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'The influence of the *Bhagavata Purana* on what has come to be known as Hinduism is paralleled only by the epic *Ramayana*. Yet it is, at first glance, a thematically complicated and stylistically unusual text. Building on his work analyzing the narrative structure of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Ithamar Theodor expertly argues that the combining of all the elements contained in the *Bhagavata* was a conscious harmonizing of two distinct orthodox scholastic traditions: the philosophical one stemming from the *Upanishads*, and the literary aesthetic one drawing from the rasa theory of kavya poetics. This is a fascinating and groundbreaking work.'

—EDWIN BRYANT, PROFESSOR OF HINDU RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

'The *Bhagavata Purana*, composed in eloquent Sanskrit about a thousand years ago, has become one of the principal sources of inspiration for Hindu traditions of devotion to Krishna as Supreme Being. In his carefully researched work, Ithamar Theodor takes us along a new path of interpretation, arguing systematically for an aesthetic understanding of the text as key, and showing in the process how apparent incompatibilities of its teaching can be reconciled by this approach. In future, no meaningful comment about or study of the *Bhagavata Purana* can afford to neglect the illuminating argument of this book.'

—JULIUS LIPNER, FBA, PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF HINDUISM AND THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGION, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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ITHAMAR THEODOR

THE 'FIFTH VEDA' OF HINDUISM  
POETRY, PHILOSOPHY AND DEVOTION IN THE BHAGAVATA PURANA

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# THE 'FIFTH VEDA' OF HINDUISM

POETRY, PHILOSOPHY AND DEVOTION  
IN THE *BHAGAVATA PURANA*

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The *Bhagavata Purana* is one of the most important, central and popular scriptures of Hinduism. A medieval Sanskrit text, its influence as a religious book has been comparable only to that of the great Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Ithamar Theodor here offers the first analysis for twenty years of the *Bhagavata Purana* (often called the 'Fifth Veda') and its different layers of meaning. He addresses its lyrical meditations on the activities of Krishna (avatar of Lord Vishnu), the central place it affords to the doctrine of bhakti (religious devotion) and its treatment of older Vedic traditions of knowledge. At the same time he places this subtle, poetical book within the context of the wider Hindu scriptures and the other Puranas, including the similar – but less grand and significant – *Vishnu Purana*. The author argues that the *Bhagavata Purana* is a unique work which represents the meeting place of two great orthodox Hindu traditions, the Vedic-Upanishadic and the Rasa-Aesthetic. As such, it is one of India's greatest theological treatises. This book illuminates its character and continuing significance.

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Cover image: Sudama approaching the golden city of Krishna, from the *Bhagavata Purana*. Originally from Garwhal in the Punjab Hills, from the V&A's collection (Photo by CM Dixon/Print Collector/Getty Images)

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