CHAPTER THREE

THE BRHADARANYAKA UPANIŞAD

The Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (BU), which forms the conclusion to the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa of the White Yajurveda, is usually considered the oldest extant Upaniṣad. The text has been transmitted in two versions, a Mādhyaṃdina and a Kānya recension.¹

The BU is most often read as a philosophical text centered on the mystical identity between ātman and brahman. The main character in the text is the philosopher Yājñavalkya, whose teachings about ātman and brahman emerge as superior to those of other teachers throughout this text.

I will argue in this chapter, however, that the BU is not merely a text about philosophical concepts such as ātman and brahman; it is also a text about textual rivalries. The BU cannot and should not be read in isolation, but rather, as an integral part of the intricate textual universe the older Upaniṣads inhabit.

Many scholars have noted in passing that the BU is formally affiliated with the White Yajurveda. I will demonstrate that this affiliation is more than a mere formality. I will show that the BU, like many of the older Upaniṣads, resonates with the ideas and preoccupations of a particular Vedic sākhā. Textual authority is an important theme in the BU, and I will demonstrate that the stories of Yājñavalkya serve a dual purpose in this text: They present the emerging ideas about ātman and brahman that the sākhās of the White Yajurveda wish to promote, but they also negotiate a relationship with other Vedic sākhās in a way that facilitates dialogue, while still allowing the tradition of the White Yajurveda to emerge as the most authoritative one.

¹ In the following analysis, quotations are from the more commonly used Kānya recension unless otherwise noted.
Yañāvalkya plays a prominent role in the BU, especially in his dialogues with his wife Maitreyī, and his dazzling performance in the contest held at the court of king Janaka of Videha. But who is Yañāvalkya exactly? It is interesting to note that he is not mentioned in any of the other older Upaniṣads. He is also notably absent from most of the older Vedic literature, with the exception of the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa, an older text also affiliated with the White Yajurveda. In the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa, however, Yañāvalkya is frequently invoked as an authority on ritual. We are told in the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa that king Janaka of Videha presents Yañāvalkya with cows as a reward for his deep knowledge of the Agniḥotra ritual. In the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa, we also encounter an earlier version of the contest scene at Janaka’s court, a scene that is of central importance in the BU. In the BU, Yañāvalkya is further referred to as the first teacher of the White Yajurveda:

ādityān ānāmi śakāṇi yañāṇi vājasaneyena Yañāvalkyaṃkaḥ

These formulas of the White Yajurveda from the Sun were proclaimed by Vājasaney Yañāvalkya. As the legendary first teacher of the White Yajurveda, it is not surprising that Yañāvalkya figures so prominently in this Upaniṣad of the White Yajurveda. His association with the legendary revelation of the White Yajurveda would in all likelihood be well known to an ancient audience listening to and reciting the BU. Yañāvalkya’s voice of authority in the contents described in this Upaniṣad may have been perceived by ancient listeners as the voice of the tradition of the White Yajurveda itself.

The depiction of Yañāvalkya in the BU appears to draw on the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa, and yet, some significant changes have occurred in the depiction of Yañāvalkya by the time of the composition of the Upaniṣad. First of all, Yañāvalkya is no longer primarily an expert on ritual in the BU, but a wisdom teacher whose teachings are focused on ātman and brahman. Second, whereas Yañāvalkya himself is outwitted

---

2 BU 2.4 and 4.5.  
3 BU 3.1–4.4.  
4 E.g. SB 11.3.1.2 ff., 11.4.2.17, 11.4.3.20, 11.6.2.4, 12.4.1.10, 13.5.3.6.  
5 SB 11.3.1.2 ff.  
6 BU 6.5.3.