AN EARLY UPANIŠADIC READER

With notes, glossary, and an appendix of related Vedic texts

Edited for the use of Sanskrit students
as a supplement to Lanman’s Sanskrit Reader

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The brahmin was his mouth; the rājanya was made his arms; His thighs what is the vaiśya, from the feet arose the śūdra.

The moon arose from (his) mind, from his eye arose the sun;
From the mouth both Indra and Agni, from the breath arose Vāyu (the wind).

From the navel came the ether, the sky unfolded from the head;
From the feet, the earth; from the ear, the quarters; in this way they laid out the worlds.

Seven were his surrounding sticks, three times seven were the kindling sticks made,
When the Gods, stretching out the sacrifice, tied up Puruṣa as the victim.

Through the sacrifice the Gods sacrificed the sacrifice; these were the first laws/ordinances/forms/norms;
These powers went to the highest heaven where the earlier Gods, the Sādhyas, are.

1 These are the male and female principle, respectively, who engender each other mutually (see note 2 on selection H:2).

H. Being and non-being

1. The nāsadiya-sūkta (RV 10:129)

Like the puruṣa-sūkta, this hymn is a creation account, operating with paradoxes (at least, that is the usual interpretation). The hymn, especially its beginning, is widely cited in upaniṣadic literature, no doubt in part because the hymn mentions tadvēkāṁ ‘that One (ultimate entity)’ (verse 2 and 4) and thus converges with one of the major interests of the upaniṣads, the question of the transcendental unity behind the diversity of the
phenomenal world. The hymn ends in pessimism, but that pessimism is most powerfully expressed. Because of its significance, the hymn has given rise to a large number of translations and interpretations. The following translation has benefited from many of them, but does not attempt to follow any one of them in detail. — A recent study argues for a very different interpretation of this hymn (Joel Brereton, ‘Edifying puzzlement: Ṛgveda 10.129 and the uses of enigma’, Journal of the American Oriental Society 119: 248-260, 1999). Relying on the relatively late identification in Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa 6 and 10 (Selection J below) of the ṛṣis at the beginning of our hymn as referring to the ṛṣis, he questions the traditional ‘cosmogonic’ interpretation of the hymn and instead proposes to interpret the hymn as identifying ‘the original creativity’ of the poets. Brereton’s proposal is highly interesting, but needs to be subjected to critical scrutiny, taking into consideration the entire range of indigenous Indian interpretations (beyond the ŚB one), ranging from allusions or direct references to our text in the Vedic literature to discussions in the commentatorial literature.

नासीदासीदो सदासीतदानिः
किमावरौः कुहं कस्य शर्मकम्भं
किमासीदहत गस्सीरम्। ॥ १ ॥

There was not non-being, nor was there being then; there was no air, nor was there heaven above.

What kept on moving? Where? And under whose protection? What was the water, impenetrable, deep?

न मृत्युरासीददर्न न तत्रति
आनीवात स्वधया तदेकं
न राज्य अह आसीत्प्रकेतः।
तस्माद्यान्य च पर: किं चनासं ॥ २ ॥

There was no death, nor immortality at that time. There was no sign of night or day. That One breathed windless on its own. Beyond it nothing else existed.

तम आसीत्तमसा गृहहम्गे
प्रकेतं सदिः सर्वं इदम्
तुच्छेनाभ्यपिंहित्य यदासीत्
तपस्त्तमहिनायतेकम्। ॥ ३ ॥

Darkness there was in the beginning, hidden by darkness. All of this was a signless flood.

The force that was enclosed by emptiness, the One, was born by strength of (mental) heat.

कामसत्तदाय समंतंतांधि
सुतो बन्धुमसः तिरंविन्दन्
मनसो रेतं प्रथमं यदासीत्।
हृदि प्रतीष्या क्रृत्यवो मनिषा ॥ ४ ॥

In the beginning desire unfolded on it, which was the first seed of the mind. The sages found the bond of being in non-being, searching in their hearts, by thinking.
Their measuring chord was spread athwart. Was there below by chance, was there above?

There were seed-pourers, there were powers. Desire was below, beyond was will.

Who indeed knows? Who will declare here? From where did this creation come about? The Gods are later than this (world’s) creation. So, who knows whence it came about?

This creation, whence it came about, whether it was created, whether not,

Who is the overseer of this (world) in highest heaven, he surely knows, unless he does not know.

2. असतः सद्यायत (from RV 10:72)

In this hymn, too, the creation of the world is portrayed as something of a paradox, through images and ideas which are mutually contradictory. The hymn is included here because the असतः सद्यायत of verses 2 and 3 is no doubt referred to in Selection XI.

Let us now, with rejoicing, proclaim the generations of the Gods

Brahmanaspati forged them together like a blacksmith.

In the earliest age of the Gods, being was born from non-being.

In the first age of the Gods, being was born from non-being. The quarters (of the world) arose thereafter. It (the world) [was born] by one with spread-out legs.¹