

# **AION-AIONIOS: Eternity, Age, or World?**

**by John Wesley Hanson, A.M., D.D. (Revised 1880 edition)**

[For the full version go to <http://a.co/3lgxYiY>]

## **INTRODUCTION:**

The word that is rendered aion-aionios<sup>2</sup> in the Greek Septuagint, and everlasting, eternal, etc., in the English Bible, is olam<sup>3</sup> in the original Hebrew Scriptures, derived from olm,<sup>4</sup> to cover, or conceal. It literally means hidden, unknown, and, when applied to time, it signifies indefinite duration, whether past or future<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the hills are said to exist from olam. As the Hebrew knew that they had a beginning with the creation of the earth, and would end with its destruction, of course he did not mean to say that the hills are literally everlasting when he termed them olamic. As he knew that they had a beginning, so he knew they would have an end; but as the period of their duration was unknown, he said they were from olam. The word is used in one text<sup>6</sup> in both a limited and unlimited sense; and it signifies in one case<sup>7</sup> only three days and three nights.

So of future time, some things were to exist to olam, e.g., the Covenant, the Law, the Mosaic Economy, the Levitical Priesthood, etc, though it was supposed they would cease at Messiah's advent. They are olamic, because their duration is indefinite, hidden, concealed from man. Dr. T. Clowes observes: "The word olam is used 459 times in the Old Testament; and when we consider how uniformly the Septuagint translators and the writers of the New Testament have rendered the word by aion and aionios, there being probably not ten instances of deviation from this uniformity by the Septuagint translators, and not so many by the New Testament writers; and when we consider further, the manifest advantage of this uniformity to those who in former ages read the Septuagint and the New Testament in their mother tongue, in giving them a clear and definite idea of olam, we are led to express a deep regret that the English translators did not give their readers a similar advantage. But our translators have rendered this virtually one word, olam, occurring 657 times in the Bible, by almost thirty different

words and phrases; most of them signifying duration, to be sure, but varying their signification as to its extent from a three days' duration, to a duration without beginning and without end. The first five places in which olam occurs in the Old Testament are rendered by no less than five different words: Gen. 3:22, forever; Gen. 6:3, always; Gen. 6:4, of old; Gen. 9:12, perpetual; Gen. 9:16, everlasting. In Gen. 13:15, he shows that olam signifies the duration of human life, and remarks: "And let no one be surprised that we use the word olam in this limited sense. This is one of the most usual significations of the Hebrew olam and the Greek aion, and it is perfectly right to use Scripture terms in Scripture senses. This sense of olam and aion runs through all the writers in Greek, Latin and English. ... There is no evidence that any words in the Old Testament implying duration refer to the future life of man. Neither is it certain that the ancients, by the terms of duration which they employed to describe the Divine existence, fully comprehended the idea of interminable existence. Indeed, this is an idea beyond the reach of any human intelligence.

The Hebrew spoke of the earthly existence of man as his olam. The Greeks and Latins had the same manner of speaking. The aion or aevum of man, meant the period of his existence, consisting of a few years on earth; the aion or aevum of God conveyed the idea of existence without beginning of years or end of life." Parkhurst says: "It denotes a hidden duration, and it seems to be used much more frequently for indefinite, than for infinite time."

If the ancient Hebrew wished to express great but unknown duration, past or future, he resorted to reduplications and intensified forms, as in Micah<sup>8</sup>: "We will walk in the name of the Lord our God for an olam and an olam of olams," according to the Syriac version<sup>9</sup>, or, in the Hebrew, for an olam of ads the latter word being a synonym of the former. The phrases, "generations of olams," and "olams of ads," are intensified forms of the word for the purpose of describing indefinite, but still limited, duration; for at the time the Old Testament was written the Hebrew mind had not cognized the metaphysical idea of endless duration, and therefore could have no word expressive of eternity. Says a French author<sup>10</sup>: "It is certain that in the Hebrew there is no word which, properly speaking, signifies eternity or a time which has no end. Gno lam signifies only a time, of which we know not the beginning or the end; according to the signification of its root, which means to conceal, to hide. Thus it is to be understood more or less strictly according to the object to which it is applied. When it relates to God or his attributes we should take it in its largest possible extent, that is to say, of an

absolute eternity. But when it is applied to things that have a beginning or an end, we must understand it in a manner so limited as the subject requires. Thus, when God says of the Jewish laws that they should be observed *le gnolam*, forever, we must understand a space of time as long as God should find it proper, a space of which the Jews, before the coming of the Messiah, did not know the end." An equally eminent German writer<sup>11</sup> declares: "The pure idea of eternity is too abstract to have been conceived in the early ages of the world and accordingly is not found expressed by any word in the ancient languages. But as cultivation advanced and this idea became more distinctly developed, it became necessary in order to express it to invent new words in a new sense, as was done with the words *eternitas*, *perennitas*, etc. The Hebrews were destitute of any single word to express endless duration. To express a past eternity they said, before the world was; a future, when the world shall be no more. ... The Hebrews and other ancient people have no one word for expressing the precise idea of eternity." To render *olam* by eternal or everlasting, is therefore manifestly incorrect, or to translate its intensified forms by forever, forever and ever, etc, is equally inaccurate. The exact equivalent of the noun *olam* is age, epoch, aeon. The double form of *aion* is a rendering of the Hebrew *olam va ad*. *Olam* is long time, *olam va ad*, longer time. But if *olam* were eternity, to affix words denoting longer would be absurd. In the Septuagint *ton aiona*, *kai ep' aiona*, *kai eti*, and in the New Testament *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, etc, are Greek equivalents of *olam va ad*, meaning literally, in English, long, but limited duration.

Duncan, in his Hebrew Lexicon, thus defines *olam*: 1. "A long indefinite period. *Tempus homini absconditum tam infinitum et eternum quam finitum, ut Gen. 17:8*, etc, *plerumque est perpetuum, eternum, sempiternum*. Robertson's Thesaurus. Exod. 21:6. 2. Perpetuity, durability, Is. 64:4. But most frequently eternity. 3. The world, Eccles. 3:11." Buxtorf and Schindler define *olam* as "A hidden time, an age, time hidden from man." Gesenius, in the last edition of his Hebrew Lexicon, gives eternity as the first meaning of *olam*, but remarks that "it is frequently used in a limited sense."<sup>12</sup> J. W. Haley asserts<sup>13</sup> that "the Hebrew *olam*, rendered forever, does not imply the metaphysical idea of absolute endlessness, but a period of indefinite length, as Rambach says, "a very long time, the end of which is hidden from us."

Of course the Greek word *aion* into which the Hebrew *olam* is almost always rendered, must, in the Old Testament, have the precise meaning of the word it represents; and all the modifications of *aion*, its reduplications and intensified forms, must carry the same

force as do the Hebrew expressions whence they are derived. As from *olam* signifies from an indefinite past time, and to *olam* an unknown time in the future, to be interpreted by the subject treated, so from an *aion* or to an *aion*, must denote indefinite time. An *olamic* period is an *aionion* period, and an *olam* of *olams* or an *olam* of *ads* is an age of ages. It follows that the corresponding Greek form *eis tous aionas ion aionon*, instead of being rendered forever, or forever and ever, should in English, be represented by an age of ages, or ages of ages, or some other phrase indicating an indefinite period to be determined by the subject treated. Of their own intrinsic force the words cannot denote endless duration.<sup>14</sup>

The Comparative Hebrew Lexicon of Meier says that *olam* (as a verb) is derived from *olaph*, to cover, to conceal, to hide away. He also gives as the meaning of *olam* (as a noun), undetermined (or indefinite) time, past or future hence, remote time and eternity; thus averring that eternity is not the original but the derived meaning. He gives also as a later meaning time, timehood (German, *zeitlichkeit*). Besides, he says that *zeitlichkeit* also means world.

It has long been a prevalent opinion that the words forever, everlasting, eternal, and their cognates in the English Bible, signify endless duration, because it has been supposed that the Hebrew and Greek words from which they are rendered have that meaning and, as they are found qualifying punishment, it is believed that the occurrence of the words in such a connection demonstrates the endlessness of punishment.

The author of this treatise has endeavored to put within brief compass the essential facts pertaining to the history and use of the word, and he thinks he conclusively shows that it does not afford any support whatever to the erroneous doctrine. It will generally be conceded that this tenet is not contained in the Scriptures if the meaning of endless duration does not reside in the controverted word.

The reader is implored to examine the evidence presented, as the author trusts it has been collected, with a sincere desire to learn the truth. The inquiry is pursued in a manner intended to be satisfactory to the scholar, while it shall also be within the apprehension of the ordinary reader, so that the learned and the unlearned may be able to see the subject in a light that shall relieve the Scriptures of seeming to teach a doctrine that blackens the character of God, and plunges a deadly sting into the believing heart.

It is not going too far to say that if the word in question does not carry the force of endless duration, then the dogma of endless punishment is not found in the Bible. This excursus shows that interminable duration does not reside in the word.<sup>15</sup>

Three avenues are open to us through which to pursue this important investigation: I. Etymology; II. Lexicography; III. Usage.

[For the full version of this study on Aion-Aionios go to <http://a.co/3lgxYiY>]

-----

### **End Notes**

1. ΑΙΩΝ-ΑΙΩΝΙΟΣ.
2. αἰών-αἰώνιος.
3. עולם
4. עולם
5. The lexicons are uniform in giving this definition.
6. Hab. 3:6.
7. Jonah 2:6.
8. 4:5.
9. Tayler Lewis in Lange's Commentary.
10. LeClerc, 1705. (Olam is here spelled after the French and Portuguese fashion, the g being silent.)
11. Knapp, Greek Testament.
12. Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, p. 53.
13. Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible, p. 126.
14. It may be observed that there are several other words that are sometimes used as the equivalents of olam: ad, until; netsach, flowing; tamid, stationary; dor, generation; kedem, east; kol yamim, all days; orek, long; yamim, days; adi-ad, to long future time; la-ad, to long future time; dor vador, generation to generation. We give the literal meaning, but they are employed to indicate indefinite duration. If olam meant eternity, it would be absurd to try to add to its meaning by saying olam va ad; if aion meant eternity, it would be equally absurd to say eis ton aiona, kai eis ton aiona, etc, in the Old Testament, or eis tous aionas ton aionon in the New Testament. No rule of language would permit their use. But as the nouns simply denote a long time, it is proper to extend their meaning.

15. While passing this work through the press, we came across the following on “olam” in Appendix A, in *Is Eternal Punishment Endless?* By Rev. J.M. Whiton:

#### GESENIUS’S HEBREW-ENGLISH LEXICON – OLAM.

A) Properly ‘hidden,’ specially hidden time, i.e., obscure and long, of which the beginning or end is uncertain or indefinite, duration, everlasting, eternity, spoken: 1. Of time long past, gray antiquity, as Gen. 6:4, mighty men which were of old (from *olam*). 2. Often also of future time, ever, forever, in such a way that the limitation is to be determined from the nature of the subject, Thus, a) Specially in the affairs of single persons, *olam* is sometimes put for the whole period of life, as, a servant forever (of *olam*), ie, not to be set free in all his life (Deut. 15:17). Sometimes put for very long life, (Ps. 21:4) length of days for ever and ever (*olam va’ed* [like our for ever and age]. b) As pertaining to a whole race, dynasty, or people, and including the whole time of their existence until their destruction. 1 Sam. 2:30, Thy family shall serve me forever (to *olam*), ie, so long as it endures. c) Nearer to the metaphysical notion of eternity, or at least to an eternity without end, approach those examples in which *olam* is attributed to the earth and to the universe. Eccl. 1:4, the earth abideth forever (for *olam*). So of human things which refer to a period after death, eg, sleep of *olam*, everlasting sleep, for death, Jer. 2:39,57; house of *olam*, his everlasting house, long home, Eccl. 12:5. d) The true and full idea of eternity is expressed by *olam* in those passages where it is spoken of the nature and existence of God, who is called (Gen. 21:33), the God of *olam*. Of him it is said (Ps. 90:2), from *olam* and unto *olam* Thou art God. e) Of a peculiar kind are those passages where the Hebrews by hyperbole ascribe eternity in the metaphysical sense to human things, chiefly in the expression of good wishes; let my lord the king live forever (to *olam*), 1 Kings 1:31. PLUR. *Olamim*, ages, everlasting ages, like Gr. –αἰώνες [aeons], ie, a) ages of antiquity, Isaiah 51:9; b) future ages, the remotest future, Psalm 77:7.

B) The World, like Gr. αἰών [aeon], hence love of wordly things, wordly-mindedness. So Eccl. 3:11, Although he (God) hath set the love of wordly things (*olam*) in their heart, so that man understandeth not the works of God. [So in the New Testament, ‘Be not conformed to this world’ (aeon – Romans 12:2), is equivalent to ‘Love not the world’ (cosmos – 1 John 2:15).] It would seem unnecessary to suggest that limited duration is the prevailing sense of this word by an immense preponderance. Dr. Whiton observes, also, pp. 9-10: “*Olam* in the Hebrew Testament very frequently meant a world-period or cycle. Ecclesiastes 1:4 – The earth abideth forever, literally, for the *olam*, or cycle: LXX for the aeon. Psalm 145:13 – Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom; literally, a kingdom of all *olams*, or cycles; LXX of all the aeons. “Exodus 40:15 – Their anointing shall surely be for an everlasting priesthood; literally, for a priesthood of *olam*, or a cycle; LXX a priestly anointing for the aeon. In this last instance, the *olam*, cycle, or aeon, closed, as we see by comparing Hebrews 7:11, 12, at the end of the Mosaic dispensation. Again, Psalm 143:3 – Those that have been long dead; literally, the dead of *olam*, or, as we should say, “the dead of ages”; LXX the dead of aeon. The word aeon accordingly retains in the New Testament this peculiar Hebraistic color which the LXX had given to it.” (The unlearned reader should understand by LXX the Greek Old Testament, that is, the Septuagint, translated from the Hebrew by seventy scholars, hence called the LXX).

## Table of Contents

FORWARD

PREFACE

Aion-Aionios

INTRODUCTION

ETYMOLOGY

LEXICOGRAPHY

USAGE – 1. THE GREEK CLASSICS

USAGE – 2. THE OLD TESTAMENT

USAGE – 3. JEWISH GREEK

USAGE – 4. THE NEW TESTAMENT

USAGE – 5. THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX B: Aionios and Aidios

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX D

### APPENDIX B: Aionios and Aidios

There is but one Greek word besides *aionios* rendered everlasting, and applied to punishment, in the New Testament, and that is the word *aidios*, found in Jude 6: “And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting [αἰδιος] chains under darkness, unto the judgment of the great day.” This word is found in but one other place in the New Testament, viz. Romans 1:20: “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his *eternal* power and Godhead.”

Now, it is admitted that this word, among the Greeks, had the sense of eternal, and should be understood as having that meaning wherever found, unless by express limitation it is shorn of its proper meaning. It is further admitted that had *aidios* occurred where *aionios* does, there would be no escape from the conclusion that the

Greek Classics, and the Old and New Testaments, teach endless punishment. It is further admitted that the word is here used in the exact sense of aionios, as is seen in the succeeding verse: "Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire." That is to say, the "aidios chains" in verse 6 are "even as" durable as the "aionian fire" in verse 7. no less and no more durable. Which word modifies the other?

1. The construction of the language shows that the latter word limits the former. The aidios chains are even as, equal to, the aionion fire. As if one should say, "I have been infinitely troubled, I have been vexed for an hour"; or, "He is an endless talker, he can talk five hours on a stretch." Now, while "infinitely" and "endless" convey the sense of unlimited, they are both limited by what follows, as aiodios, eternal, is in this instance limited by aionios, indefinitely long.

2. That this is the correct exegesis is evident from still another limitation of the word. "The angels ... he hath reserved in aidios chains unto the judgment of the great day." Had Jude said that the angels are held in aiodos chains, and stopped there, not limiting the word, we should not dare deny that he taught their eternal imprisonment. But when he limits the duration by aionion and then expressly states that it is only unto a certain date, we understand that the imprisonment will terminate, even though we find applied to it a word that intrinsically signifies eternal duration, and that was used by the Greeks to convey the idea of eternity, and was attached to punishment by the Greek Jews of our Savior's times, to describe endless punishment, in which they were believers.

But observe that, while this word, aidios, was in universal use among the Greek Jews of our Savior's day, to convey the idea of eternal duration, and was used by them and the heathen to teach endless punishment, he never allowed himself to use it in connection with punishment, nor did any of his disciples but one, and he but once, and then he carefully and expressly limited its meaning, and did not apply it to human misery but to fallen angels. Can demonstration go further than this to show that Jesus carefully avoided the phraseology by which his contemporaries described the doctrine of endless punishment? He never employed it. What ground, then, is there for saying that he adopted the language of his day on this subject? Their language was aidios timoria, endless torment. His language was aionion kolasin, age-lasting correction. They described unending ruin, he, discipline, resulting in reformation.

Dr. Whiton most pertinently observes:\* “If now it be assumed that aidian regularly denotes that which is strictly everlasting, then we are met by a question that ought to be answered, ‘Why, with this word at hand, to give precise expression to the idea of endless duration, have the sacred books never employed it with reference to the future of the human race, but always the indeterminate word aeonian?’ For instance, in the very next verse (7), Jude, in speaking of the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah, drops the word aidian, just used with reference to the angels, and takes the word aeonian, a change scarcely noticed in our version by the change of ‘everlasting’ to ‘eternal.’ Aeonian and aidian may be used interchangeably in the writings of Plato, but they are not in the writings of the Apostles; in these the futurity of mankind is only aeonian.

“Professor Bartlett pronounces the occurrence of aidion here (in evidence, as he assumes, that aeonian is the same as endless) to be ‘singular and startling.’ His wonder suggests to us a further wonder. If aidian has the meaning of endlessness any more clearly and strictly than aeonian, then the entire avoidance of this clearer and stricter term throughout the New Testament as descriptive of human destiny in the future state is certainly very ‘singular,’ even if not actually startling.

“It might, however, be regarded as even ‘startling’ if, after all the reliance that has been placed upon this passage, it should turn out that a limited interpretation is here attached to aidian by its context. What if Jude only meant to affirm that the imprisonment of the fallen angels is ‘everlasting’ until the Judgment! – thus leaving the after ages unspoken of?”

Thus the word whose meaning of endlessness no one disputes, is

1. Never employed to denote the perpetuity of human suffering.
2. It is not applied to the fate of man at all, but only to certain “angels.”
3. When applied to fallen angels it is expressly limited by being stated to be even as “aeonian,” no more.
4. It ends at the judgment, being only “until” then.
5. Finally, with this word right within reach, Jesus and his Apostles declined to use it to describe the punishment of the sinner, but only employed the aeonian terms, which uniformly possess the sense of limited duration. **Can such an omission be explained except on the ground that He taught a limited punishment?**

Many instructive passages illustrating the use of aidios may be found in the work of Gregory of Nyssa entitled Against Eunomius. In the summary of the work I find the following passage: "The Creator of the world had no beginning, but is without beginning and eternal [aidios]." Again he says, "Christ is the good will of the Father which was from eternity [εξ αιδιου]." Wishing to make clear his view of the eternity of God, Gregory says (vol. 1, p. 156 Oehler's ed.), "We affirm concerning the eternity [αιδιοτητα] of God what we have heard from prophecy, that God is [was] before time [προαιωνιος], and rules time [αιωνα], and [literally] unto time [επ αιωνα], and beyond [ετι]." "For this reason" he continues, "we pronounce [define] him to be before all beginning and beyond all end." Again, p. 377 of the same volume, Gregory says, "But the creation has a beginning in time [αιωνας], but what beginning think you had the maker [ποιητου] of the ages [των αιωνων]?" Similar passages, however, by this writer are too numerous for exhaustive citation. More than 100 to the same import might be collated from his works. Gregory flourished AD 370.

The reader of the Fathers will see that they made a wide and clear distinction between aidios and aion. (President White has furnished the last two paragraphs).

-----

[For the full version of this study on Aion-Aionios go to <http://a.co/3lgxYiY>]