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**Viṣṇu as a Fish:
The Growth of a Story from the Brāhmaṇas to the Purāṇas**

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It is not unusual for stories that appear in Vedic literature to be enhanced and reinterpreted in later texts, especially in the Epics and the Purāṇas.¹ Very often, the augmented versions of such tales function as vehicles for propagating new beliefs, but the incorporation of additions is also a way for later commentators to make sense of statements made in earlier texts from within a worldview unlike their own. The present article will trace the transformation of what is usually referred to as the Indian flood myth. We will follow the story through three texts that are representative of successive periods in the development of ideas in Sanskrit literature. Our first text is a Brāhmaṇa, a composition from the Vedic period and, therefore, part of what Post-Vedic tradition calls *śruti* (“what is heard”). The remaining two texts—one of the Epics and an early Purāṇa—come from the post-Vedic period,² and belong in the traditional category of *smṛti* (“what is remembered”). I will also refer to other, later Purāṇas, especially the *Bhāgavata*.

In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (ca. 7th-6th c. BCE),³ we find the earliest extant Sanskrit version of the Indian flood myth.⁴ Like its counterpart in the Bible, the story involves the rescue of a man from a devastating flood. However, in the Brāhmaṇa text the rescuer is a fish, a *matsya*. The story is short and straightforward. Manu, who since the earliest Vedic text, the *R̥g Veda*, was considered the ancestor of humans and the first one to perform the Vedic ritual sacrifice, is one day washing himself with water that had been brought to him. Suddenly, a fish comes into his hands and pleads with him for help. The fish asks Manu for protection from larger fish that might devour him, and requests to be kept in Manu’s care while it grows to a larger size. In exchange, he offers to save Manu. Puzzled, Manu asks what he needs to be saved from, and the fish announces a future flood in which all creatures

(*prajā*) will be carried away. If Manu protects the fish while it grows, the fish will later save Manu from the flood.

The fish then instructs Manu to keep him in a small jar for some time and, as its size increases, to transfer him, first into a pit in the ground and later into the ocean. He informs Manu of the year when the flood will arrive, and directs him to prepare a boat in order for the fish to rescue him. Manu dutifully does as the fish tells him, and he cares for it until it is large enough to be thrown into the sea. Later, when the foretold year arrives and the water level rises, Manu climbs into his boat and waits for his rescuer. The fish swims up to him, tells him to tie the boat's rope to its (the fish's) horn, and leads him to a high mountain peak located to the North. Manu now ties the boat to a tree and waits for the water to subside, as the fish had instructed him to do. As predicted, the flood carries away all creatures and Manu remains as the only survivor. As the waters recede, Manu descends gradually, and the Brāhmaṇa text explains that the mountain is therefore named "The Descent (*avasarpāṇa*) of Manu."⁵

The flood story proper ends at this point, but we must look at what happens next. Manu now decides he wants offspring (*prajā*), and for that purpose he practices austerities intensely. He also performs a Vedic ritual and offers clarified butter, curds, whey and sour milk into the waters. A year later, these offerings solidify and become a woman who declares herself to be Manu's daughter because she had been created by him. She explains that if he uses (i.e., offers) her in the ritual, Manu will have abundant offspring (*prajā*) and cattle (*paśu*). He follows her instructions, and through her he engenders "this" progeny (*prajāti*), which is, therefore, known as the progeny of Manu, humankind.⁶

The text explains that Manu's daughter is the personification of the Vedic *idā* offering (made with clarified butter, curds, whey and sour milk), and that whoever performs the Vedic ritual using the *idā* will increase the progeny (*prajāti*) of Manu. In other words, he will be able to beget children.

This is the story as it appears in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, and there are several relevant things to point out. First, as is usually the case in the Brāhmaṇas, the story is somewhat incidental. It is told in order to explain the origin of the *idā* offering and its use in the ritual. The section of the text where our story appears is primarily concerned with the *idā* offering and is, in turn, a small section of a long description of the New and Full Moon rituals. It is clear that the context of the narrative is that of a Vedic ritual performance. Also, the offering of the *idā* is closely connected with

the desire to have children. We might say that just as Manu formerly created offspring thanks to Iḍā when he was the only man, a sacrificer today can reenact the deed and have children by offering the *iḍā* preparation during the ritual performance.

Another point worthy of notice is that the relationship between the fish and Manu is reciprocal. Manu saves the fish, and the fish will later save Manu. This conforms to the general pattern of the Vedic ritual, which involves giving offerings to the gods with the expectation that they will provide something in return. It is not presented as a selfless act, as both sides expect to gain something for their efforts.

Our next version of the flood story is found in the *Mahābhārata*.⁷ The Epic's rendering can be considered to be the first one to appear in post-Vedic texts (*smṛti*).⁸ Several stories from the Brāhmaṇas are retold in the *Mahābhārata*, and in most cases the story is amplified, narrative detail is added, and when numbers are mentioned they tend to increase. Simple stories from the Brāhmaṇas often reach vast, cosmic proportions in the Epics and the Purāṇas. In some cases—and our fish story is one of them—there is a clear progression and transformation of the story from the Brāhmaṇas to the Epics to the Purāṇas.

The Epics' versions of earlier stories conform to, and reflect a, different cultural and religious milieu than that of the Brāhmaṇas. By the time of the Epics, the gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva have dramatically increased in importance, and many earlier stories are turned by the new poets into vehicles to proclaim the high status of these gods.

So, how does the story of the fish change in the *Mahābhārata*? The basic elements remain the same. Manu protects the fish while it grows, and later releases it into the ocean. When the flood arrives, the fish rescues Manu by means of a rope fastened to its horn. The fish hauls the boat to a high Himalayan peak, where it is tied. The mountain is consequently known as the place of "The Tying of the Boat," Naubandhana.⁹ The waters later recede and Manu is safe. But despite following the same general pattern, there are notable differences in this new rendering. A case in point is the different stages in the growth of the fish. Whereas in the Brāhmaṇa the fish was successively placed in a jar, a pit, and the ocean; the sequence now goes from a jar to a pond, to the Gaṅgā river and to the ocean. Also, in the Epic version Manu is said to have been practicing intense austerities (*tapas*) for ten thousand years when the fish approached him on the bank of the river Viriṇī and asked for help.

The context of the story has also changed. There is no ritual background in the *Mahābhārata* version, no sacrificial offering and no ritual procedure. Instead, Manu is portrayed as a great ascetic performing endless austerities. This exemplifies a general trend seen at the end of the Vedic period: the growth in importance of asceticism and a gradual fading away of the Vedic ritual.

Another noteworthy difference has to do with the passengers on the boat. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, Manu was the only passenger and the only one saved. In the *Mahābhārata*, on the other hand, Manu is told to take on-board his ship the seven mythical ṛṣis (seers), as well as the seed/seed (bija) of an unspecified number of beings. Manu is no longer the only one to be rescued. Other seers are included, as is the seed of many kinds of living beings.¹⁰ But the key difference lies in the fact that, immediately after the rescue, the fish identifies himself as Brahmā Prajāpati. The fish, or Brahmā, now instructs Manu to create all manner of offspring (*prajā*) as well as gods, demons (*asuras*), men, and all the worlds (*lokas*). Thus, the *Mahābhārata* rendering confers upon the fish divine status by identifying it with Brahmā. And if the fish is to be seen as a god, this appears like a fitting identification in the context of the Epic, where Brahmā is firmly established as the creator god.¹¹

The Epic version has turned a simple story about Manu's protection of a young fish and the fish's reciprocal rescue of Manu during a powerful flood, into a drama of vast proportions. Manu is no longer only responsible for his own safety and survival; this time, he must rescue all the creatures that inhabit the world. To accomplish this, he receives the help of the creator god himself, Brahmā, in the form of a fish. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* version does, of course, include Manu's role as progenitor of humankind. That is, after all, who Manu is. It also tells us that before he created his offspring there had been a flood, and that creatures had lived prior to it. But the *Mahābhārata* rendering places Manu's role as progenitor in a broader perspective by indicating that Manu was in charge of bringing over elements from before the flood. He brings seeds from previous living beings in order to preside over a new beginning, a renovation. It is no longer *the* beginning, but only *a* beginning, a restoration of what had been there before.

This is noteworthy, because in Vedic literature there is no clear indication of a belief in the periodical renovation of the world after a catastrophe. In the *Rg Veda* and in subsequent Vedic literature, we hear varying accounts of the creation of the world, but it is *the* one creation; there is no

explicit mention of many different creations. The idea that the world is created, then destroyed and re-created, is a concept that makes its appearance in Sanskrit literature at the end of the Vedic period and then becomes fundamental in Purāṇic and śāstric (*smṛti*) traditions. In keeping with this new, cyclical understanding of cosmogony, if Manu is the progenitor of humanity, he will have to perform the task repeatedly. Or, alternatively, there would need to be several Manus. We shall return to this later.

Our story has a third stage of development. For this, we will turn to the aptly titled *Matsya Purāṇa*.¹² The Purāṇas are post-Vedic texts that deal with different topics, cosmogony being very prominent among them. The word *purāṇa*, as a noun, refers to an old tradition or story; hence, it also became the name of a literary genre that recounts traditions about creation, the gods and human dynasties. At the end of the *Mahābhārata* version of our story, the poet proclaims that he has recited the *purāṇa* of the fish (*matsya purāṇa*), that is, the lore or story of the fish. The term here has a restricted sense, but the same expression would become the name of one of the classical Purāṇas and the source of our third version.

In the *Matsya Purāṇa*, the story of the flood is placed at the beginning of the text. As was the case with the transformation from the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa* to the *Mahābhārata*, in the Purāṇa we also witness a growth in the number of elements included in the story. Like in the Epic's version, the story opens by describing Manu practicing intense austerities, only this time he does so for one million years, instead of the ten thousand of the Epic. The stages of the fish's growth while in Manu's care also increase. The fish goes from a vessel to a jar, a well, a lake, the Gaṅgā river, and finally the ocean. The geographical location has also changed. Instead of the river Viriṇī, he is now in a remote place of the Malaya mountain. The seven ṛṣis are no longer mentioned among Manu's passengers on the boat. In this version, he only takes with him different kinds of living beings.

The god Brahmā is also present in the *Matsya Purāṇa* rendering; however, by contrast to the *Mahābhārata* story, he is not identified as the fish. Instead, Brahmā appears before Manu at the beginning of the account and, pleased with Manu's severe asceticism, offers him a boon.¹³ Manu declares that he wishes to protect all living beings when the time of world destruction (*pralaya*) arrives. The god consents, and then disappears. At this point, the fish comes into the hands of Manu while he is making offerings to the ancestors. In response to the fish's cries for help, Manu places him in successive receptacles as it increases in size.

Something crucial happens at this juncture. When Manu—now customarily referred to as a king—places the fish in the sea, it continues to grow and fills the entire ocean. Astonished by the quick and amazing growth of the fish, Manu becomes afraid and, in an attempt to understand how this could be possible, asks the fish who he is. “Who are you,” he exclaims, “the lord of the *asuras* (demons)?” And then the crucial recognition: “Or are you Vāsudeva (Viṣṇu)? Who else could do this?”¹⁴

The fish is no longer Brahmā, as in the *Mahābhārata*, he is now Viṣṇu. But note the manner in which the fish’s identity with Viṣṇu is presented by the Purāṇa. It is not the fish who reveals his true nature to Manu (as in the Epic), rather, it is up to Manu to recognize him. The implicit message here is that Manu is a devout Vaiṣṇava and, as such, cannot but see a manifestation of Viṣṇu when faced with such an extraordinary display of power and majesty.¹⁵ If Manu is now a Vaiṣṇava, it is inconceivable for him that anyone but Viṣṇu could be capable of such a feat.¹⁶

This shift in the identity of a magnificent animal from Brahmā to Viṣṇu at the hands of Vaiṣṇava poets is not exclusive to the story of the fish. There is an analogous situation in the case of another brief story from the Brāhmaṇas. In that instance, a boar (*varāha*) dives to the bottom of the ocean to retrieve some earth, which it then spreads out on a lotus leaf that floats above the waters. The resulting vast expanse then becomes the Earth. This is a story of creation in the Brāhmaṇas, and the boar is said to be Prajāpati.¹⁷ However, in the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmiki, the boar is said to have been Brahmā, while Vaiṣṇavism will soon consider the boar to be a manifestation of Viṣṇu.¹⁸

But let us return to our *Matsya Purāṇa* narrative. The fish, now identified as Viṣṇu, congratulates Manu on having recognized him, and instructs the sage to tie the rope to his horn when the winds of the end of the world (*yugānta*) arrive.¹⁹ The fish announces that after the destruction (*laya*) he (the fish/Viṣṇu) will proclaim the Vedas, and Manu will become the Prajāpati of the entire world.²⁰ When the Kṛta Yuga begins, Viṣṇu continues, the gods will worship Manu and he will be king for an entire period (*antara*) of Manu, a *manvantara*. A description of the destruction follows, and it is a large scale catastrophe that goes far beyond a mere flood. In fact, the chaos described is in line with what Purāṇic traditions consider to be the destruction that takes place at the end of the period of creation called the *kalpa*, or day of Brahmā. The prediction describes a drought, scorching heat brought about by seven rays, fire caused by the god Śiva, and finally doomsday clouds that flood the three lower worlds of Purāṇic cosmology and turn the world into a single

ocean.²¹ The fish also declares that this destruction will mark the end of the period (*antara*) of Manu Cākṣuṣa.

In the *Matsya Purāṇa*, the boat is no longer prepared by Manu, as in the earlier versions, but by the gods. And this ship is said to be a Veda-ship, *vedanau*, a boat made of the Vedas.²² The gods, however, will not survive the destruction, and Viṣṇu specifies who and what will remain after the cataclysm. Included in the list are the Sun, the Moon, Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Bhava (Śiva), the world protectors (*lokapālas*), the river Narmadā, the ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya, the Vedas, the Purāṇas and the auxiliary sciences (*vidyās*). The mention of the sage Mārkaṇḍeya is noteworthy, for he is the narrator of the *Mahābhārata* version of the flood story.

Finally, everything happens as predicted by the fish/Viṣṇu. Manu gathers all creatures and he ties the rope to the fish's horn in order to be saved. There is no mention of the boat being tied to a tree or moored to a Himalayan peak, as in the earlier versions. The narration ends with Manu submissively prostrating himself before Viṣṇu in his magnificent fish form.

Interestingly, the rope used by Manu turns out to be a snake. In the context of a cosmogonical narrative, the snake is a Vaiṣṇava symbol that surely would not have been lost on the intended audience of the Purāṇa. According to Purāṇic tradition, Viṣṇu rests on a multi-headed snake named Śeṣa or Ananta that floats on the ocean during the period of world destruction, the night of Brahmā. The use of this image serves to reinforce the fish's identity with Viṣṇu.²³

As is evident from the foregoing, in the *Matsya Purāṇa* recognizing the fish as Viṣṇu is a central feature of the narrative. This element or recognition plays a fundamental role in the development of the Vaiṣṇava theory of *avatāras*, or descents to earth of Viṣṇu, considered as Supreme God. Its use can be traced back to at least the *Nārāyaṇīya* section of the *Mahābhārata*, where Vaiśaṃpāyana, the narrator, states that Vyāsa, the reputed author of the poem, must be Nārāyaṇa/Viṣṇu. For, who else would be capable of such an accomplishment?²⁴

Around the beginning of the Common Era, Vaiṣṇavism was emerging as one of the subcontinent's foremost religious traditions. A major contributing factor to this rise in prominence was the way in which Vaiṣṇavism re-read, reinterpreted and appropriated diverse existing traditions by seeing them all as originating in Viṣṇu. Vedic mythological characters such as the boar and the fish were now understood by Vaiṣṇava authors as manifestations of Viṣṇu. Likewise, legendary heroes such as Rāma Jāmadagni—who

appears in both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*—were also considered, through a Vaiṣṇava lens, to be mere manifestations of Viṣṇu. In the case of Rāma Jāmadagni, he would be considered a form of Viṣṇu under the name of Paraśurāma. They were all understood to be different descents, *avatāras*, of the Supreme Viṣṇu fulfilling his role as protector or rescuer of the world.

In the *Matsya Purāṇa*, however, it is not only the fish that is seen as a form of Viṣṇu. As noted above, the ship is said to be made by the gods and to be the boat of the Vedas. And Manu learns that Viṣṇu will proclaim the Vedas when the new age begins. Ultimately, then, Viṣṇu's task is not only to save the world through Manu; the *Purāṇa* also presents him as the rescuer and proclaimer of the Vedas, thereby appropriating the entire Vedic tradition. Viṣṇu is the Supreme God, the origin of everything and the protector of the world.

The narration of the *Matsya Purāṇa* includes significant elements that are absent from previous accounts, such as the theory of the *yugas* and, especially, that of the *manvantaras*. As discussed above, in the *R̥g Veda* there is only one Manu, the ancestor of humanity. However, in a few verses of the Epics and especially in the *Harivaṃśa*, in early *Purāṇas* and in the *Manu Smṛti* (the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra*) a new theory emerges that subsumes the R̥gvedic Manu under a larger cosmic scheme. According to this new, enhanced perception, the Manu known to Vedic texts is only one of many. There were other Manus before him and there will be more after him. The Manu of the *R̥g Veda* was known as the son of Vivasvat ("the shining/radiant one")—possibly a name of the Sun—so in these later texts he is routinely called Manu Vaivasvata ("son of Vivasvat"), most likely in order to distinguish him from the other Manus that have now entered the scene.²⁵ Cākṣuṣa, mentioned by the fish as the Manu whose period was ending, would be the Manu immediately preceding Manu Vaivasvata.²⁶

The notion that humankind is initiated repeatedly by successive Manus is the main element of the theory of the *manvantaras* (Manu antaras). The one Manu and one creation (albeit variously described) of the *R̥g Veda* have now been replaced by a continuous series of different Manus and recurring creations. The theory of *manvantaras* would become a mainstay of *Purāṇic* cosmogony, together with the theory of the *yugas* and that of the *kalpas*.

The *Mahābhārata* version makes no mention of successive Manus, although the *manvantara* theory appears very briefly elsewhere in the Epic. The *Mahābhārata* explains that Manu will carry over elements from a previous period, but it is the same Manu that crosses over from one period to the next

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(as in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*). There is no replacement of one Manu by another. After all, the purpose of the story is, precisely, that Manu be saved from a flood by the fish. Even in our *Matsya Purāṇa* rendering it is the same Manu before and after the destruction, despite the mention of the period of Manu Cākṣuṣa coming to an end. The theory of successive Manus was in a formative stage at this time, and such irregularities are not surprising.²⁷ A possible attempt to solve the inconsistency is the subsequent use of the term Manu more in the sense of a function, a task or a job, than as the name of a person. Thus, when the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10th century?) later provides still another version of the flood story, it says that the king who rescued Viṣṇu in the form of a fish was King Satyavrata. In the *Bhāgavata*, the name—or title—of Manu Vaivasvata was apparently conferred upon Satyavrata because of his role in the rescue of mankind and his ability to recognize the fish as Viṣṇu.²⁸ This example illustrates the difficulties that are sometimes implicit when reinterpreting earlier traditions and stories through the lens of later beliefs, and in new social and cultural environments. The main components of a narrative will often not be altered, but they need to be construed differently.

There is another late development that deserves mention. Some Purāṇas conflate the story of Manu's encounter with the fish as Viṣṇu with the tale of a little-known demon called Hayagrīva, "the one with a horse's neck." The *Agni Purāṇa* (9th century), after telling the story of Manu in general agreement with the *Matsya Purāṇa* rendering—including the recognition of Viṣṇu's identity by Manu—tacks on two verses at the end of the narration. These concluding verses state that Keśava (Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu) pursued a demon, a *dānava*, called Hayagrīva after he had stolen the Vedas from the god Brahmā. Viṣṇu killed the demon and restored the Vedas.²⁹ The conflation is taken a step further in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, where the brief Hayagrīva episode serves as a frame for the Manu story.³⁰ The text declares that Viṣṇu, upon learning of Hayagrīva's theft, decides to take on the form of a fish in order to rescue the Vedas, thus paving the way for the *Bhāgavata* to introduce the encounter between Manu and the fish. At the end of the narrative, after Manu has been rescued, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* closes by saying that Hari/Viṣṇu (the fish) returns the Vedas to Brahmā after killing Hayagrīva.³¹ The confusion caused by the two different roles attributed to Viṣṇu when he became a fish (the killing of Hayagrīva and the rescue of Manu) prompted some commentators of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to reason that there had been two distinct fish *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, one for each purpose, and that they had appeared in different *manvantaras*.³²

We can now zoom-out and take a synoptic look at how our story has evolved. The earliest version is found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, a Vedic text. This version exists in a Vedic ritual context, and it is told as part of a discourse concerning a ritual offering. It concerns Manu and a fish, who agree to help each other in a time of danger. In our next version, that of the *Mahābhārata*, there is no ritual context, and emphasis is placed on a cleansing of the world and on Manu's compassion for the distressed fish. In the *Matsya Purāṇa*, our third version, Manu's compassion is even greater. It moves him to save not just the fish, but the whole of humanity. To stress this point, this retelling must make Manu aware of the impending disaster, whereas in the earlier versions he had no previous knowledge of the flood and learned about it from the fish. The Purāṇic author makes Manu's austerities prompt the god Brahmā to grant him a boon, thus setting the stage for Manu's compassionate request to save the world.

It is clear, then, that whereas in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* ritualism is prominent, in the Epic it is asceticism that is emphasized. Our Purāṇa includes asceticism, but it adds devotion as a vital element. Manu is portrayed as a devout Vaiṣṇava who prostrates himself before the Supreme God, Viṣṇu.

Devotion to Viṣṇu will be highlighted even more in subsequent renditions of the story, reflecting the later poets' devotional *bhakti* environment. Accordingly, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* will later explicitly state that King Satyavrata (Manu) was a *nārāyaṇapāra*, one devoted to, or intent upon Nārāyaṇa/Viṣṇu.³³ It also adds elaborate praises of Viṣṇu as the Supreme God at different junctures, such as when the king recognizes him and when Viṣṇu, as a fish, arrives to save the boat.³⁴ In addition, while the king and his passengers are on the boat, the *Bhāgavata* has Viṣṇu providing them with teachings about the Purāṇas, *sāṃkhya*, *yoga*, the *ātman* and Brahman.³⁵

The Manu of Vedic literature is the progenitor of humankind, and his role as such is featured in the three versions. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, it is highlighted by the fact that the ritual described helps the sacrificer obtain offspring. In the *Mahābhārata*, it is present in Manu's role in saving living beings and, therefore, allowing for progeny to be produced. In the *Matsya Purāṇa*, however, although Manu is portrayed as wanting to save humanity and the world out of compassion, the role of rescuer is ultimately transferred to Viṣṇu, with Manu acting as his mere instrument for accomplishing the task. Hence, *Matsya* becomes one of Viṣṇu's *avatāras*, the one who saved the world in the form of a fish.³⁶

A further transformation of our story has to do with the geographical loca-

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tion, the place where the narrative is set. The Brāhmaṇa version makes no reference to a particular river, but the boat is tied to a tree in a Northern mountain, presumably in the Himalayas. The *Mahābhārata* sets the story on the rivers Viriṇī and Gaṅgā in Northern India, and states that the ship is fastened to a Himalayan peak. But the *Matsya Purāṇa* has moved the action to central or southern India, in the Malaya mountain and along the river Narmadā. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, in turn, will place the action unequivocally in South India, in the Draviḍa country, on the bank of the river Kṛtamālā.³⁷

Our different versions serve as a good illustration of how stories can grow from the Brāhmaṇas to the Purāṇas. In our story, this growth occurs on different levels, it is evident in minor aspects of the narrative, such as the number of stages of the tale or the number of its constitutive elements. This growth is also present in more important contexts, such as the cosmic background of the narrative. We have seen, for instance, the manner in which the number of receptacles in which the fish is placed is augmented from one version to the next. The number increases from three to four to six through our three versions. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* would continue the trend by saying that, at a certain point, Satyavrata/Manu needs to transfer the fish from place to place, thus implying many more different receptacles beyond those explicitly mentioned.³⁸ Another example of this numerical increase is the amount of time Manu devotes to his ascetic practices. In the *Mahābhārata* we are told he does so for ten thousand years, but in the *Matsya Purāṇa* these have become one million years. And yet a further instance is the increase in the number of those saved from the flood, as discussed above.

More relevant, however, is the expansion of the cosmic background of the narrative in the successive versions. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* refers to a large flood that will kill all beings, and from which the fish will save Manu. In the *Mahābhārata* there is a slight enhancement by turning the flood into a cathartic, world cleansing event. But in the *Matsya Purāṇa* the story is placed squarely in the vast cosmic context of *yugas* and *manvantaras*, of large-scale world destruction and of ever-recurring cycles of creation and destruction.³⁹ The story has been made to fit into the large scheme of Purāṇic cosmogony and cosmology and, in the process, has itself become an important part of subsequent Purāṇic cosmogonical tradition.

Finally, the most significant transformation of the story, in religious terms, is the change in the identity of the fish. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* the fish is simply a fish with extraordinary powers. The *Mahābhārata* poet equates the fish with the creator god, Brahmā. But when the story is retold

in the *Matsya Purāṇa* it is permeated by a Vaiṣṇava perception of the world. And through the eyes of a devout Vaiṣṇava there could be no question as to the identity of such a formidable and magnificent fish. It had to be Viṣṇu. As the Purāṇic composer has Manu exclaim when he beholds the fish's extraordinary powers, "who else could it be?"

Endnotes

1. "The Epics" refers to the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*.
2. The Epics are often considered to be transitional texts between the Vedic and post-Vedic periods. For our purposes, they can safely be placed in the post-Vedic category.
3. This is the approximate time frame suggested by Witzel 1995:106.
4. The passage discussed here is *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.8.1.1-11 in the *Mādhyandina* recension, 2.7.3.1-8 in the *Kāṇva* text. For translations see Eggeling vol. 1:216-219, Swaminathan vol. 2:187-191, or O'Flaherty 1975:180-181.
5. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.8.1.6 (*Mādhyandina*), or 2.7.3.4 (*Kāṇva*). In the *Atharva Veda* (19.39.8, Śaunaka) there is mention of a Himalayan peak called *Nāvaprabhramśana*, "the sliding of the boat," and the previous verse (19.39.7) refers to a golden boat that travels through the sky. This indicates that there may have been an earlier story of a boat associated with a Himalayan summit. However, there is no mention of Manu in these verses. The possible connection between the flood story and these AV verses was suggested long ago by Weber. See Eggeling's (vol. 1:218) note to SB 1.8.1.6.
6. This "progeny of Manu" could have a more restricted sense and refer only to followers of Vedic tradition.
7. *Mahābhārata* 3.185, Critical Edition. Translated in van Buitenen 1975:583-585.
8. It is difficult to date different sections of the Epic with accuracy, but it is not unreasonable to ascribe this passage to around the third or fourth centuries of the Common Era, or slightly earlier. See González-Reimann 2002:99, n. 51.
9. *Mahābhārata* 3.185.47.
10. Note that this echoes the biblical narrative more closely than the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* version.
11. In Vedic literature, starting in late portions of the *Rg Veda* and increasingly in the *Brāhmaṇas*, the role of creator is assigned to *Prajāpati*. However, as the Vedic period draws to a close this function is gradually transferred to *Brahmā*. Once *Brahmā* is firmly established as the creator god, *Prajāpati* becomes one of his names.
12. The story is found in *Matsya Purāṇa* 1.11-2.19 (in some editions it starts at 1.9). For translations see O'Flaherty 1975:181-184, or A Taluqdar of Oudh [1916] 1980:4-7. The date of this chapter of the *Matsya* is set by Hazra ([1975] 1987:50) at around the third or fourth centuries CE. This would make it almost contemporaneous with the *Mahābhārata* version of the story, if the dates mentioned above are correct (see note 8). Nevertheless, it seems certain that the *Mahābhārata* version is earlier than the

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Matsya Purāṇa one because the Purāṇic author appears to be familiar with the Epic one. For different datings of this and other Purāṇas, see Rocher 1986.

13. It is a common feature of Epic and Purāṇic stories that those who practice intense austerities are granted a wish by the god Brahmā. This is even true for demons (*asuras* or *rākṣasas*) who engage in austerities, and the boons they receive are usually an essential narrative component of their confrontation with the gods.

14. *Matsya Purāṇa* 1.23-24.

15. Manu was not the only one awed by the power of the fish god. The renowned American author Herman Melville (1819–1891) used the image of the mighty Purāṇic fish *avatāra* of Viṣṇu in his descriptions of his great whale, Moby Dick. For a study of Melville's knowledge and use of the story and its imagery, see Sullivan and Hall, 2001.

16. For a comparable instance of recognition, this time by the Vaiṣṇava author of an interpolation in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa, see González-Reimann 2006: 216-217.

17. As stated in the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (1.1.3.5-7):

In the beginning this [world] was water, an ocean. With it, Prajāpati practiced [asceticism] intensely. [He thought,] "how should this [world] come to be?" He saw a lotus petal standing. He thought, "it must stand on something." He took on the form of a boar and dove close to it. He found Pṛthivī (the Earth) below. He seized her and went up. He extended her on the lotus petal. Because he extended her, Pṛthivī is called Pṛthivī (the extended one) . . .

See also *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* (*Black Yajur Veda*) 7.1.5.1, translated in O'Flaherty 1975:185.

18. *Rāmāyaṇa* 2.102.2-3. Critical Edition. In another verse (6.105.12) generally considered to be later, the text already identifies the boar with Viṣṇu indirectly by stating that it was Rāma. See González-Reimann 2006:215, n. 50. It would then become customary in the Purāṇas to regard the boar as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu.

19. On the meaning of *yugānta* as a generic reference to "the end of the world," see González-Reimann 2002:64-73, where its use in the *Mahābhārata* is examined.

20. Referring to Manu as a Prajāpati is not unusual in the Purāṇas. Prajāpati, after all, means "lord of offspring/progeny (*prajā*)."

21. In Purāṇic literature, this kind of destruction is called a periodic, or occasional destruction, a *naimittika pralaya*.

22. *Matsya Purāṇa* 2.10.

23. This snake has also been identified as Vāsuki, a legendary king of snakes. See Tagare, vol. 3:1121, at *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.24.45. The god Śiva is also associated with a snake, but the context here points clearly to Viṣṇu.

24. "Know that Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa is the lord Nārāyaṇa. For who else . . . could be the author of the *Mahābhārata*?" Mbh 12.334.9. Some Purāṇas would subsequently list Vyāsa as one of Viṣṇu's *avatāras*. One could also mention Arjuna's recognition of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā* section of the *Mahābhārata*, although the circumstances in that case are not entirely analogous.

25. In *Rg Veda* 8.52.1, Manu is referred to as Manu Vivasvat. He was called Vaivasvata already in the *Atharva Veda* (8.10.24 Śaunaka) and in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (13.4.3.3). In *Rg Veda* 8.51.1 we hear of a Manu Sārīvarāṇi, presumably the son or descendant of Sārīvarāṇa, which is the name of a Vedic ṛṣi (5.33.10). There is also mention of a Manu Sāvārṇi/Sāvārṇya in RV 10.62.9, 11, but it is not entirely clear whether this is another name of Manu Vivasvat or, perhaps more likely, the name of a king. When the *manvantara* theory develops in the Purāṇas, Sāvārṇa will be the name of the Manu following Vaivasvata. After the *Rg Veda*, Vivasvat is regularly understood to be the Sun.

26. For the emergence and development of the *manvantara* theory in Post-Vedic traditions, see Mitchiner 1978.

27. The general understanding in the developed *manvantara* theory as found in later Purāṇas, seems to be that each Manu appears at the end of a *manvantara* together with a group of seven ṛṣis in order to carry over beings and Vedic learning from one period to the next. See Mitchiner 1978: 12-13.

28. See *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.24.10 ff. His new name is mentioned in 8.24.58, and Manu as a title in 8.24.11.

29. *Agni Purāṇa* 2.16-17.

30. The *Mahābhārata* (5.128.49) refers fleetingly to Kṛṣṇa's killing of a demon called Hayagrīva, without providing any details. The same is true of the *Narasimha Purāṇa*, 53.60. See also the *Padma*, 6.230.10-12, 26-27. Other Purāṇas also narrate the episode. The earliest textual source to mention this demon is probably the *Harivamśa* (91.50, 92.8, 105.14, 109.40) where it is Kṛṣṇa that kills him. The later story could be the result of a triple (or even fourfold) conflation of different tales: Kṛṣṇa's killing of Hayagrīva; Viṣṇu's killing of the demons Madhu and Kaijabha, who had stolen the Vedas (Mbh 3.194.8-30, 12.335.1-67); and Manu's rescue by the fish. For more textual references to the demon Hayagrīva, see Nayar 2004:52 ff.

31. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.24.57, 61.

32. Likewise, some considered there had been two boar *avatāras*. See Tagare's note at *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.24.46, on the opinions of the commentators Śrīdhara Svāmī and Bhagavat Prasāda. Bhaktivedanta Swami offers the two-fish explanation in his comments to *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.24.10. He assigns the first fish *avatāra*—the slayer of Hayagrīva—to the Svāyambhūva Manvantara; and the second to the end of the Cākṣuṣa Manvantara, where he helped King Satyavrata. To compound the confusion, Hayagrīva is also the name of another *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. He does not receive much attention in the Purāṇas, but gained prominence in South India; see Nayar 2004, *passim*.

33. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.24.10.

34. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.24.25-30, 8.24.46-53.

35. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.24.54-56.

36. The *Mahābhārata* version contains a similar component by making Brahmā the fish that rescues Manu, but there is no further elaboration and no devotional declaration towards Brahmā as there is in the *Matsya* and later Purāṇas towards Viṣṇu.

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37. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.24.12-13.
38. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.24.23, with reference to being moved from one pool to another.
39. *ibid.*

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Appendix

Important Differences In the Three Versions

<i>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa</i> (Madhyandina 1.8.1.1-11, Kaṇva 2.7.3.1-8)	<i>Mahābhārata</i> (CE 3.185)	<i>Matsya Purāṇa</i> (1.11-2.19)
Fish is only a fish	Fish is Brahmā	Fish is Viṣṇu
No yugas or manvantaras mentioned	No yugas or manvantaras mentioned	Yugas and manvantras included
Flood only	Flood only	Destruction beyond flood. Similar to the Puranic <i>naimittika pralaya</i> , which takes place at the end of the kalpa (Brahmā's day).
Manu has offspring thanks to ritual and tapas	Manu, following Brahmā's instructions, creates everything thanks to tapas	Manu owes his status to Viṣṇu.
No geographical locations mentioned	Mention of river Viriṇī	Mention of the Narmadā river and the Malaya range
Manu is unaware of flood	Manu is unaware of flood	Manu knows there will be a flood
Exchange between Manu and the fish, reminiscent of exchange between gods and humans in Vedic ritual.	No explicit exchange. Manu saves fish out of compassion.	No exchange. Manu saves fish out of compassion. Growth of fish prompts Manu to recognize him as Viṣṇu.
Vedic ritual context	No ritual context. Flood described as world cleansing.	No ritual context. Emphasis on compassion.
Prominence of ritual	Prominence of asceticism	Prominence of asceticism and devotion (to Viṣṇu)