

***Aionios*: The Word to Sharpen Our View of the Future**

by Anthony Buzzard

If believers really understood what was at stake in being a Christian, I am sure they would find the resources to be radically different from the world. The trouble is, I think, that many do not grasp the awesomeness of their destiny as co-regents with the Messiah in the coming Kingdom of God. They cannot thrill to Paul's challenge that we should conduct ourselves in a way that is worthy of the staggering invitation we have been given to the Kingdom (Eph. 4:1).

Until the Kingdom comes into focus in people's spiritual vision, the situation is likely to remain unchanged. In this brief study I suggest that the foggy translation of a key Greek word keeps Bible readers in the dark about the future. It also helps to propagate the monstrous notion that God is going to torture the wicked forever and ever.

Quite simply, "eternal" in our Bibles is a mistranslation of the Greek word *aionios*, which means "pertaining to the coming age of the Kingdom of God." It is a semi-technical term to be applied to all the good (and threatening) things of the future. What the righteous are invited to inherit is "life in the coming age" or "the life of the coming age." By contrast the wicked are ushered into "punishment excluding them from the coming age." A step towards clarity was taken by The Twentieth Century New Testament: A Translation into Modern English when they rendered "everlasting punishment" (Matt. 25:46) as "aeonian punishment." The length of the punishment is not described. It is a penalty based on exclusion from the coming age.

"Eternal Life" Should Be "Life of the Age to Come"

The term "everlasting" or "eternal life" is a poor representation of its very Jewish original. The phrase *zoe aionios*, in most Bible translations "everlasting" or "eternal life," really means the Life of the Age to Come or the Life of the Coming Kingdom, which is the same thing. Our good friend, the late Dr. Nigel Turner, remarks in his excellent *Christian Words*: "It is imprecise to render '*aionios* life' as 'eternal life.'"¹ Dr. Turner used a characteristic British

understatement: "It is imprecise" to translate *aionios* as "eternal." It is in fact very un-Jewish to render the word as "everlasting" or "eternal." This is much too vague and helps to veil the whole idea of the future Kingdom of God on the earth in the Age to Come. It clouds and befogs the great cardinal virtue of Hope. It allows for all sorts of alien philosophy to invade the faith and gives support for life in heaven as a bodiless spirit, which is something Jesus said nothing about.

About Revelation 14:6, usually translated "eternal Gospel," Nigel Turner wrote, "The '*aionios* Gospel' is not therefore in Christian language the 'everlasting Gospel'...Rather, it is the Gospel of, or concerning, the Kingdom-age (Rev. 14:6)."² More recently, N.T. Wright's *Kingdom New Testament* translation (2011) has correctly "the life of the age to come" in many verses. For example, "What should I do to inherit the life of the age to come?" (Matt. 19:16; Mark 10:17; Luke 10:25).

In addition the rendering of *aionios* as "eternal" in Matthew 25:41 causes the average reader to think of an eternal punishment for the wicked, an idea which some evangelicals are thankfully giving up. A strong case can be made for the destruction of the wicked based on the fact that the fire which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah is also "eternal" (*aionios*), that is "having to do with the future age of the Kingdom" (Jude 7). The fire is not still burning. What Jude meant was that the ancient fire which destroyed those evil cities was of the same sort as that which will destroy the wicked in the future. Supernatural fire is what is meant, not eternal fire.

In my translation of the New Testament, I have found that translating *aionios*, wherever it appears, as "of the age to come" or "belonging to the coming age" throws a flood of light on the text and saves us from much misinterpretation. How clear it is, for example, that in 2 Corinthians 5:1 Paul has in mind the future resurrection body of the believer which we "have," i.e. we have it as something God has prepared for us. And it is *aionios*, a body fit for the coming age of the Kingdom of God on earth. It is a body which enables us to maintain our identity. It will be a body animated by spirit and never subject to death.

The Battle over *aionios*

In 1857 Charles Kingsley helped to dispel the darkness with which Platonism had shrouded the truth of Scripture in regard to the future. He declared that

¹ Nigel Turner, *Christian Words*, 1980, p. 452.

² *Ibid.*, p. 456.

the word *aion* (age) “never is used in Scripture or anywhere else in the sense of endlessness (vulgarly called eternity). It always meant, both in Scripture and out, a period of time...*Aionios* therefore means, and must mean, belonging to an epoch...*aionios kolasis* is the punishment allotted to that epoch” (not everlasting punishment!).³

Tradition rose to oppose this truth when Dr. Pusey preached a sermon at Oxford to promote the idea of the everlasting punishment of sinners. He argued that the word *aionios* in classical Greek *does* mean endlessness. But classical Greek is a poor measure of the Hebrew-oriented New Testament language.

In 1877 Dr. Samuel Cox replied by pointing out that the word *aionios* “is saturated through and through with the thought and element of time. The adjective *aionios* must derive the whole of its meaning from the [noun] *aion* from which it is derived. In the NT the word is used in connection with the Jewish doctrine of the aeons [ages]. Instead of affirming that time shall be no more when men pass out of this present order and age, the New Testament speaks of ‘ages to come’ as well as ages that are past. In the past the Patriarchal age, the Mosaic age; in the future ‘the age of the Messiah’ or ‘the age to come.’”⁴

No wonder then that Paul spoke of God’s “plan for the ages” (Eph. 3:11). *Aionios* refers to the great age to come and God’s great purpose for that age.

In 1878 Canon Farrar added the weight of his scholarship to the emerging light of truth by asserting that “It has been so ably proved by so many writers that there is no authority whatever for rendering [*aionios*] as ‘everlasting.’”⁵ Professor E.H. Plumptre agreed: “The whole history of the word [*aionios*] shows that it cannot, as a word, denote endlessness.”⁶

Nevertheless the public were continuing to read in their inadequate translations that Jesus will usher the wicked into “eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46). In this way the fog of Platonism continued to interfere with the inspired words of Scripture. The latter could not be heard clearly as long as the confusion of Greek philosophical concepts jam the pure Hebrew signals of Scripture.

³ Charles Kingsley: *His Letters and Memoirs of His Life*, Vol. 1, p. 307.

⁴ Henry Major, “Aionios: Its Use and Meaning Especially in the New Testament,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, Oct. 1916, p. 8.

The Bible vs. Plato

Interestingly, in the vocabulary of Plato the word *aion* applies to things belonging to the world of eternal ideas. Platonically minded writers and thinkers, then, will use *aionios* in the transcendent and timeless sense in which Plato used it. It is that meaning which has been foisted on our translations, as through Platonic metaphysics is the basis of what the prophets and Jesus said about the future. Little wonder, then, that people expect souls to enter at death the eternal, timeless heavenly realm. But nobody could have got that impression from the Bible if *aionios* had been allowed to retain its Hebraic association with God’s plan for the ages.

As George Ladd wrote, “We are not to think of eternity as the Greeks did, as something other than time...In Hellenism people longed for release from the cycle of time in a timeless world beyond, but in biblical thought time is the sphere of existence both now and in the future. The impression given by the KJV at Revelation 10:6, ‘there should be time no longer’ is corrected in the RSV, ‘there should be no more delay.’”⁷

Aionios in Daniel

In the LXX *aionios* occurs over 160 times. One of these texts is of paramount interest to us: **Daniel 12:2** where it describes the resurrection life of those who after the tribulation emerge from their sleep in the dust of the ground. Here *aionios* describes *zoe* — life — and it was this famous phrase which was so often on Jesus’ lips: “the life of the age to come.” It appears 40 times in the NT, along with other phrases believed by Jesus and drawn from Daniel — “Son of Man” and “Kingdom of Heaven.” Daniel provided Jesus with a storehouse of phrases and ideas, all of which have been tragically distorted or ignored by Platonically oriented theology.

In the LXX of Daniel *aionios* appears 7 times and refers to:

- God’s Kingdom (4:3)
- God’s authority or rule (4:34)
- The authority given to the Son of Man (7:14)

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷ George Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1993, p. 44.

- The Kingdom given to the saints (7:27)
- The righteousness to be brought in after the end of the 70 “sevens” (9:24)
- The life of the age to come and the shame of the age to come (12:2)

As Vincent Taylor writes in his commentary on Mark, “*Zoe aionios*...appears first in Daniel 12:2 in connection with the idea of the resurrection of the dead...In origin the conception is eschatological: *Zoe aionios* is life in ‘the coming age’...No mere equivalent of immortality, it is a gift which a man receives from God in the resurrection.”⁸

Hastings Rashdall corroborates this definition of the word *aionios*: “Its fundamental meaning in the Gospels would seem to be ‘belonging to the aeon, the age’ that is to say, the coming age, the Messianic age. It certainly does not *mean* ‘everlasting,’ though sometimes no doubt it is applied to things which are everlasting.”⁹ ✧

⁸ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 1952, p. 426.

⁹ Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*, 1919, p. 12.