CHAPTER SIX  
THE KAUŚITAKI UPANISAD

The Kauśitaki Upanisad (KṣU) comprises books 3–6 of the Kauśitaki Āraṇyaka. It is formally ascribed to the Śāṅkhāyana school of the Rgveda. Śaṅkara did not write a separate commentary on the KṣU, but he was obviously familiar with the text since he refers to it several times in his commentary on the Brahmaśūtra. As we shall see, Śaṅkara’s reason for not composing a commentary to the text may have been that many of its ideas are at variance with his philosophical and theological views. Śaṅkarāṇanda (14th cent) composed a commentary to the KṣU.

The KṣU consists of four chapters, mostly in prose, but also with a few scattered verses interspersed in the text. Numerous variant readings of passages of the KṣU exist, probably because an authoritative version of the text has not been established through one of Śaṅkara’s commentaries.

The KṣU contains narratives of encounters between wisdom teachers and those seeking knowledge. Gītra Gāngāyani tells Āruṇi and his son Śvetaketu about the passage of the self after death. The deceased must answer the moon’s question: “Who are you?” by declaring “I am you”, and then he must cross the lake Āra and the river Vijarā “with his mind only” and again answer the question “Who are you?”, this time asked by brahman itself. The idea that correct knowledge leads to the desired result (here: the world of brahman) is common in the Upaniṣads. Other teachings are presented by the Vedic god Indra and by king Ajātaśatru.

But the KṣU also describes numerous magical rites that will bring the person who knows how to perform them correctly a woman’s love, prosperity, children, etc. This may have been one of the reasons why Śaṅkara chose not to compose a complete commentary to this text;

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1 KṣU 1.2.  
2 KṣU 1.4.
knowledge of magical rites was perhaps not the kind of knowledge that he cared to comment on.

Ātman in the KṣU

Ātman is frequently used in the sense of the “inner essence” of a thing or person in the KṣU, and described as annasyātmā (“the essence of food”), ījasa ātmā (“the essence of radiance”), śabdasyātmā (“the essence of sound”), satyasātmā (“the essence of truth”), vāca ātmā (“the essence of speech”), etc. This usage is obviously related to the idea of ātman as the immortal essence or self of a person. The deceased person, in his conversation with brahman, refers to brahman as the ātman of every being. The ātman is said to consist of intelligence, and to be unaging and immortal. Ātman is also described as bliss, a term that is frequently used elsewhere to describe brahman. In the KṣU, the emphasis is on understanding the ātman as much as knowing brahman.

Ātman is also still used in the Vedic sense of “body.” Nevertheless, we can observe the idea of ātman as the highest principle and completely identical with brahman emerging in this text.

Brahman in the KṣU

Brahman is presented both as an abstract principle and as a mythological figure in this Upaniṣad. The KṣU describes brahman as sitting on a throne and holding a conversation with a deceased person. The deceased correctly answers brahman’s questions and then defines himself as brahman, and brahman as the ātman of all living beings. Brahman is

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3 KṣU 4.4.
4 KṣU 4.5.
5 KṣU 4.6.
6 KṣU 4.10.
7 KṣU 4.17.
8 KṣU 1.6.
9 KṣU 4.3.
10 KṣU 4.3.
11 E.g. in KṣU 4.20.
12 KṣU 2.12, 4.2, 4.10.
13 KṣU 1.6.