

Zurvan: From Word to Belief – A Narrative in Philosophy and Religion

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Abstract:

Zurvan, the deity of time in the religious traditions of ancient Iran, stands as one of the profound and multifaceted concepts in the history of Iranian thought (ancestors of the Tajiks, Persians, and Kurds). This article seeks to examine the concept of Zurvan from philosophical, historical, mythological, and literary perspectives. The etymology of the term is explored within the context of Indo-European languages, followed by an analysis of religious narratives in Pahlavi texts, the Avesta, Manichaean sources, as well as Greek and Armenian materials. The influence of Zurvan on doctrines such as Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism is also discussed. The paper illustrates how Zurvan, as a mediating concept between the philosophy of time and the myth of origins, has attained a foundational place in Iranian thought.

Keywords: Zurvan, time, myth, ancient Iranian philosophy, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Zoroaster, Pahlavi texts

1. Introduction

In the history of Iranian religious and mythological thought, few concepts have had as profound an impact on dualistic worldviews as *Zurvan*. Zurvan is not merely a religious figure but embodies a philosophical structure related to origins, time, determinism, and divine will. This paper aims to analyze Zurvan from various angles, including its linguistic roots and mythological context.

2. Etymology of Zurvan

The word *Zurvan* appears in Avestan as 𐬰𐬀𐬭𐬀 (zruvan), and according to the Dutch linguist

Alexander Lubotsky, it derives from the Proto-Indo-European root *ǵerh₂, meaning “old age” or “wearing out” (Lubotsky, 1997). The term is not merely synonymous with “time,” but rather symbolizes *duration*, *infinity*, and the *divine nature of time*.

3. Zurvan in Mythology and Pahlavi Literature

In Pahlavi texts, Zurvan is introduced as the god of time and the father of Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda) and Ahriman (Angra Mainyu). Eznik of Kolb (5th century CE) recounts an ancient Zurvanite belief wherein Zurvan prays for a thousand years to have a son like Ohrmazd, but a moment of doubt causes Ahriman to be born alongside Ohrmazd (Eznik of Kolb, c. 450 AD). This duality reflects not merely a moral allegory, but a complex concept involving determinism, doubt, and the creation of opposites.

4. Zurvan and Manichaean Doctrine

In Manichaean cosmology, Zurvan is also portrayed as the primordial god of light and the creator of Hormizd and Mithra. Mani’s narrative of the opposition between the essence of light and darkness reflects the Zurvanite idea of a common origin for good and evil within the absolute Zurvan (Sundermann, 2009).

5. The Philosophical Position of Zurvan: Eternal Time and Predestined Fate

In Zurvanite thought, time is not seen as a linear flow but as an eternal, self-aware, and fate-determining being. This concept shares similarities with the Greek *Chronos* and Near Eastern ideas of *fate* (*fatum*) (Boyce, 1982). In myths, Zurvan is not only the father of good and evil forces but also, through the acceptance of fate born of his doubt, represents a philosophical portrayal of *responsible time*.

6. Zurvanism vs. Zoroastrianism

In the Gathas of Zoroaster, there is no mention of Zurvan. The belief in Zurvan emerges in the Younger Avesta and Sasanian texts, where it is condemned by Zoroastrian priests as a heresy (Zaehner, 1955). The conflict between Zurvanites and Mazdeans (Zoroastrians) can be interpreted as a struggle between determinism and free will, monotheism and dualism.

7. The Fourfold Cosmological Structure of Zurvan

Pahlavi literature, especially Zurvanite narratives, presents a cosmological structure of four principal forces: Zurvan (time and destiny), Ohrmazd (light), Ahriman (darkness), and Mithra (mediator and sun). This structure offers a philosophical balance between good and evil and justice, and can be analyzed in comparison with Indo-Iranian narrative frameworks (Shaked, 1994).

8. Conclusion

Zurvan is an interdisciplinary concept traversing linguistics, philosophy of religion, mythology, and literature. A renewed interpretation of this ancient deity not only enhances our understanding of Iranian cosmology but also aids in rethinking concepts such as time, determinism, evil, and ethics.

References & Notes

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