

Terms for Eternity:

Aiônios and aīdios in Classical and Christian Texts

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In the brief time we have today, we offer a summary of the research we are undertaking into the uses of two ancient Greek terms that are commonly translated as "eternal." The terms are aiônios and aīdios. Neither word is to be found in the Homeric epics or in the major poems of Hesiod, although the noun aiôn, from which aiônios derives, is very common, mainly in the sense of a "life" or "lifetime." Aīdios enters into Greek sooner, whereas aiônios first occurs, surprisingly enough, in Plato. Plato's introduction of the term is philosophically significant, as is the fact that Aristotle eschewed it completely in his own copious writings. The subsequent history of these terms, and the dance in which they engage with each other throughout Greek literature and philosophy, is fascinating in itself, but the real pay-off is in the way they are employed in the Septuagint and the New Testament, and thereafter in Christian writers who are usually equally familiar with their connotations both in the pagan tradition and in Scripture. What is more, a great deal proves to be at stake in how these two terms are interpreted: in fact, nothing less than the prospect of the eternal damnation of sinners versus the universal salvation of all. Thus, what may seem to be a dry investigation of subtle terminological distinctions proves to be a key to understanding ancient philosophical and religious thought.

The notion of "eternity" is not simple, in part because "eternity" has multiple senses, in part too because some of these significances involve a high level of philosophical abstraction. On the one hand, terms for "eternal" may bear the loose sense of "a very long time," as in the English "always," without implying a rigorous notion of infinitely extended time. Even at this level, the Greek adverb aiei, like the English "always," has at least two distinct connotations, referring both to an indefinitely prolonged stretch of time, equivalent to the English "forever" ("I will always love you"), and to an action that is regularly repeated ("he always comes late to class"). Again, there are intermediate uses, for example, "the house has always been on that street,"

meaning that, as long as the house has existed, it has been in the same place, without any implication of unlimited duration. On the other hand, "eternal" may signify a strictly boundless extent of time, that is, greater than any numerical measure one can assign. This latter description is itself imprecise, of course. It may mean nothing more than "countless," that is, too large to grasp, or grasp easily. But eternal time is more commonly understood to be strictly endless, with no termination at all. Even on this more rigorous conception, there are two senses in which time may be said to be eternal. It may have a beginning but no end; or it may have neither a beginning nor an end, but extend infinitely into the past and the future. What is more, in addition to all these varieties of "eternal," the adjective has been appropriated also to denote something like "timelessness," a changeless state that has no duration and hence is not subject to time at all.

To begin with aiônios in the presocratics, Ps.-Plutarch ascribes to Anaximander the idea that corruption and genesis occur in cycles "from an infinite aiôn," but these are surely not Anaximander's own words. Similarly, Hippolytus Ref. explains that Heraclitus "calls the eternal fire 'Thunderbolt.'" Similar usages are ascribed to the Pythagoreans, but these again are clearly later inventions.

In contrast to aiônios, the adjective aĩdios is attested in the sense of "eternal" or "perpetual" as early as the Homeric Hymn to Hestia and the Hesiodic Shield of Heracles, but in neither case does the expression imply a technical sense of "eternal." With the Presocratics, however, the term aĩdios in the sense of "eternal" seems to come into its own, in a series of testimonies beginning with Anaximander and continuing on down to Melissus and beyond, although here again one must be careful to distinguish between paraphrases and original terminology. For Anaximander, any of the attributed sentences would, taken alone, be of doubtful authority; taken together, the several passages perhaps suggest that Anaximander himself may have applied the adjective aĩdios to motion. For Xenophanes we have attestations of his use of aĩdios in the sense not only of "indestructible" or "immortal" but also that of agenētos, "uncreated. Again, the convergence of the various accounts suggests that Xenophanes may in fact have employed the adjective aĩdios in reference to god or the universe. Two testimonies concerning Heraclitus cite aĩdios as referring to the perpetual movement of things that are eternal and to the cyclical fire, which is god. Heraclitus' use of the term aĩdios in connection with cyclical phenomena is particularly noteworthy, for in later texts recurring or periodic events tend to be described rather by the word aiônios.

With Empedocles, we have the use of the term aīdios in his Katharmoi, guaranteed by the meter: "there is a thing of Necessity, an ancient decree of the gods, eternal." Among the Eleatics, Parmenides is said to have described the "all" as aīdios, in that it is ungenerated and imperishable. As for Melissus, Simplicius provides what appears to be a direct quotation affirming that "nothing that has a beginning and end is either eternal [aīdion] or infinite." It is worth noting that nowhere is the term aīōnios ever attributed to the Eleatics. Finally, Democritus too argued that time was aīdios, on the grounds that it was ungenerated, and that the whole of things too was eternal (aīdion to pan).

It would appear, in sum, that the term of art for eternal things -- all that is ungenerated and imperishable -- among cosmological thinkers in the period prior to Plato was aīdios, never aīōnios. In addition, aīdios is the standard adjective meaning "eternal" in non-philosophical discourse of the fifth century as well.

When we come to Plato, we find uses of both adjectives, aīōnios and aīdios, in the sense of "eternal." It is in the Timaeus that Plato enters most fully into the question of eternity, and here we find aīdios six times, aīōn four times, and aīōnios twice. Plato introduces the concept in reference to the model that the demiurge followed in creating the sensible universe by looking "to the eternal" (pros to aīdion, bis). Then, in a crucial passage, Plato remarks that the created universe was seen to be moving and living, an image of the eternal gods (tôn aīdiôn theôn, 37C6), and adds that it was itself an "eternal living thing" (zoion aīdion). Plato goes on to say that it was the nature of the living thing to be aīōnios but that this quality could not be attached to something that was begotten (gennêton). The creator therefore decided to make "a kind of moving image of eternity" (eikô d'epenoiei kinêton tina aiōnos), and so as he arranged the universe he made "an eternal image moving according to number of the eternity which remains in one" (menontos aiōnos en heni kat'arithmon iousan aiōnion eikona), and this he called "time."

On the one hand, aīdios and aīōnios appear to be virtually interchangeable: the model for the universe is "an eternal living thing" (zōion aīdion) and its nature is eternal (tou zōou phusis ousa aiōnios). And yet, Plato seems to have found in the term aīōn a special designation for his notion of eternity as timeless; and with this new sense of aīōn, aīōnios too seems to have come into its own as a signifier for what is beyond time. It was Plato who first articulated this idea of eternity, and he would appear to have created a terminology to give it

expression. Plato's conception of a timeless eternity remained specific to Platonism and closely related schools in antiquity.

Aristotle, as we have said, seems never to use the term aiônios, though there are nearly 300 instances of aïdios, which is Aristotle's preferred word to designate things eternal. It is clear that Aristotle was not moved to adopt Plato's novel terminology, whether because he perceived some difference between his own concept of eternity and that of his teacher, or because he felt that aiônios was an unnecessary addition to the philosophical vocabulary, given the respectability of aïdios as the appropriate technical term.

In the Stoics, aïdios occurs over thirty times in the sense of that which endures forever. It is applied to bodies and matter, the onta or realities that truly exist according to Stoic materialism, and above all to god or Zeus. To the extent that the Stoics employed aiônios and aiôn, however, there is either a connection with their specific view of cosmic cycles, as opposed to strictly infinite duration, or else the noun occurs in phrases indicating a long period of time. The Epicureans, in turn, regularly employ aïdios to designate the eternity of such imperishable constituents of the universe as atoms and void. Epicurus uses aiônios in reference to the future life that non-Epicureans expect, with its dreadful punishments: that is, to an afterlife in which Epicureans do not believe, and which does not deserve the name "eternal" (aïdios), properly reserved for truly perpetual elements.

Given the prevalence of the term aïdios in Greek literature down through the Hellenistic period, it comes as something of a surprise that in the Septuagint, aïdios is all but absent, occurring in fact only twice, both times in late books written originally in Greek: 4 Maccabees and Wisdom. In addition, there is one instance of the abstract noun, aïdiotês, again in Wisdom.

On the other hand, aiônios occurs with impressive frequency, along with aiôn; behind both is the Hebrew °olâm. A few examples of its uses must suffice. In Gen, the perpetual covenant with human beings after the flood, commemorated by the rainbow, is termed diathêkê aiônios, just as is that between God and Abraham and his descendants; in Ex it is the compact between God and Israel sanctified by the observance of the Sabbath, which in turn is called "an eternal sign" of this covenant across the generations and ages (aiônes). Here we see the sense of aiônios relative to aiôn, understood as a time in the remote past or future.

In general, the sense of aiônios is that of something lasting over the centuries, or relating to remote antiquity, rather than absolute eternity. Now, when the same term is employed in reference to God, e.g., theos aiônios, the question arises: does aiônios mean simply "long-lasting" in these contexts as well, or is a clear idea of God's everlastingness present in at least some of these passages? Take, for example, Ex 3:15: "God also said to Moses, 'Say this to the people of Israel, The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': this is my name for ever [aiônion], and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations [geneôn geneais]." The emphasis on successive generations, past and future, suggests perhaps that aiônios here connotes repeated ages, rather than a strictly infinite period of time. Many of the other examples come from relatively late texts, but even in these it is difficult to decide which sense is intended, in the absence of the kind of precise language to be found in the philosophers but alien to the Hebrew Scriptures. In some cases, moreover, the reference may be to the next epoch or aiôn, rather than to an infinite time as such.

Of particular interest is the mention in Tobias (3:6) of the place of the afterlife as a topos aiônios, the first place in the Hebrew Bible in which aiônios unequivocally refers to the world to come. In 2Mac, the doctrine of resurrection is affirmed and aiônios is used with reference to life in the future world. In sum, the Septuagint almost invariably employs aiônios, in association with the various senses of aiôn, in the sense of a remote or indefinite or very long period of time (like olâm), with the possible connotation of a more absolute sense of "eternal" when the term is used in reference to God -- but this connotation derives from the idea of God. In certain late books, like those of Tobias and the Maccabees, there is a reference to life in the aiôn, understood in an eschatological sense as the world to come, in opposition to the present one (kosmos, kairos).

The adjective aïdios occurs only twice in the Septuagint. In Wisdom, which is saturated with the Greek philosophical lexicon, Wisdom is defined as "a reflection of the eternal [aidion] light" that is God. In 4Mac, an impious tyrant is threatened with "fire aiônion" for the entire age or world to come (eis holon ton aiôna). But here we find the expression bios aïdios or "eternal life" as well, in reference to the afterlife of the martyrs; this blessed state, moreover, is opposed to the lasting destruction of their persecutor in the world to come. This contrast between the parallel but antithetical expressions olethros aiônios and bios aïdios is notable. Both adjectives refer to the afterlife, that is, a future aiôn, but whereas retribution is described with the more general

and polysemous term aiônios, to life in the beyond is applied the more technical term aīdios, denoting a strictly endless condition.

In the New Testament, when the reference is to God, aiônios may be presumed to signify "eternal" in the sense of "perpetual." Nevertheless, the precise sense of aiônios in the New Testament, as in the Hebrew Bible, cannot be resolved with the help of explicit definitions or statements equating it with terms such as "ungenerated" and "imperishable," of the sort found in the philosophers and in Philo of Alexandria. Hence, the positions adopted by religious scholars in this controversy have embraced both extremes. On the one hand, William Russell Straw affirms of aiôn that, in the Septuagint, "it is never found with the meaning of 'life,' 'lifetime'... The majority of instances can bear only the meaning 'eternal....' As for aiônios, "It may be rendered 'eternal' or 'everlasting' in every occurrence." Peder Margido Myhre, on the contrary, argues that the Platonic sense of the term as "metaphysical endlessness" is entirely absent in the New Testament. I quote: "Since, in all Greek literature, sacred and profane, aiônios is applied to finite things overwhelmingly more frequently than to things immortal, no fair critic can assert ... that when it is qualifying the future punishment it has the stringent meaning of metaphysical endlessness.... The idea of eternal torment introduced into these words of the Bible by a theological school that was entirely ignorant of the Greek language would make God to be a cruel tyrant."

We turn now to the two uses of the more strictly philosophical term aīdios in the New Testament. The first (Rm 1:20) refers unproblematically to the power and divinity of God. In the second occurrence, however (Jud 6), aīdios is employed of eternal punishment -- not that of human beings, however, but of evil angels, who are imprisoned in darkness "with eternal chains" (desmois aīdiois). But there is a qualification: "until the judgment of the great day." The angels, then, will remain chained up until Judgment Day; we are not informed of what will become of them afterwards. Why aīdios of the chains, instead of aiônios, used in the next verse of the fire of which the punishments of the Sodomites is an example? Perhaps because they continue from the moment of the angels' incarceration, at the beginning of the world, until the judgment that signals the entry into the new aiôn: thus, the term indicates the uninterrupted continuity throughout all time in this world -- this could not apply to human beings, who do not live through the entire duration of the present universe; to them applies rather the sequence of aiônes or generations.

We conclude with a glance at Origen's use of aiônios and aïdios (in our larger project we carry our investigation down to the time of Dionysius the Ps.-Areopagite). In Origen, there are many passages that refer to the aiônios life, in the formula characteristic of the New Testament: the emphasis seems to be not so much on eternity, that is, temporal infinity, as on the life in the next world or aiôn. A particularly clear instance is (we believe) Philocalia, where the aiônios life is defined as that which will occur in the future aiôn. Origen affirms that God gave Scripture "body for those we existed before us [i.e., the Hebrews], soul for us, and spirit [pneuma] for those in the aiôn to come, who will obtain a life aiônios." So too, in the Commentary on Matthew, the future life (aiônios) is contrasted with that in the present (proskairos). Again, Origen in a series of passages opposes the ephemeral sensible entities of the present time (proskaira) to the invisible and lasting objects of the world to come (aiônia).

Consistent with the usage of the Septuagint and the New Testament, Origen also applies the adjective aiônios to attributes of God. In one particularly illuminating passage, Origen speaks of the eternal God (to aiôniou theou) and of the concealment of the mystery of Jesus over aiônios stretches of time (khronois aiôniois), where the sense is plainly "from time immemorial." So too, Origen mentions the "days of the aiôn," and "aiônia years" (etê aiônia), that is, very long periods of time, and the phrase eis tous aiônas here signifies "for a very long time."

In Origen, the adjective aïdios occurs much less frequently than aiônios, and when it is used, it is almost always in reference to God or His attributes; it presumably means "eternal" in the strict sense of limitless in time or beyond time.

In On Principles 3.3.5, Origen gives a clear sign that he understands aiôn in the sense of a succession of aiônes prior to the final apocatastasis, at which point one arrives at the true eternity, that is, aïdiotês. Eternity in the strict sense pertains, according to Origen, to the apocatastasis, not to the previous sequence of ages or aiônes. So too, Origen explains that Christ "reigned without flesh prior to the ages, and reigned in the flesh in the ages" (aiôniôs, adverb). Again, the "coming aiôn" indicates the next world (epi ton mellonta aiôna), where sinners will indeed be consigned to the pur aionion, that is, the fire that pertains to the future world; it may well last for a long time, but it is not, for Origen, eternal.

In this connection, it seems particularly significant that Origen calls the fire of damnation pur aiônion, but never pur aïdion. The explanation is that he does not consider this flame to be absolutely eternal: it is aiônion because it belongs to the next world, as opposed to the fire we experience in this present world, and it lasts as long as the aiônes do, in their succession. Similarly, Origen never speaks of thanatos aïdios, or of aïdia punishments and torments and the like, although he does speak of thanatos aiônios or death in the world to come (kolaseis aiônioti), i.e. punishment in the world to come.

Origen was deeply learned in both the Bible and the classical philosophical tradition; what is more, he maintained that damnation was not eternal, but served rather to purify the wicked, who would in the end be saved in the universal apocatastasis. His careful deployment of the adjectives aiônios and aïdios reflects, we have argued, both his sensitivity to the meaning of the latter among the Greek philosophers, and the distinction that is apparently observed in the use of these terms in the Bible. For Origen, this was further evidence in Scripture for the doctrine of universal salvation.