Jewish Greek Usage of AIONIOS in the time of Jesus

Preface:
Did Jesus teach that unrepentant sinners would face eternal conscious torment as God’s judgment in the afterlife? After years of study on this issue I am convinced that the answer is NO! The afterlife is a subject that was largely ignored in the Old Testament and the first to write explicitly on the subject was Daniel, who wrote of a future resurrection (12:2) when the righteous would be raised to “life” and the wicked raised to “shame and everlasting [sic] contempt.” In the study referred to below the words that are translated as “everlasting” and “eternal” in English bibles are reviewed. What it concludes is that the original Hebrew (olam) and Greek (aionios) words that are translated as “eternal” do not in fact support this interpretation, and that the punishment meted out to sinners in the afterlife is age-limited rather than eternal.

The concept of eternal torment first appeared in pagan religion and was probably brought into Pharisaic Judaism after Judah’s return from exile in Babylon. This would make it one of the “traditions of men” that were held and taught by the Pharisees (Mark 7:6-8). Paul also warns against such man-made teachings saying in Colossians 2:8, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” Truly the doctrine of eternal conscious torment has held many people captive and has been an abusive slander against the good and loving character of God for far too long.

In the chapter from this study below it is shown that Jesus refutes this teaching by referring to the consequences suffered by sinners in the afterlife as aionion kolasis (Matt. 25:46). Now this is translated in modern bibles as “eternal punishment” but a study of both of these words exposes the errors. Firstly, aionion points to something that is age-limited, and secondly, kolasis points to corrective discipline rather than retributive punishment. In other words, the “punishment” that is meted out in the afterlife is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. The discipline of the afterlife is given for the purpose of purification and correction leading to reconciliation, and is not merely pain inflicted for its own sake, or for the satisfaction of the punisher.

While Jesus used the phrase aionion kolasis we find that the Pharisees of His era used completely different terminology when referring to punishment in the afterlife, which they unreservedly believed to be eternal conscious torment. Instead of using aionios
the Jews in their Greek writings preferred the word *aidios*, a word explicitly meaning eternal, everlasting, and never-ending. And instead of using the word *kolasis* they used the word *timoria*, which does explicitly signify retributive punishment of the eye-for-an-eye sort, inflicted for the satisfaction of the one doing the punishing. The usage of *timoria* shows that this form of punishment was for a punitive purpose, pain-for-pain, and also acted to instill fear in the hearts of onlookers thereby delivering a preventative effect. But who are the onlookers who would benefit from the sufferings of sinners in this imagined hellfire of eternity? Could it be that the dark and merciless doctrines of the Pharisees merely reflected their *own* character, rather than God’s?

The conclusion that should be drawn from this study is not that the afterlife is a pleasant place for unrepentant sinners, for all will indeed be held accountable for their actions after death. Rather it is to defend the good and loving character of God as declared by Jesus in Matthew 5:38-48. In this opening sermon Jesus delivered a curveball to His late-Second-Temple Jewish audience, teaching that we must *forgive* our enemies, not paying back evil for evil, and that we prove ourselves as sons of God by *loving* our enemies. The implicit teaching here is that *God Himself* loves His enemies, which was certainly not in line with Pharisaic teaching at the time! Furthermore, Jesus goes on to teach that it is easy for us to love our friends, because even the pagans do that! We, however, are called to love *everyone* unconditionally, even our enemies, which is the way we model the perfection of our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:48).

The heavenly Father who is introduced to us by Jesus Christ is a God of Love. His love never fails and His love cannot be escaped. These are crucial elements that must be part of our doctrine of the afterlife, and what Jesus teaches about *aionion kolasis* is entirely consistent with His portrayal of the loving nature and character of our heavenly Father. In contrast to Jesus, those who would portray God as inflicting pain and punishment upon sinners merely for punishment’s sake eternally in the afterlife are depicting God as a Pharisee who teaches us to behave *one way* but Himself behaves *another*. This was the critique Jesus gave of the Pharisees (Matthew 23:3) and we go tragically wrong if we characterize God as a Pharisee who acts with the same hypocrisy!

Keep this in mind as you now turn to the scholarly work of John Wesley Hanson for the evidence that confirms what has been summarized here in this brief preface:
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by John Wesley Hanson, A.M., D.D. (Revised 1880 edition)

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Unfortunately but very little Jewish-Greek literature, contemporary with Christ and his apostles, survives. The targums are of dates long subsequent to the Christian era, so that they can throw little light on the meaning of words among the Greek-speaking Jews at the time of Christ. By contact with the heathen, and from other causes, they had greatly degenerated in their religious ideas, and the traditions and fables contained in the targums are of slight value in the discussion of the great questions of man’s destiny.

But of the Jews who were contemporary with Christ we may safely make one assertion: they used the word under consideration precisely as it was used in the Old Testament. They were diligent students of the Septuagint, and they could put no construction on our word different from that which we have seen it to carry in the Greek Scriptures, with which they were perfectly familiar.

We find the truth of this statement established as we consult Josephus, who applies the word to the imprisonment to which John, the tyrant, was condemned by the Romans; to the reputation of Herod; to the memorial erected in re-building the temple, already destroyed when he wrote; to the worship in the temple, which, in the same sentence, he says was destroyed; to the glory acquired by soldiers, and he styles the time between the promulgation of the law and his writing, a long aion. 148 To accuse him of attaching any other meaning than that of indefinite duration to the word, is to accuse him of stultifying himself. In his treatise on Daniel, he says, “He was held in the greatest favor and honor by kings and people, whilst he lived; and, having died, he is still held in (μνημην αιωνιον) eternal remembrance.” In his work against Apion, “It is plain from this fact, how much faith we have in these writings; for no one has dared, so long a time having already passed away (τοοουτον αιωνος ηδη παρωχηκοτος), to add anything, nor to diminish, nor to change anything.”

But when he wishes to describe endless duration he employs other and unequivocal terms. Of the doctrine of the Pharisees he says, 149 “They believe that spirits possess a deathless vigor, and that under the earth there will be rewards and punishments, as they have lived virtuously or wickedly in this life, and that these last are to be kept in an eternal imprisonment (eirgmon aidion), etc.”

Again, 150 “Of the two first named, the Pharisees are regarded as most skilful in interpreting their laws, and constitute the first sect. They ascribe everything to fate and to God, but allow that to do what is right is mainly within the power of men, though fate
always cooperates. All souls are incorruptible, but while those of good men are removed into other bodies, those of bad men are subject to eternal punishment (aidios timoria).”

Elsewhere he says that the Essenes “Allot to bad souls a dark, tempestuous place, full of never-ceasing punishment (timoria adialeipton), where they suffer a deathless punishment (athanaton timorian).” It is true that he sometimes applies aionion to punishment, but this is not his usual custom, and he seems to have done this as one might use the word great to denote eternal duration, that is, an indefinite term to describe infinity. But aidion and athanaton are his favorite terms. These are unequivocal. Were only aionion used to define the Jewish idea of the duration of future punishment, we should have no proof that it was supposed by them to be endless.

Philo, who was contemporary with Christ, generally used aidion to denote endless, and aionion to describe temporary duration. Dr. Mangey, in his edition of Philo, says he never used aionion for interminable duration. He uses the exact phraseology of Matthew 25:46, precisely as Christ used it. “It is better not to promise than not to give prompt assistance, for no blame follows in the former case, but in the latter there is dissatisfaction from the weaker class, and a deep hatred and everlasting punishment from such as are more powerful.” Here we have the precise terms employed by our Lord, which show that aionion did not mean endless, but did mean limited duration, in the time of Christ. Speaking of the solicitude of the brute for its offspring, he observes, “Perceiving from afar with a long-reaching (aionia) sagacity.” Philo adopts athanaton, ateleuteton, or aidion, to denote endless, and aionion for temporary duration. In one place occurs this sentence concerning the wicked: “to live always dying, and to undergo, as it were, an immortal and interminable death.”

Stephens, in his Thesaurus, quotes from a Jewish work: “These they called aionios, hearing that they had performed the sacred rites for three entire generations.” This shows conclusively that the expression “three generations” was then one full equivalent of aionion.

Now, these eminent scholars were Jews who wrote in Greek, and who certainly knew the meaning of the words they employed, and they give to the aeonian words the meaning that we are contending for – indefinite duration, to be determined by the subject treated.

Thus the Jews of our Savior’s time avoided using the word aionion to denote endless duration, for, applied all through the Bible to temporary affairs, it would not teach it. If
he had intended to inculcate the doctrine held by the Jews, Jesus would certainly have used their terms. But he threatened age-lasting, or long-enduring discipline to the believers in endless punishment. Aionion was his word, while theirs was aidion, adialeipton, or athanaton. He thus rejected their doctrines, by not only not employing their phraseology, but by using only those words connected with punishment that denote limited duration.

It is sometimes said that Jesus adopted the phraseology current at the time he spoke, and used by others to convey the idea of interminable torment; but we have now shown that he did nothing of the kind. Instead of thanaton athanaton, immortal death, eirgmon aidion, eternal imprisonment, aidion timorian, eternal torment, and thanaton ateleutelon, interminable death, he used aionion kolasin, the adjective denoting limited duration, and the noun suffering, issuing in amendment. Not only did he refuse to endorse the views of the Jews, acquired from the heathen, but he absolutely condemned them. Referring to the cruel men who procured his death, Jesus said to his disciples, “Take heed and beware of the leaven (doctrine) of the Pharisees and the Sadducees” (believers in endless misery and believers in destruction). Had aionion been the strongest word, especially had it unequivocally denoted endless duration, who does not see that it would have been in general use as applied to punishment by the Jewish Greeks, of 19 centuries ago, who believed in endless punishment, but who stated it in stronger words than the aeonian phraseology?

Now, does not the fact that the Jewish Greeks contemporary with Christ generally used other words, and those that are stronger, as we shall show when we come to treat the New Testament usage, when they defined that endless punishment in which they were believers, and employed aeonian words to describe temporary duration, demonstrate that the aeonian words did not then denote endless duration? And if such was not their meaning then, is it not preposterous to suppose that Jesus gave to them such a meaning – one that no one else had ever given them, and one that no one would understand them to signify?

We thus have an unbroken chain of lexicography, and classic, old testament, and contemporaneous usage, all allowing to the word the meaning we claim for it, so that we are compelled, as we open the New Testament, to expect to find it employing the aeonian terms in the sense of limited duration.
End Notes

148. The way in which Josephus uses the word can be seen in the following instances of its application to temporal affairs. He speaks of the fame of an army as “a happy life, and aionion glory.” Ant. Jud., Lib. 4, cap. 6, § 5: “ενδαιυονα βιυν και κλευς αιωνιυν παραο χειν, etc. – et Gloria donet immortaliam. He calls a memorial aionion – Ant. Jud., Lib. 1, c. 13, § 4, και μνημην αιωνιον – in sempiterna memoria. Ant. Jud., Lib. 12, c. 7, § 3, αιωνιου την ευκλειαν etc – vos aeternam manere gloriam, etc. Ant. Jud., Lib. 15, c. 11, § 1, και προς αιωνιου μυημην αοκεσειν – aique futurum ad sempiternam. See also ib., Lib. 4, c. 6, § 5; Lib. 15, c. 15, § 5; De Bello, Lib. 55, c. 2, § 1; c. 9, § 4.

149. Ant. Jud., Lib. 18, c. 1, § 3, ‘Αθανατον τε ιοχυν ταις φυχαις πιοτις αυτοις ειναι, και υπο χθονος δικαιωσεις τε και τιμας οις αρετης η κακιας επιτηδεμοις ευ τε βιω γεγονε, και ταις μεν ειργμον αιδιον, etc.

150. De Bello Jud., b. 2, c. 8, § 14, Δυο δε προτερον φαρισαιοι μεν, οι δοκουντες μετα ακριβειας εξηγειοθαι τα νοαυιυα και την πρωτην επαγουτες αιρεοιν, ειμαρμενη τε και θεα προοαπτουοι παυτα, και το μεν πραττειν τα δικαια και μη, κατα το πλιοτον επι τοις ανθρωποις κειοθαι, βοηθειν δε εις εκαοτον και την ειμαρμενην ψυχην δε παοαν μεν αοθαρτον, μεταραινειν δε εις ετερον οωμα την αγαθων μονην, την δε των αιδιω τιμωρια κολαζεσθαι.

151. κολαοις αιωνιοις.


156. Beecher, Hist. Fut. Ret., pp. 73-75. Dollinger, quoted by Beecher. Philo was born 25 years before Christ, and was learned in Greek philosophy, especially revered Plato. His use of Greek words would be perfectly accurate, and is of the highest authority.

157. For an exposition of kolasin, rendered punishment in Matthew 25:46, see next chapter.


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