 433) in the effort to solve this problem. When the earth appeals to Viṣṇu directly, she likewise mentions only a generic overpopulation of kings who are not characterized as either good or bad (*kālena punar udbhūtā manor vaṁśe nareśvarāḥ ... teṣāṁ subhaṭasaṁghāte gajavāḥjīsamākule | vṛddhyā nirvivarībhūte bhāreṇāsmi nipīḍitā*, BhM-HV 445-446).
- Nonetheless, as in the HV, Nārada appears to specify that those demons whom Viṣṇu slew previously have now incarnated on earth (BhM-HV 463); in Mathurā, Kālanemi has taken birth as Kaṁsa (*[mathurāyām] adya samutpannaḥ kaṁso yadukule nṛpaḥ | yo 'sau hataṣ tvayā pūrvaṁ kālanemir mahāsuraḥ || 465*). Hayagrīva and other (celestial) demons have now become Keśin, Dhenuka, Ariṣṭa, Pralamba and so on (*keśidhenukāriṣṭa-pralambādya bhuvī sthitāḥ*, 466). And so the final command of Brahmā to Viṣṇu is that he must descend in order to slay the demons (*[vasudevasya] putratvam āsādyā ... jahi dānavān*, BhM-HV 471).

Kṣemendra's rendering of the HV descent account largely but not entirely stresses the demonic presence on earth as the problem requiring solution. The initial enumeration of the forms of Viṣṇu flags the demon-slaying deeds of Kṛṣṇa to come, and the poet takes considerable delight in crafting poetic images of Viṣṇu battling Kālanemi.¹⁶ He certainly understands the chief task of Viṣṇu to be the slaying of Kaṁsa and the other earthly demons, all of them rebirths of the enemies slain in BhM-HV 321-406. However we still have here, as in his source text, the matter of virtuous kings proliferating, along with Brahmā's concerns for a solution that will not jeopardize the flourishing *dharma* (HV 41.12; 41.30 / BhM-HV 432-433).

In the MBh section of the BhM, Kṣemendra appears to reflect an understanding of the *avataṛaṇa* and war as a purely moral affair of demon slaying. However, that passage rendered

¹⁶ e.g. "[Kālanemi saw Viṣṇu] spread over by the rings of the splendour of his *cakra*, red from the blood spurting forth from the wounds in the forest of necks of Rāhu, like the sky by the [red] rays of the sun."

rāhukaṅṭhāṭavīchedaprocchalacchoṇitāruṇaiḥ |

vyāptaṁ cakraprabhācakraiḥ sūryāṁsubhir ivāmbaram || BhM-HV 393

the source with such brevity that it is perhaps not wise to assume too much from this fact either way. Certainly we see in his handling of the HV that he has understood and preserved his source text's more complex image of an earth suffering from too much *dharma* in addition to her demonic woes. Where clearly he has a prerogative (indeed, a responsibility) to simplify and reduce his sources to the essential, it is significant that he preserved this old motif, originating in MBh 1.58. I think it is fair to say, however, that the demonic nature of the earth's woes nonetheless dominate his construction of the mythic scene.

With the BhM, we can only infer so much about how Kṣemendra understood the global meaning of the Mahābhārata war and life of Kṛṣṇa. He remains faithful to his sources, which again appear to have been fairly close to our own critical editions of the MBh and HV. But with the *Daśāvātāracarita* [DAC], the poet had the freedom to construct the scene as he wished, and this provides us with a more reliable access to his own understanding of the divine intervention. It moreover appears to be his latest work, usually dated to 1066 (e.g. Suryakanta 1954: 7).¹⁷ His long account of the Kṛṣṇāvatāra [DAC 8] begins with the familiar scene: the earth, afflicted by her burden, sought refuge with the enemy of Kaiṭabha (*kaiṭabhāriṃ punar bhūmir bhārartā śaraṇaṃ yayau*, DAC 8.2). She sees him resting on Śeṣa, surrounded by gods and sages, recalls his boar intervention when she was abused by Hiraṇyākṣa, and describes her present situation:

10. Those demons lead by Kālanemi, who, for the sake of the pacification of my burden (*madbhārasāntaye*), previously were slain by you, Sir, have again descended as kings.

11. The great demon Kālanemi has arisen in the Vṛṣṇi lineage as the cruel son of Ugrasena, together with his even crueller followers.

12. Oppressed by carrying the burden of the armies of the endless demon kings (*anantadaityabhūpālabalabhārabharārditā*), I am unable to bear this time of rampant *adharmā* (*adharmabahulaṃ kālaṃ na sahe voḍum akṣamā*).

13. The Blessed Lord, having heard this spoken by the Earth, with a smile on his face said “I will do everything that is fitting” and dismissed her.

Brahmā then directs the gods to descend. What ensues initially follows the basic contours of the HV, with familiar scenes of Kṛṣṇa's life related up to the rescue of Aniruddha (DAC 8.334),

¹⁷ It is sometimes argued that the DAC attests a late-life conversion to Vaiṣṇavism from Buddhism late in Kṣemendra's life (e.g. Chakraborty 1991: 260-262).

and thereafter turns to MBh material, beginning with the circumstances surrounding the Śaṃtanu, the cursed Gaṅgā, etc. As such his Kṛṣṇa biography splits into roughly 300 or so verses for the HV-derived material and 500 or so for the MBh-Kṛṣṇa content, effectively combining the entire of the received epic tradition into a single continuous life narrative.

What I want to highlight here is the following. Note first that the earth characterizes the Kālanemi battle as one undertaken for the pacification of her burden (*madbhārasāntaye*). This war had transpired up in the heavens of course, and had nothing to do with the earth or any physical burdening – Kālanemi represented a celestial-cosmic threat to the gods and the sacrificial order they embody. This shows all the more clearly how powerful the construct of “earth's burden” has become as a flag-phrase to designate any and all problems solved by Viṣṇu, whatever their nature or wherever they are played out, as Hacker demonstrated (1960: 67). The earth's present problem is likewise a matter of a “burden”, but now there is no mention of excess virtue or a need to preserve a flourishing *dharma*. On the contrary, we arrive finally at an explicit framing of the burden problem as a “time of rampant *adharmā*”. Here where Kṣemendra is free to construct the myth according to his own understanding, the Kṛta Yuga motif is dropped. Although the Kali Yuga is not mentioned, this would appear to be what the earth means by referring to an unbearable *adharmabahulaṃ kālaṃ*. Kālanemi is the only demon mentioned by name; he is the central figure representing this adharmic chaos in need of rectification and occasioning the descent. Perhaps a small trace remains of the excess-dharma-longevity problem: Kālanemi's companion demons as kings are limitless in number. As it happens, most of the enemies slain by the young Kṛṣṇa, i.e. the minions sent out by Kaṃsa from Mathurā, are of course not kings (indeed, a few are animals). But Kṣemendra is constructing a total *avatāra* biography here, framing the explicitly *adharmā* problem of Kālanemi-Kaṃsa as the root cause of the descent of Viṣṇu and the gods. Kālanemi's followers are, in addition to the non-royal enemies of the young Kṛṣṇa in the Vṛndāvana-Mathurā area, the many demon kings eliminated by the Mahābhārata war.

In the DAC, then, Kṣemendra brings the *aṃśāvatarāna* myth squarely into line with the, by then, classically evolved Vaiṣṇava-*avatāra* mythological complex, which again developed in such a way as to distance itself from the moral quandaries and darkness of the MBh, and eventually dropped the somewhat disorienting motif of a Kṛta-yuga prosperity troubling the earth. It was the HV's reconstruction of MBh 1.57-61 that permitted this, with the demonic person of Kālanemi providing the chief focus for the pivot towards a more uniform understanding of Kṛṣṇa among Viṣṇu's *dharma* interventions.

Conclusion

For reasons that I hope are by now clear, I am not satisfied with the reading of MBh 1.57-61 as a Viṣṇu *avatāra* myth transpiring at the end of the Dvāpara or start of the Kali. To read it this way would be to paint what we know and not what we see. But when one examines the evolving reception of this narrative over time, it becomes clear how we arrive at this popular reading. The *aṃśāvatarāṇa*'s initial terms are of a more generic *devāsura* battle, constructed upon the motif of an excess of *dharma* and ensuing overpopulation. These initial terms included Viṣṇu and demons, but not in a configuration that justifies the *avatāra-dharma* reading. The many demons of the MBh Ādiparvan descent, only two of whom have any connection to Viṣṇu, are in a sense seized upon by the HV and organized around the colossal figure of Kālanemi. He is an innovation of the HV, through whom the poets render the divine descent into a more clearly moral affair, with the MBh's generic demons now cast as immediate enemies of Viṣṇu, to be exterminated by Kṛṣṇa.

This Vaiṣṇav-ication of the received myth permits a sharpening or amplification of the moral stake, for, in contrast to the general tone of the MBh, the HV's ensuing representation of Kṛṣṇa's demon-dispatching is uncomplicated and celebratory. But even there in the HV, we still have a kind of equivocation around the matter of excess virtue combining with a demonic threat, which is carried over from MBh 1.57-61. Through sources like BrP 180-181 and ViP 1.5, the decisive turn given by the HV takes hold and we arrive at a near-classical homogenization of all Viṣṇu's *prādurbhāvas* (now *avatāras*) as dharmic interventions “descending” in order to “relieve the earth of her burden”, i.e. to destroy adharmic demons, whether they have appeared on the earth below or in the celestial realms above.

With Kṣemendra, we see the MBh and HV tradition of moral complexity persisting, with the excess *dharma* motif still preserved in his source-faithful HV epitome. But given the freedom to construct the descent in his own terms in the DAC, we find a more univocal construction: the earth's problem is Kālanemi and his minions. Their rebirth as Kaṃsa, Pralamba, and the many kings involved in the Mahābhārata war are explicitly said to have brought about a time of *adharmā*. Whether readers of the Great Epic are comfortable with the implications or not, this leaves us with a fairly simple view of the violence of the war as a triumph of good over evil, analagous to any other *avatāra* intervention of Viṣṇu.

All of these efforts on my part represent a fairly fine-toothed historicization of materials that owes a great deal to Hacker 1960 and other earlier works of scholarship on Vaiṣṇava mythology. What I hope to accomplish thereby is something of a shift of focus from the trees (or tree) to the forest. That is, while we may wish to resolve the inner tensions of the MBh's complex mythology through a highly restricted and focused analysis on the critical text

alone, we must not lose sight of the fact that some of those conundrums have been chewed over and ironed out in the much wider ensuing Hindu mythological tradition. In other words, I wonder whether the desire so many of us feel to “make it all make sense” should sometimes be checked by the realization that this sense-making work has effectively been carried out already – sometimes in ingenious ways – in the Purāṇas and other sources receiving and refashioning the narratives of the Mahābhārata war and life of Kṛṣṇa.

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