CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE KENA UPANISHAD

The Kena Upanisad (Kena) belongs to the Sāmaveda. It is also known as the Tālavakāra Upanisad, because it forms a part of the Tālavakāra Brāhmaṇa, which is also known as the Jaiminiya Upanisad Brāhmaṇa. The Kena is found in Jaiminiya Upanisad Brāhmaṇa 4.18.1–4.21.1. The text consists of four sections, two in verse and two in prose.

Brahman in the Kena

We find two different views of brahman expressed in the Kena. In the metrical portion (khaṇḍas 1 and 2), the supreme principle is the impersonal, unqualified brahman, while the prose portion (khaṇḍas 3 and 4) describes a personal brahman.

Brahman is described in wholly abstract terms in the first two chapters: “It is different from that which is known and beyond that which is unknown.” ¹ Brahmaṇ is here described as inexpressible: “That which cannot be expressed by speech, through which speech itself is expressed—know that that alone is brahman, and not that which they worship here.” ² Brahmaṇ is here the first cause and the impeller of everything.

The prose portion of the Kena contains a mythological tale of how brahman manifests itself and appears in front of the gods. Brahmaṇ challenges Agni to burn a blade of grass, but the god of fire is unable to do so. Vāyu, the god of the wind, is likewise unable to blow away even a blade of grass. The god Indra finally discovers, with the aid of Umā, that the apparition is brahman, and that brahman is the force underlying everything, including the fire and the wind. ³

¹ Kena 1.4.
² Kena 1.5.
³ This Indo-European myth may be quite old; it does bear some resemblance to the old Norse myth retold by Snorri in the Gylfaginning where the god Thor and his servants participate in a contest where they fail to beat their mysterious competitors.
The myth is recounted here to emphasize that brahman is the origin of all power, including the power of the gods. The anthropomorphic brahman in sections 3 and 4 of the Kena is so different from the inexpressible brahman in sections 1 and 2 that it is likely, on conceptual grounds, that the metrical and prose portions of the text have different origins.

Ātman in the Kena

Ātman is not discussed very extensively in the Kena. It is stated that one gains power (vīrya) by one’s ātman. The only other time the term ātman is mentioned in the text is in 4.4, where ātman is used in the old sense of “body”. The main focus of both the verse section and the prose section of the Kena is on brahman, and not on ātman.

Indra in the Kena

The Vedic gods Agni, Vāyu, and Indra all appear in the Kena. Indra is the only one among them who eventually comes to understand the true nature of brahman, “and that is why Indra is higher than the other gods”, according to the text. As we have seen, Indra is presented as a positive figure in several of the older Upanisads. The idea that Indra became the king of the gods because of his knowledge of ātman/brahman is, we may recall, also found in the Kaṇśītaki Upaniṣad. The positive portrayal of Indra in this Upaniṣad is reminiscent of that which we find in the Upaniṣads affiliated with the Rgveda. This may reflect the positive attitude toward the Rgveda and its schools in general encountered in texts affiliated with the Sāmaveda.

Umā in the Kena

In the Kena, we encounter the only female wisdom teacher in the Upaniṣads who can rival Gārgī of the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, the goddess Umā:

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1 Kena 2.4.
2 Kena 4.3.