

judgments. These judgments are fallible because man looks at the outward appearance. They are also limited in their power to bring benefit. God is the divine judge, who looks at the heart. **‘True and just are his judgments’** (Rev 19: 2). Aeonian judgment is this judgment of God.

### Aeonian Punishment

Jesus finished his parable of the sheep and the goats with the words: **‘They will go away to aeonian punishment, but the righteous to aeonian life’** (Mat 25: 46). The primary meaning of the Greek word *kolasis* (κολασις), here translated *punishment*, is *correction*. Was Jesus speaking of *everlasting correction*? What sort of correction could go on for ever and ever? Is God unable to complete his work? *Aeonian* punishment or correction takes place in the higher, unseen spiritual realm, beyond the time and space of our material world. God’s corrective and restorative purposes for his whole creation will be perfectly achieved.

### Conclusion

If we translate the Greek word *aionios* either by *everlasting* or by *age-lasting* we meet with inconsistencies and contradictions. If we trace it back to its roots in the Hebrew word *olam*, pointing us to the unseen, timeless realm of God the Scriptures take on new and consistent meaning.

Everything described by the word *aionios* or *aeonian* is rooted in the timeless nature of God. Everything aeonian relates to him. Aeonian life and aeonian fire are aeonian because they are part of the nature of God, who is from everlasting to everlasting, from *olam* to *olam*. These things exist for the whole of human time, and they go beyond into the timeless and invisible realm of the spirit. They go beyond the comprehension of our time-limited minds and belong to the timeless and spiritual realm of God.

**‘Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known’** (1 Cor 13: 12).

#### **Ὀλεθρος - Destruction or Lostness**

1. Eternal destruction is a contradiction in terms. Destruction cannot be for a length of time, whether short, long or infinite. You can have complete destruction or partial destruction, but you cannot have eternal destruction or temporary destruction. Unlike being destroyed, you could be lost for a short time or a long time, or even, as some people believe, for ever.

2. Being *lost from the face of the Lord* makes sense, whereas being *destroyed from the face of the Lord* makes no sense.

3. The Greek noun ὀλεθρος (olethros) translated *destruction* comes from the verb ὀλλυμι (ollumi), which can mean either *to destroy* or *to lose*. Luke uses its compound ἀπολλυμι in chapter 15 to describe the lost sheep and the lost (prodigal) son, as well as in John 3: 16, where it is commonly translated *perish*, but might better be translated *be lost*. If we translate ὀλεθρος as *lostness*, it makes perfect sense.

4. I have used the word *lostness* which is not in the English dictionary, as the equivalent word *perdition* is now archaic.

# The Hidden Aeonian Realm

**This is aeonian life:  
that they may know you,  
the only true God,  
and Jesus Christ,  
whom you have sent.**

John 17: 3

Bible quotations are taken from the NIV or retranslated

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Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life.' Life is part of the very nature of God. So also is fire. Moses told the people of Israel: 'the Lord your God is a consuming fire' (Deut 4: 24 quoted in Heb 12: 29). He spoke to Moses from the middle of the burning bush, and he went in front of the Israelites as a pillar of fire. Further we read, 'He is like a refiner's fire. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver' (Mal 3: 3).

Besides being used with the adjective *aeonian*, fire is also used several times with the adjective *unquenchable*. In fact, this thought runs through scripture. God spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Ex 3: 2). This was no ordinary fire. All normal fires consume what they burn, or rather dissolve it into ashes and smoke, and cease to burn when the work is complete. The bush continued to burn. This fire was different to all normal fire, and belonged to a higher order, not bound by the normal laws of earth.

Later God instructed Moses, 'The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out' (Lev 6: 13). No doubt this reminded Moses of the burning bush, and symbolised the presence of God.

Both Isaiah and the book of Revelation speak of smoke that ascends 'to olam' or 'to aions of aions.' Again this is impossible for any earthly fire, but makes sense in the supernatural realm of God.

This same aeonian fire of God operates on all the human race. It baptises and purifies the saints. It will purge and correct sinners till the total divine work of God is accomplished for all the human race.

### **Aeonian Lostness (Destruction)**

'The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who will be punished with **aeonian lostness (everlasting destruction)** from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of his power' (2 Thes 1: 7-9). I believe *lostness* is a better translation of the Greek word *ολεθρος* than *destruction* (see note at end<sup>1</sup> for reasons). Hence I have replaced the words *everlasting destruction* with *aeonian lostness*.

The thoughts of fire, punishment and lostness are all combined in this one passage. Those who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ will suffer the punishment of rejection from the presence of God. They will be lost. Three times Jesus spoke of those who would be thrown into outer darkness. This surely is the same reality as aeonian lostness. This punishment takes place beyond and outside our world of time and sense; and when its purpose is accomplished, all will be reconciled to God. The Good Shepherd will eventually find every sheep who has been lost.

### **Aeonian Judgment**

In Heb 6: 1, 2 we read of the foundational teachings of: 'repentance from dead acts, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and **aeonian judgment**.' Human judges make human

not go to prepare a mansion in the sky for his followers to enjoy after they died. Rather he prepared an invisible, spiritual place for them and us to inhabit immediately here and now.

## Fire, Judgment, Punishment & Destruction

We turn now to the apparently negative nouns with which the adjective *aeonian* is used in the New Testament. We find the nouns *fire*, *punishment*, *destruction*, *judgment* and *sin* (though some manuscripts have judgment in place of sin).

Here we find a serious logical problem with the traditional interpretation. *Eternal punishment* means punishment that goes on continuously for ever and ever. *Eternal destruction* presumably means that what is destroyed ceases to exist for ever and ever. How can something that has ceased to exist continue to suffer punishment? In fact we will see later that this phrase, which occurs only once in the Bible, is almost certainly a mistranslation. Neither does the phrase *eternal judgment* make good sense. Does the judgment process continue for ever - like a court in permanent session? Or is it rather judgment with eternal consequences? *Eternal fire* does not make good sense either. Fire continues to burn till all its fuel is consumed, and then its work is done. Even if these phrases make sense individually, collectively they contradict each other. Again we come to the same conclusion as before. The word *aeonian*, normally translated *eternal* in our Bibles, relates to the nature of the fire, destruction, judgment or punishment, rather than to its duration. It speaks of things that are heavenly, spiritual and invisible, rather than the earthly visible counterparts of these things that we see with our natural sight.

Fire, judgment, punishment and destruction are all related to each other, and frequently occur together in different passages of scripture. Nevertheless we will now consider the scriptures relating to them individually.

### Aeonian Fire

The theme of fire occurs many times in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus himself spoke several times about fire. In Mat 25: 41 we read the words: '**Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the aeonian fire prepared for the devil and his angels.**' In Mat 25: 41 he said: '**It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the aeonian fire.**' In Mark 9: 42 he spoke of the unquenchable fire of Gehenna. In Luke 16: 24, the rich man of the parable was '**in agony in this flame.**' We also read the words of John the Baptist, '**he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire**' (Mat 3: 12) and in the book of Revelation, '**he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur (brimstone) in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up to aions of aions**' (Rev 14: 10, 11).

Aeonian fire contrasts with aeonian life. The righteous go into aeonian life, while the unrighteous go into aeonian fire. The meaning of aeonian is the same for both. Just as aeonian life is a higher, spiritual and unseen kind of life of which earthly life is only a picture, so aeonian fire is a higher, spiritual and unseen fire of which natural fire is only a picture.

## Introduction

In traditional translations of the Scriptures we read wonderful things about eternal or everlasting life, an everlasting gospel and eternal glory. We also read of terrible things such as eternal destruction, eternal punishment and torment that continues for ever and ever. Elsewhere in the Bible we read that everything in heaven and earth will eventually be reconciled to God .

How can eternal punishment be reconciled with the reconciliation of all things? And how can eternal destruction be reconciled with eternal punishment?

Are we understanding these phrases correctly, and are they correctly translated from the original Greek and Hebrew?

In this article, I want to examine this subject and call three witnesses to the box to assist our enquiry.

Firstly I want to discuss the linguistic aspects of the subject, particularly the Hebrew word *olam* (עולם) and the Greek words *aion* (αἰών) and *aionios* (αἰώνιος) that lie at the root of the subject - especially the Hebrew word *olam*, which, I believe, has received inadequate attention in the writings of others.

Secondly I want to look at what Bible chronology can contribute to the subject.

Thirdly I want to discuss scientific considerations of time, rising from Einstein's theory of relativity.

After that, we will re-examine many of the phrases where in English translations the word *eternal* has been used, and come to a new and consistent understanding of their meaning.

Parts of this discussion may be difficult to understand. Some readers may wish to skip the earlier parts and be content just to read my conclusions, or even search elsewhere for food more amenable to their spiritual digestive systems! Others, especially those who have already studied and maybe written on the subject themselves, will, I hope, gain fresh understanding from a more in depth study of what I have written.

## Misconceptions

I believe there are two main misconceptions that are widely taught among Christians today regarding the Greek words *aion* (αἰών) and *aionios* (αἰώνιος).

Firstly we have the traditional teaching that *aionios* always means *eternal*, and *eis aiona* (and similar expressions) means *for ever*. On this linguistic foundation rests the common belief that most of the human race will suffer eternal torment and damnation.

Secondly we have the opposite and mainly more recent teaching. This tells us that *aion* always means an *age* and *aionios* means *age-lasting*. This I believe is much nearer the truth, and certainly less harmful than the traditional teaching. However I believe it is not the whole truth. It springs from a failure to study the meaning of the Hebrew word *olam* (עולם) in the Old Testament and an ignorance of various linguistic principles.

## The Meanings of Words

How do we find out what an ancient Greek or Hebrew word means? Look it up in a dictionary appears to be the obvious answer. Huge labour and scholarship have gone into the compiling of dictionaries, and generally speaking they do us a vast service. However, they are not infallible and sometimes reflect unchallenged traditional views and the theological biases of those who compile them. To be more sure of a word's meaning we ourselves have to do the same research and use the same methods that the dictionary writers have done.

What are these methods?

Firstly, study the word in all the scriptural and other contexts in which it is used. This is the primary method.

Secondly, look at the roots from which the word comes. *Olam* comes from a Hebrew verb root *alam*, which means *to hide*. The adjective *aiōnios* comes from the noun *aion*. We would expect its meaning to be related.

Thirdly, look at related words in other languages. The English *eon* comes from the Greek *aion*. This last method is perhaps the least reliable. For example, the French word *sensible* means the same as the English word *sensitive* – **not** the same as the English word *sensible*.

The first of these methods always has the final authority. Word meanings change over time, and can drift away from what they originally meant, making the two other methods less reliable.

## Languages of the Bible

Most people know that the original manuscripts of the Old Testament were in Hebrew while those of the New were in Greek. What many people do not understand is the influence of Hebrew on the Greek of the New Testament.

Consider the following facts. All the writers of the New Testament, except Luke, were native Hebrew or Aramaic speakers. (Scholars do not agree on which. Hebrew and Aramaic are close enough to each other for their differences not to matter in this context, while Greek is totally different.) The writers either wrote in Hebrew and were later translated into Greek, or if they wrote in Greek, they were still thinking in Hebrew. Foreigners speaking English often bring the structures, the pronunciation and the word senses of their own languages into English. (I once heard of an Israeli who invited a chicken to dinner when he really meant to order it for dinner!) Most native English speakers do the same and worse when they try to speak other languages. When Hebrew speakers wrote the books of the New Testament in Greek, or translated them from Hebrew into Greek, they brought the Hebrew language structures and word meanings across into Greek. This means that to be sure of the meaning of a Greek word in the New Testament, we often need to ask what Hebrew word it was being used to translate. What was the Hebrew thought behind the Greek word?

backwards or forwards to and beyond the time horizon into a realm that is hidden from our natural sight. It is the best that human language can do to describe a life that is invisible and unexplainable to the natural mind, that goes beyond all limits of time and space and that belongs not to the realm of earth, but to the kingdom of God.

### The Aeonian Spirit

In Heb 9: 14 we read of '**Christ, who through the *aeonian* Spirit offered himself unblemished to God.**' The Greek word *pneuma*, translated into English as *Spirit*, basically means *wind*. Hence it seldom appears alone, but needs qualification to make its meaning clear. Most commonly we read of the *Holy Spirit* or the *Spirit of God*. Here Paul uses the words *Aeonian Spirit*, to make it clear that he is referring to the supernatural, heavenly, invisible Spirit that proceeds from God, rather than its earthly shadow the wind.

### The Aeonian Gospel

The word gospel means good news, or in older English good tidings. In the old covenant messengers brought good tidings to Zion of the restoration of Jerusalem and doubtless brought great joy. But this was not an *aeonian* gospel. The blessings of Zion in that dispensation belonged to the temporary and visible realm. They could not last. The *aeonian* gospel is a gospel of *aeonian* restoration, life, salvation and redemption. All these blessings are hidden from the natural eye, but are permanent and more real than their physical and visible counterparts.

### Aeonian Salvation and Redemption

Jesus '**became the source of *aeonian* salvation for all who obey him**' (Heb 5: 9). He '**entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained *aeonian* redemption**' (Heb 9: 12).

The themes of salvation and redemption run through the pages of the Old Testament. God wonderfully redeemed his people from the land of Egypt. Then the centuries passed by, and sadly they again fell into captivity in the land of Babylon. Many times in the book of Judges God sent saviours to save his people from their enemies. All these salvations were only temporary in nature and again and again they fell back into bondage and servitude.

*Aeonian* salvation and redemption are totally new and different. Once again we see that they contrast with the temporary salvation and redemption of the old covenant and belong to the permanent, invisible and spiritual realm of the new.

### Aeonian Dwellings

'**They will receive you into *aeonian* dwellings**' (Luke 16: 9). '**We have a building from God, an *aeonian* house in heaven, not built by human hands**' (2 Cor 5: 1). '**I am going to prepare a place for you, so that you also may be where I am**' (John 14: 3). The natural mind thinks about living in a physical house made of brick or stone. Solomon even built a physical house of stone where God could live. Jesus did



*aeonian*. Aeonian is an existing English word, but so little known to most people that it has the advantage of having no preconceived ideas attached to it. Instead of the familiar phrases *everlasting God*, *eternal life*, *eternal salvation* etc I will write *aeonian God*, *aeonian life*, *aeonian salvation* etc.

Paul wrote, 'we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is aeonian' (2 Cor 4: 18). The word *aeonian* describes those things human eyes have not seen, and ears have not heard, because they belong to the unseen realm of the kingdom of God.

We will consider one by one the things which the New Testament describes by the Greek adjective *aionios*.

## The Aeonian God

Both in the New Testament (Rom 16: 26) and in the Old, God himself is described as the *aeonian God*. 'Abraham called upon the name of the LORD, the *aeonian God*' (Gen 21: 33).

The word implies that God always was, is now and always will be. He is the great *I am*, creator of time and space, and himself outside and beyond both. He is spirit, not flesh and is invisible to human sight.

## Aeonian Life

More than half the times when the adjective *aeonian* is used in the New Testament, it is associated with the word life. It describes the life that Jesus came to bring. 'Whoever believes in the Son has *aeonian life*' (John 3: 36). 'Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has *aeonian life* and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life' (John 5: 24). Jesus came to bring *aeonian life*.

The emphasis of the word *aeonian* is not on the length of this life, but on its nature and quality. Quite simply there are two kinds of life. The old covenant places its main emphasis on natural, physical life. 'Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you.' Prolonged physical life was the best the old covenant could offer. Jesus came to give spiritual life. This was and is life on a totally new and higher plane. Physical life is visible and temporary and destructible. Spiritual life is unseen and permanent and indestructible. All this is implied in the word *aeonian*.

'Whoever believes in the Son has *aeonian life*' (John 3: 36) In this and many other verses, we find not the future tense, but the present. Not *will have* aeonian life, but *has* aeonian life. Aeonian life is not an infinitely prolonged extension of this life after we die. It is a new, spiritual life which we receive from Jesus when we receive him.

Jesus contrasted these two lives in his words to Nicodemus: 'What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit' (John 3: 5).

In the New Testament as we have it Jesus used the Greek word *aionios* to describe this life; but without doubt the actual word he used was the Hebrew word *olam*. As we have seen the word *olam* implies time extending

When we want to study a New Testament Greek word in this way, how can we know what the original corresponding Hebrew word was? Happily we have a ready-made dictionary in the form of the Septuagint. The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Old Testament made in Alexandria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. When the Old Testament was quoted in the New Testament, this was the version that was used. It forms a vital link between Hebrew and Greek and often is a clue to the thought behind Greek words in the New Testament.

All this is strongly relevant to our present study. The Greek words *aion* and *aionios* are used throughout the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word *olam*. We cannot make a proper study of the Greek words *aion* and *aionios* (as many have attempted to do) without studying the Hebrew word *olam*, which they are frequently used to translate.

## Hebrew Olam

We will commence then with a study of the Hebrew word *olam*, a word which occurs about 440 times in the Hebrew scriptures.

In English translations of the Old Testament, whenever we find the words *everlasting*, *eternal* and *for ever*, it is this one Hebrew word – *olam*.

The noun *olam* comes from a verb root *alam* meaning *to hide*. As we see from the scripture passages that follow, it is impossible to translate the word *olam* consistently into English or any other language, but one thought runs through all the ways it is used. It refers to time that is hidden from our view. It speaks of time that has gone beyond the horizon of our vision.

The word *olam* is used in three main ways:

1. Referring to time past – literally *from olam* (מֵעוֹלָם and מִן הָעוֹלָם). These phrases occur at least 20 times, a sample of which I will quote, using typical standard translations:

'I have kept silent for a long time' (Isaiah 42: 14).

'Mighty men which were of old' (Gen 6: 4).

'From everlasting to everlasting, you are God' (Psalm 90: 2) (as below)

'You are from everlasting' (Psalm 93: 2).

'They were the inhabitants of the land from ancient times' (1 Sa 27: 8).

'From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River' (Joshua 24: 2).

'It is an ancient nation' (Jer 5: 15).

All the above are translations of the same Hebrew phrase *from olam*, but clearly the length of time varies. The shortest is the length of time Isaiah had kept silent. The longest is the length of time that God has been God!

2. Referring to future time – literally *to olam* (לְעוֹלָם, עַד עוֹלָם and עַד הָעוֹלָם). *To olam* is much more common than *from olam*. Like *from olam* it clearly refers to time periods of differing lengths.

The following examples will illustrate:

‘That he may appear before the Lord and stay there **for ever**’ (1 Sam 1: 22).

‘But the LORD shall endure **for ever**’ (Ps 9: 7).

‘The LORD is King **for ever**’ (Ps 10: 16).

‘From everlasting to **everlasting**, you are God’ (Ps 90: 2 (as above))

‘Joshua burnt Ai, and made it a heap **for ever**’ (Jos 8: 28).

‘The smoke thereof shall go up **for ever**’ (Is 34: 10).

‘The earth with her bars was about me **for ever**’ (Jonah 2: 6).

Once again these verses all translate the same Hebrew phrase *to olam* (with slight variations). The shortest length of time is the three days that Jonah spent in the fish, even if it felt like for ever to him. The longest, as with *from olam*, is the length of time that God will be God.

3. Referring to things of long or apparently unlimited duration. For this *olam* is used in conjunction with a noun and normally translated into English by the adjectives *everlasting* or *eternal* or the phrase *for ever*. The following are some examples: *everlasting God, everlasting covenant, everlasting possession, everlasting priesthood, everlasting commandment, everlasting hills, everlasting doors, everlasting life, a slave for ever.*

Everyone – scientists and theologians – agrees that hills are not everlasting. Before God created the earth, whether by an instantaneous word or by a long geological process, the hills were not there. Equally everyone who believes in God believes that there is no time at which he did not exist, and no time when he will cease to be.

How does *olam* come to have this variable meaning – anything from three days to infinity? The reason lies in its derivation. As I’ve said, it comes from the verb *alam* meaning to *hide*. One thought runs through every use of the word *olam*. Whatever we are considering stretches continuously to the limit of our vision and beyond. Either its beginning or its end or both are hidden from view. It is beyond the time horizon, either of an individual person, or of the whole human race. Beyond the time horizon, backwards or forwards, everything is hidden.

The sea stretches to the horizon. How far beyond that does it go? We don’t know. It might go a little beyond, or it might go on for ever. The horizon is as far as we can see. If the sea has an end, we cannot see it. It is the same with what is described by the word *olam*. Whether it be God, or the hills, or doors, or the destruction of an ancient city, we can see no limit to it. It disappears beyond the horizon of our vision.

The word *olam* is used most suitably to describe God. He was before the beginning of time. He is the great omnipresent **I am**. He will be unchanged when time ceases to exist. He remains hidden from our natural sight.

Unlike the Greek word *aion*, and contrary to what many writers have said and are saying, the Hebrew word *olam* never means an age. My Hebrew dictionaries, though differing on other matters, agree on this.

Rather it is true that each person and object has its own individual time scale depending on its own individual motion, and independent of all other time.

This fact is the basis of much science fiction writing featuring travel in time. C S Lewis also uses these ideas in his Narnia novels. The children heroes of his stories could pass through the wardrobe door, and spend hours, days, weeks, months or years in the land of Narnia, and return to England to find that no time at all had passed in their normal world.

Physicists say that it is impossible for anything to travel at the speed of light. But have you not read that ‘**What is impossible with men is possible with God**’ ? (Luke 18: 27). The apostle John wrote the words ‘**God is light.**’ Following our principle of physics we see that what to God is little or no time can be of long or almost infinite duration to an earthbound observer.

King David touched this truth when he wrote the words, ‘**For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night**’ (Ps 90: 4). Peter wrote similar words: ‘**One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day**’ (2 Pet 3: 9).

Even our own experience tells us the same story. Time flies when we are occupied or enjoying ourselves, and can seem interminable when we are waiting with nothing to do. We lay our heads on the pillow every night, and 8 hours can pass without our minds recording any time at all. And we read that ‘**Jacob served seven years for Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her**’ (Gen 29: 20).

The second aspect of relativity that concerns us is known as the space-time continuum. Space and time are not independent of each other, but are related. Together space and time make up four dimensions. Travel in space cannot be separated from travel in time.

This confirms the fact that when God created the universe, he also created time. He himself is outside both. Before he created the universe in the distant past there was neither space nor time. When at some time in the future he finally brings it to an end, both time and space will together cease to be.

The Hebrew word *olam* and the Greek word *aion* both predate modern science in their ability to refer to both space and time. Their meanings are wider than we have previously thought.

## The Aeonian Realm

We return now to review the use of the Greek word *aionios* in the light of our linguistic and scientific findings. We find this word perfectly adapted to describe the things that relate to God and the realm of the spirit. In the old testament we read of things which were visible, temporary and limited because they belonged to the natural, earthly realm. In the new, we meet with the spiritual counterparts of those earthly things, which are invisible, heavenly and permanent.

From now on I will replace the Greek word *aionios* with the English word

mystery. The Bible had different calendars running side by side that recorded different periods of time. One calendar recorded time according to normal human reckoning. Another calendar only recorded time when God's purposes for his people were going forward. For 14 years from the birth of Ishmael to the birth of Isaac, when the wrong heir was in Abraham's tent, this calendar stopped. No time was recorded because God's redemptive purposes were in abeyance. When the ark of the covenant was captured by the Philistines and kept in their land for 20 years, and at other times of oppression in the time of the judges, again this calendar stopped. The clock stood still when the Jews were in captivity in Babylon for 70 years. Again God did not record time in this special calendar.

When these failed time periods were removed from Israel's chronology, the remaining time was divided into perfect 490 year cycles stretching right across Old Testament history. Apparent inconsistencies of time as recorded in the Scriptures were also resolved.

Several different calendars co-exist, hidden beneath the surface of the scriptures, all recording time in different ways, each giving a different measurement according to the principles on which it is based.

I have written a separate article entitled Bible Chronology on this subject, and the websites Bible Chronology and Miracle of Time give much further detail. However what concerns us here is one outstanding fact: God does not measure time as man does. What to man may be a long unhappy period of judgment may to God be no time at all. God himself created time and, though manifested in time especially in the person of Jesus Christ, he himself is outside it.

## Science and Relativity

Einstein's theory of relativity teaches us the same lessons as Bible chronology. Two major aspects of it relate to what we have been discussing.

Firstly, Einstein discovered that time was relative rather than absolute. We would naturally think that time is fixed and the same for everybody. 2 seconds is always 2 seconds. 7 days is always 7 days. That, however, is not the case. What to one observer is 2 seconds could be 3 seconds to another observer. What to one observer is a day could to another observer be a thousand years!

As an object approaches the speed of light, time moves more slowly. If two identical clocks were synchronized and one placed in a spaceship travelling away from Earth, then, when the spaceship returned, its clock would show that less time had elapsed than the stationary clock at home would show. A clock placed at the top of a very high tower has actually been found to measure less time than an identical clock placed at the bottom.

Time on the spaceship becomes shorter and shorter, as it approaches the speed of light. One day on the spaceship could be equivalent to one year for a stationary observer. It is impossible for an object to travel at the speed of light, but if it could, time would reduce to nothing or cease to exist.

Time is not like a fixed absolute corridor through which people and events pass.

In later (Rabbinical) Hebrew and in modern Hebrew *olam* commonly means *world* or *universe*. Like time, the world and the universe both stretch far beyond the horizon of our sight into the unseen. However *olam* seldom if ever means *world* in the Old Testament. There it always refers to duration of time.

## Greek Aion and Aionios

We must now turn our attention to the Septuagint.

How was *olam*, in the three ways it was used, translated into Greek? We find that *olam* is almost always translated by the Greek words *aion* and *aionios*.

*From olam* becomes ἀπὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος or *from the aion*.

*To olam* becomes εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα or *to the aion*.

*Olam* used with a noun usually becomes the adjective αἰώνιος - *aionios*.

All three of these Greek phrases occur again in the New Testament. We must therefore assume that when they are used in the same way in the New Testament as they are in the Old Testament, they have the same meaning. We will look at some examples.

1. Looking back in time - *from the aion* (ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων). This, or a similar phrase using *aion*, occurs in the following verses:

'As he said through his holy prophets **of long ago**' (Lk 1: 70).

'The mystery which **for ages** has been hidden in God' (Eph 3: 9).

'The mystery which has been hidden **from the past ages and generations**' (Col 1: 26).

All these phrases look back as far as possible in time, but several of them are clearly limited to the existence of human beings on earth. They do not go back infinitely.

2. Looking forward in time - *to the aions* or *to the aions of the aions* (εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας or εἰς αἰῶνας αἰώνων). These phrases with slight variations occur more than 60 times. The following are a sample:

'**Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever**' (Mat 6: 13).

'**No longer** shall there ever be any fruit from you' (Mat 21: 19).

'To Abraham and his descendants **for ever**' (Luke 1: 55).

'**If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever**' (John 6: 51).

'You will **never** wash my feet' (John 13: 8).

'To whom be glory **for ever and ever**' (Gal 1: 5).

'I will **never** eat meat again' (1 Cor 8: 13).

'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and **for ever**' (Heb 13: 8).

'The smoke of their torment goes up **for ever and ever**' (Rev 14: 11).

Exactly as with the Hebrew phrase *to olam*, we see a wide variation of the time envisaged, from part of a personal lifetime to the length of time that Jesus will remain unchanged. In every case though we can say that the time goes to and beyond the limit of our sight.

In some cases such as ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever’ the length of time is clear from the context. In other cases, such as ‘The smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever,’ the length of time is not clear, and we have to decide from the study of other scriptures what is the best translation.

3. Where *olam* is used with a noun in the Old Testament, we find it replaced by the Greek adjective *aionios* (αἰώνιος).

Altogether the word *aionios* is used about 70 times in the New Testament. No less than 45 of these occurrences are with the word *life*. It is also used on the positive side with the words *God, gospel, glory, salvation, redemption* and *dwelling*s, and on the negative side with the words *fire, judgment, punishment* and *destruction*.

It is very clear from the use of *aion* and *aionios* in the New Testament and Septuagint, that they can refer to things of both limitless and limited duration. We cannot find any single English word to translate them. Again we have to decide from the study of other scriptures what is the best translation in each case where these words are used.

We will return to this point after discussing two further senses in which the word *aion* is used in the New Testament.

## Further Meanings of *Aion*

We see clearly from the above that the noun *aion* and the adjective *aionios* are used in the same way as the Hebrew *olam* to mean a length of time going forwards or backwards to and beyond the visible time limit in the context where it is used. However the word *aion* is also used in two other ways in the New Testament.

Firstly *aion* is used to mean an *age*, or long but limited period of time. Nowhere in the Old Testament is *olam* used in this sense. We have 4 references to *the age to come* (Mt 12: 32, Mk 10: 30, Lk 18: 30, Heb 6: 5). Two of these verses include reference to the present age. We have one reference to the ages to come (Eph 2: 7). We have 5 references to the end of the age (Mt 13: 39, Mt 13: 49, Mt 24: 3, Mt 28: 20, Heb 9: 26). This is the meaning of the English word *eon*, which is derived from the Greek *aion*.

Secondly *aion* is used to mean *world*. Some people say that *aion* always means *age*, but that is clearly not so from the following two scriptures:

‘He has spoken to us by his Son, ... through whom he made the *aions*’ (Heb 1: 2).

‘By faith we understand that the *aions* were formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible’ (Heb 11: 3).

It is certainly true that God created the ages, but it is clear that *ages* cannot be the right translation of the word *aion* in these contexts. The *aions* were visible, and cannot therefore be periods of time. Also, Hebrews chapter 11 works through the Old Testament, beginning at Genesis, and it is natural that the creation of the universe should be the first topic. In Hebrews chapter 1 (quoted above) it would be totally natural when speaking of the glory of Jesus to describe him as the agent in the

creation of the universe. To refer to him as the agent in the creation of the ages, even though true, would not be relevant in the context. The whole of Hebrews is an exposition of Old Testament scriptures. The creation of the universe has pride of place in the first chapter of Genesis. The creation of the ages is never mentioned.

## Linguistic Summary

We may summarise our findings so far as follows:

The Hebrew word *olam* has no equivalent translation in English. It is derived from the word *alam* meaning *to hide*. It looks both backwards and forwards to the time horizon, and refers both to things that have a time limit and to things that do not. In modern Hebrew it also means *world* or *universe*, and the KJV translates it as *world* four times.

The Greek words *aion* and *aionios* are used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word *olam*. Then in the New Testament they are used with exactly the same meanings as in the Septuagint. Parts of the New Testament were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, and almost certainly the original word in these cases was *olam*. No consistent English translation is possible, but the sense is *to the limit of our time horizon and beyond*.

The Greek word *aion* is also used to mean an *age* or long period of time with a beginning and an end.

Additionally the Greek word *aion* is used in the plural to mean *worlds* or *universe*.

The teaching that *to the aions* (εἰς αἰῶνας) **always** means *for ever* and that *aionios* (αἰώνιος) **always** means *everlasting*, is wrong because it is inconsistent with many passages where these words are used in both Old and New Testaments.

Equally the teaching that *aion* always means *age* and that *aionios* always means *age-lasting*, is wrong because this teaching also is inconsistent with many passages where these words are used in both Old and New Testaments. I myself have taught this in the past, but have rewritten my article on Universal Reconciliation (previously called *Eternal Judgment*) to reflect what I now see.

It is interesting to note that the Greek word Hades (ᾅδης), the realm of departed spirits, literally means *unseen*. Departing spirits went to the unseen world. Further the very similar Greek word *aidios* (αἰδῖος) usually translated *eternal* (in Jude 6 and Rom 1: 20) may also mean *unseen* rather than *eternal*. Surprisingly even the English word *hell* derives from the Latin *celare* meaning *to hide*. Hell also meant a *hidden* place.

## Bible Chronology

We will now call our second witness on the subject of time, namely Bible chronology. Many scholars over a period of many centuries have tried to reconcile the various dates and time periods mentioned in the Bible. About 150 years ago an Irishman named Sir Edward Denny discovered an amazing key that unlocked the