

Eternity and the Bible - does scripture teach everlasting punishment?

Eternity in the sense of an antithesis of time, existence with neither beginning nor end, an ever changeless sphere outside of time and the material world, is a solely philosophical concept without Biblical reference. There are different opinions what eternity actually is, which further supports my point of view. It is a philosophical term and therefore ambiguous. To build a doctrine as eternal punishment on such an actually obscure term demands an authoritative definition what eternity is and what it precisely means; the Bible does not provide such definition, but warns of the vain philosophy of men:

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. (Colossians 2:8, KJV)

None the less proponents of the doctrine of eternal punishment - henceforth called infernalists as opposed to annihilationists or universalists who both agree that future punishment is terminable in some way - ironically appeal to nobody less than the Greek chief philosophers Plato and Aristotle among others as their authority what the Biblical term in question, Greek αἰών [aiôn] is ought to mean.

I will address this later; there is also a more primitive notion of eternity as simply endless time, measured by day and night and the seasons as we know it, which is exactly what Plato did not teach. I will primarily address the more sophisticated notion of eternity as timelessness though, since this was Plato's idea who is said to have imparted the connotation of (timeless) eternity to the word *aion*, which prior to him is generally acknowledged to have meant life(time).

My secular Ancient-Greek dictionary (Langenscheidt Taschenwörterbuch Altgriechisch – Deutsch) gives the following meanings (translated into English) for *aion*:

life, lifetime, generation, time span, (period of) time, age, eternity

Now this is quite a variety of meanings, isn't it?

I will examine the use of various words and compounds of words especially in the Bible and extra-biblical religious writings, these words are the Hebrew word עולם [olam] which was commonly translated *aion* (Strong #G165), or *aionios* (Strong #G166) in the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, called the Septuagint or LXX, from which also the apostles are said to have quoted; the Greek word *aion* itself, especially the phrase εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα [eis ton aiōna], the adjective αἰώνιος [aiōnios] and the more obscure compound phrases rendered “for ever and ever”, literally “ages of ages” in plural or “age of age” in singular, which are Hebrew idioms unknown to secular Greek.

I will now try to establish the appropriate meaning of the Hebrew word *olam* (Strong #H5769) from its use in the first book of the Bible, which are the following verses:

Genesis 3:22, KJV

And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever.

Genesis 6:3.4

And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.

Genesis 9:12

And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations.

Genesis 9:16

And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.

Genesis 13:15

For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever.

Genesis 17:7.8

And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

Genesis 21:33

And Abraham planted a grove in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God.

Genesis 49:26

The blessings of thy father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills: they shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him that was separate from his brethren.

From the use of *olam* in Genesis 21:33 is argued it means “eternal” because it is applied to God, but this argument is weak; in Genesis 6:4 it is applied to past times that could have been not longer than from the time of Noah back to the creation of men, which were ten generations. In Genesis 9:12 it is properly rendered “perpetual”, as everlasting generations would demand eternal procreation which is hardly scriptural. The everlasting covenant (17:7) is linked to their generations, so we have no reason to understand this covenant to be eternal. The land of Canaan (17:8) will no longer exist after the dissolution of the present world (2 Peter 3:10), it therefore cannot be actually everlasting or eternal in the sense of endless; neither the everlasting hills (49:26).

We have seen above that the word *olam* very unlikely denotes eternity by its own force, the KJV translates it as “for ever”, “always”, “of old”, “perpetual” and “everlasting” in the shown occurrences. Though the things to which this term is applied are neither everlasting nor eternal. Both God and the hills are denoted with the very same word, but while the God has neither beginning nor end, the hills have both beginning and end, this is even more evident by Habakkuk 3:6:

He stood, and measured the earth: he beheld, and drove asunder the nations; and the *everlasting* mountains were scattered, the perpetual hills did bow: his ways are everlasting.

I should note here that “everlasting mountains” is translated from “ad” (Strong #H5703), a further Hebrew word which is claimed to mean eternal, whereas “perpetual hills” and “ways everlasting” is translated from *olam*, there are many compound phrases “*olam ad*” which are rendered “forever and ever” in the KJV, e.g. Exodus 15:18, but rather meaning “to the distant time and further”, “in aeternum et ultra” in the Latin, to which I will come back soon.

Given the following occurrences we might come to a threefold meaning of *olam*:

That which is uncreated and endures everlastingly, i.e. eternal, this only applies to God.

That which has a beginning but endures forevermore; e.g. (theoretically) the possession of the land Canaan by the people of Israel.

That, which has both a beginning and end, that which is terminable.

By the use of *olam* it is clear, that it is not suitable to express God’s eternity, but it is the reference to God that can impart the notion of eternity to the word *olam*. The other things called *olam* are in the Biblical context not literally endless, therefore I think it’s fair to say that *olam* does not express everlastingness and should not be understood in this sense except as context demands it, which is only the case when referred to God, but this equally applies to terms as “duration” or “life”, God’s duration and life are everlasting but the words duration or life do not carry the connotation of endlessness by themselves, *olam* should be understood in the same way I think. The question is also warrantable, that if *olam* does not express God’s eternity, is the phrase then intended to express something entirely else maybe?, to which I will come back later also.

As I cannot read the Hebrew language and had to rely on interlinear translations I will turn now to the Greek words in question since it is commonly acknowledged by Jewish scholars that Hebrew *olam* described indefinite but likely terminable, rather than endless duration:

In the ancient Hebrew words that are used to describe distance and direction are also used to describe time. The Hebrew word for east is *qedem* and literally means “the direction of the rising sun”. We use north as our major orientation such as in maps which are always oriented to the north. While we use the north as our major direction the Hebrews used the east and all directions are oriented to this direction. For example one of the words for south is *teyman* from the root *yaman* meaning “to the right”. The word *qedem* is also the word for the past. In the ancient Hebrew mind the past is in front of you while the future is behind you, the opposite way we think of the past and future. The Hebrew word *olam* means in the far distance. When looking off in the far distance it is difficult to make out any details and what is beyond that horizon cannot be seen. This concept is the *olam*. The word *olam* is also used for time for the distant past or the distant future as a time that is difficult to know or perceive. This word is frequently translated as eternity or forever but in the English language it is misunderstood to mean a continual span of time that never ends. In the Hebrew mind it is simply what is at or beyond the horizon, a very distant time. A common phrase in the Hebrew is “l’olam va’ed” and is usually translated as “forever and ever” but in the Hebrew it means “to the distant horizon and again” meaning “a very distant time and even further” and is used to express the idea of a very ancient or future time.

Notes From Dr. Fruchtenbaum (Ariel Ministries):

The simple, basic truth is that Classical Hebrew, the Hebrew of the Old Testament Scriptures, has no term that carries the concept of “eternity.” There are phrases that carry this concept, such as “without end,” but there is not a single word that carries the concept of eternity as there is in English.

I will turn now to the Greek version of the same verses. I will quote Elpenor’s Bilingual (Greek / English) Old Testament translated by Sir Lancelot Brenton and transliterate the relevant Greek words and underline the English words used for them.

Genesis 3:22

And God said, Behold, Adam is become as one of us, to know good and evil, and now lest at any time he stretch forth his hand, and take of the tree of life and eat, and so he shall live forever [eis ton aiōna].

Genesis 6:3.4

And the Lord God said, My Spirit shall certainly not remain among these men for ever [eis ton aiōna], because they are flesh, but their days shall be an hundred and twenty years. Now the giants were upon the earth in those days; and after that when the sons of God were wont to go in to the daughters of men, they bore children to them, those were the giants of old [ap aiōnos], the men of renown.

Genesis 9:12

And the Lord God said to Noe, This is the sign of the covenant which I set between me and you, and between every living creature which is with you for perpetual [aiônious] generations.

Genesis 9:16

And my bow shall be in the cloud, and I will look to remember the everlasting [aiônion] covenant between me and the earth, and between every living soul in all flesh, which is upon the earth.

Genesis 13:15

For all the land which thou seest, I will give it to thee and to thy seed for ever [eôs tou aiônos].

Genesis 17:7-9

And I will establish my covenant between thee and thy seed after thee, to their generations, for an everlasting [aiônion] covenant, to be thy God, and [the God] of thy seed after thee. And I will give to thee and to thy seed after thee the land wherein thou sojournest, even all the land of Chanaan for an everlasting [aiônion] possession, and I will be to them a God. And God said to Abraam, Thou also shalt fully keep my covenant, thou and thy seed after thee for their generations.

Genesis 21:33

And Abraam planted a field at the well of the oath, and called there on the name of the Lord, the everlasting [aiônios] God.

Genesis 49:26

the blessings of thy father and thy mother-- it has prevailed above the blessing of the lasting mountains, and beyond the blessings of the everlasting [aenaôn] hills; they shall be upon the head of Joseph, and upon the head of the brothers of whom he took the lead.

Habakkuk 3:6

The earth stood at his feet and trembled: he beheld, and the nations melted away: the mountains were violently burst through, the everlasting [aiônioi] hills melted at his everlasting [aiônias] going forth.

From the rendering in the LXX we can infer that the noun *aion* and the adjective *aionios* have the same meaning as Hebrew *olam* which only exists as a noun. The phrase “eos tou aionos”, literally “until the eon”, is less common than “eis ton aiona”, literally “into the eon”, and not

found in the New Testament as far as I know. The Greek word ἀέναος [aenaos] is no form of *aionios* and not found in the NT either, according to Liddell Scott it means “ever-flowing” or “everlasting”, but it appears to be used in a more loose sense here, if *aenaos* is a stronger term than *aionios*, as it is possibly, it is strange that it was applied to the hills but not to God.

While infernalists agree that *aion* can mean a finite period of time, in these cases the KJV commonly translates “world” in the NT (e.g. 1 Corinthians 10:11), they insist that it can and must also mean eternity, especially in the form *eis ton aiona*, which I will investigate next; at least in Genesis 3:22 and 6:3 the rendering “forever” or “to eternity” would make sense whereas in Genesis 13:15 the expression “*until* the eon” would suggest an end; the translation “from eternity”, Greek *ap aionos*, in Genesis 6:4 is out of question, but what is meant is past perpetuity.

The adjective *aionios* to infernalists allegedly has only but one meaning – eternal or everlasting, however what has been said about *olam* equally applies to *aion(ios)*, we read about eonian generations and hills, the eonian possession of the land of Canaan but also about the eonian God. I already said that the question is warrantable that if *olam* or *aionios* are not intended to express God’s eternality - what are they ought to express then, I will address this later.

For the moment I want to summarize that Hebrew *olam* does not denote eternality and that *aion(ios)* was chosen by the ancient Hebrew translators to render *olam* and that therefore *aion(ios)* must mean what *olam* did, at least in the Old Testament but reasonably also in the New Testament, independent from the usage of these terms in secular Greek.

I will now begin to examine the Greek phrase *eis ton aiona*, it is relevant since it is applied to future punishment in two instances in the NT; the adjective *aionios* will be addressed later.

These instances are Mark 3:29 (Darby):

But whosoever shall speak injuriously against the Holy Spirit, to eternity [eis ton aiōna] has no forgiveness; but lies under the guilt of an everlasting [aiōniou] sin.

And Jude 13 (Darby):

These are spots in your love-feasts, feasting together with you without fear, pasturing themselves; clouds without water, carried along by the winds; autumnal trees, without fruit, twice dead, rooted up; raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shames; wandering stars, to whom has been reserved the gloom of darkness for eternity [eis ton aiōna].

Both verses do not say anything about the nature of future punishment, be it everlasting torment or extinction, but contradict universalism if the translation is literally right.

Universalists since the 19th century have argued that *aion* has no other meaning than “age” - which is not true, since its original meaning was life rather than an age - and that these verses address a specific age, this has been rejected e.g. by John Nelson Darby, a learned evangelist

and Bible translator from the 19th century, he was a strong adherent of the doctrine of everlasting punishment and published various tracts in support of it, his arguments seem to be influential till the present day, Darby wrote:

No one who has examined its use in Greek questions that it is used for life, or the whole period of a man's existence till he breathes his last; nor that it may be used for ages or periods, looked at as a whole. The question is, Does it not properly mean eternal or for ever, and that where age and age-long would have no sense? Thus Matthew 21:19, of the fig-tree: Let no fruit grow on thee *eis ton aiona*. "For the age" has no sense. It never was to grow.

...

But *eis ton aiona*, can only mean "for ever," though "for ever" may be used metaphorically when there is no withdrawal of the gift or promise, and the effect cannot last longer than that to which it applies.

...

So John 4: 14, shall not thirst "for the age": is that the meaning? or never? John 6: 51, 58, "live for ever"; John 10: 28, not perish "to the age": is that the sense? John 13: 8, thou shalt not wash my feet "to the age!" A multitude more may be quoted to the same effect; some with the modified sense I have spoken of above of absolute gift and calling never to be retracted. But *eis ton aiona* never means "to the age" in any case.

Darby is partly right, for example when we look at John 13:8 (Young's Literal Translation):

Peter saith to him, Thou mayest not wash my feet - to the age [*eis ton aiōna*]. Jesus answered him, If I may not wash thee, thou hast no part with me;

This translation makes no good sense, which age does it refer to? I would even go so far to agree with Darby that *eis ton aiona* actually never means "to the age" as if a specific age were meant like when we speak about centuries, when we speak e.g. about the 19th century we speak about a specific age, but this particular meaning seems not to be intended by the phrase *eis ton aiona*. On the other hand, Darby goes too far, when he concludes that nothing else than everlastingness can be meant by this phrase, which I will show now by its use in the Septuagint. The only verses that contain this particular phrase we encountered so far seem in fact to support Darby's claims; the rendering "to eternity" would likewise make sense in these instances.

Genesis 3:22

And God said, Behold, Adam is become as one of us, to know good and evil, and now lest at any time he stretch forth his hand, and take of the tree of life and eat, and so he shall live to eternity [*eis ton aiōna*].

Genesis 6:3

And the Lord God said, My Spirit shall certainly not remain among these men to eternity [*eis ton aiōna*], because they are flesh, but their days shall be an hundred and twenty years.

But let consider us this carefully. To defend universalism it is not necessary to proof that this phrase never was used to denote everlastingness; it is enough to provide sufficient proof

where everlastingness was out of question without intended hyperbole. Infernalists claim that these words or phrases are used in a hyperbolic sense when applied to finite things, but maybe it is just the way round, that the natural understanding is something terminable, whereas everlastingness is the hyperbolic meaning. Before I begin my examination I will come back for a last time to the verses above.

While the rendering “... *and now lest at any time he stretch forth his hand, and take of the tree of life and eat, and so he shall live to eternity...*” makes sense, this understanding is not obligatory.

John of Damascus, an infernalist, considered a saint, who lived in the 8th century AD defined *aion* in his work DE FIDE ORTHODOXA thus:

It must then be understood that the word eon has various meanings, for it denotes many things. The life of each man is called an eon. **Again, a period of a thousand years is called an eon.** Again, the whole course of the present life is called an eon: also the future life, the immortal life after the resurrection, is spoken of as an eon. Again, the word eon is used to denote, not time nor yet a part of time as measured by the movement and course of the sun, that is to say, composed of days and nights, but the sort of temporal motion and interval that is co-extensive with the eternal [aidios]. For eon is to things eternal [aidios] just what time is to things temporal [chronikos].

While the idea of an eon as a millennium is clearly a later development, the Dutch scholar Helena Keizer - who wrote a dissertation about the word *aion* to which I will occasionally refer to later - observed that no human being in the Bible reached the age of a thousand years, so the following understanding would make equally good sense:

And the Lord God said, ‘The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for a thousand years’. (NIV, altered by me)

I will provide now a multitude of verses more or less chronologically from the LXX and also refer to the Hebrew original text and the later Latin translation, Jerome’s Vulgate, to verify my claims.

I begin with Exodus 15:18, a verse I already mentioned and one of the most interesting verses.

The Lord reigns for ever and ever and ever. (Brenton)

This rendering is near to ridiculousness, “forever and ever” is an idiom and I accept that idioms sometimes make literally no sense, but three “evers”, this is odd. The Greek reads:

Kyrios basileuôn eis ton aiôna kai ep aiôna kai eti.

The Apostolic Bible Interlinear Translation (henceforth abbreviated ABIT), which can be downloaded for free as a PDF (<http://www.septuagint-interlinear-greek-bible.com/text.htm>) provides a much more plausible and precise rendering:

The Lord (is) reigning into the eon, and unto eon, and still.

Possibly the phrase could also be rendered “into the eon and over (Greek *ep*) the eon and still”, so it would refer to only one eon that is however exceeded. Eternity as we understand it cannot be exceeded, therefore the Hebrew translators hardly could have understood *eis ton aiona* as to denote eternity, neither did they understand Hebrew “*olam ad*” to do so but as to mean “an age and beyond” as the Jewish source I quoted already said, otherwise they could not reasonably have rendered it the way they did.

The Vulgate is both in line with the Hebrew and Greek.

Dominus regnabit in aeternum et ultra.

Interestingly even the Latin term “aeternum” did not necessarily denote everlastingness back then, otherwise we would not find the rendering “in eternity and beyond” but rather “in saeculum et ultra”, “in the age and beyond”, obviously *aeternum* (“eternity”) and *saeculum* (age) were more or less synonymous back then, which is further suggested by a verse I will come to later.

A very similar expression is found in Micah 4:5 (ABIT)

For all the peoples shall go each in his own way; but we shall call go in the name of the Lord our God into the eon [*eis ton aiōna*] **and beyond** [*kai epekeina*].

The same as above, if *eis ton aiona* means “to eternity”, this rendering says “to eternity and beyond”, the Latin has “in aeternum at ultra”, the Hebrew “*olam ad*”.

An equally limited usage we further find in the apocryphal book 1 Maccabees 14:41 (Brenton):

Also that the Jews and priests were well pleased that Simon should be their governor and high priest for ever [*eis ton aiōna*], **until** [*eôs*] there should arise a faithful prophet;

Greek *eis ton aiona* is clearly limited here, nobody would say “to infinity, until...”; the Latin has:

et quia Iudaei et sacerdotes eorum consenserunt esse eum ducem suum et summum sacerdotem in aeternum donec surgat propheta fidelis

Again we find *aeternum* in a limited sense, “in eternity until”.

It is interesting how John Wycliffe who translated the Bible into English from the Latin Vulgate in lack of a Hebrew and Greek manuscript. Wycliffe was a most trustworthy translator as far as I can judge, he followed the Latin as close as he could, very unlike the KJV, he usually rendered Latin *saeculum* with “world”; and Latin *aeternum* with “everlasting” or “without end”.

In 1 Maccabees 14:41, we find the following rendering:

and that Jewis, and prestis of hem, consentiden, him for to be her duyk, and hiyeste preest with outen ende, til ther rise a feithful profete;

Wycliffe renders “without end” (Latin *aeternum*), “until” (Latin *donec*) ..., so even “without end” in archaic English is not literally never-ending.

It is a pity that Wycliffe had not the appropriate means to translate the Bible, but was limited to the Latin version; otherwise the doctrine of everlasting torment might possibly have never prevailed in English Bible versions (I have read that Wycliffe himself was an annihilationist). Unluckily the KJV translators and those succeeding them were very much less faithfully than Wycliffe seems to have been in his translation, despite the fact that they had Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, their translation appears to be less reliable in this matter than Wycliffe’s translation from the Latin. The Latin translation itself I think is also a faithful translation but caused confusion in this matter since the adjective *aionios* was overwhelmingly translated with *aeternum* (now eternal), whereas the noun *aion* was interchangeably translated both *aeternum* and *saeculum* (age or world), this is further evident in Ezra 9:12 which I will not quote here.

The next verse to consider is Exodus 19:9 (Brenton):

And the Lord said to Moses, Lo! I come to thee in a pillar of a cloud, that the people may hear me speaking to thee, and may believe thee for ever [eis ton aiōna]: and Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.

“For ever” merely seems to refer to Moses’ lifetime here, a similar usage is found among other instances in 1 Samuel 27:12:

So David had the full confidence of Achish, who said, He is thoroughly disgraced among his people in Israel and he shall be my servant for ever [eis ton aiōna].

“For ever” means at most for Davids’ lifetime here. In Exodus 21:5.6 we read:

And if the servant should answer and say, I love my master and wife and children, I will not go away free; his master shall bring him to the judgment-seat of God, and then shall he bring him to the door, to the door-post, and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall serve him for ever [eis ton aiōna].

Also in Deuteronomy 15:16.17:

And if he should say to thee, I will not go out from thee, because he continues to love thee and thy house, because he is well with thee; then thou shalt take an awl, and bore his ear through to the door, and he shall be thy servant for ever [eis ton aiōna]; and in like manner shalt thou do to thy maid-servant.

One might suppose that “forever” or *eis ton aiona* here also means for a lifetime, but Rashi, a medieval Torah commentator states:

And he shall serve him forever: Heb. עַל־עַלְמֵי [l’olam], until the Jubilee year (the fiftieth year of the cycle). Or perhaps it means literally forever, as its apparent meaning? Therefore, the Torah states (in reference to the Jubilee year): “and each man to his family you shall return” (Lev. 25:10). This informs us that fifty years are called עַל־עַלְמֵי [olam]. But this does not mean that he must serve him (his master) the entire fifty years, but he must serve him until the Jubilee year, regardless of whether it is near or far off. — (From Mechilta, Kid. 15a)

Rashi says that fifty years are called *olam*, the same *olam* we looked at the beginning. Rashi is quite a late source but I think there is no reason that the ancient Hebrews understood it differently, a slave shall serve his master “forever”, *eis ton aiona*, until the Jubilee year just as Simon in 1 Maccabees 14:41 should be their governor and high priest “forever”, *eis ton aiona*, until there should arise a faithful prophet.

These two verses are further interesting when we look at the Latin version, in Exodus it reads:

quod si dixerit servus diligo dominum meum et uxorem ac liberos non egrediar liber offeret eum dominus diis et adplicabitur ad ostium et postes perforabitque aurem eius subula et erit ei servus in saeculum

Whereas in Deuteronomy it reads:

sin autem dixerit nolo egredi eo quod diligat te et domum tuam et bene sibi apud te esse sentiat adsumes subulam et perforabis aurem eius in ianua domus tuae et serviet tibi usque in aeternum ancillae quoque similiter facies

The expressions *in saeculum* (in age) and *in aeternum* (in eternity) are obviously used synonymous in these instances which further proofs that *aeternum* was not (necessarily) understood as to denote endlessness back then.

Wycliffe departs from the Latin in Deuteronomy 15:16.17 and renders:

Forsothe if `the seruaunt seith, Y nyle go out, for he loueth thee, and thin hows, and feelith that it is wel to hym at thee, thou schalt take `a nal, and thou schalt peerse his eere in the yate of thin hous, and he schal serue thee til in to the world, `that is til to the iubilee, ethir fiftithe yeer; also thou schalt do in lijk maner to the handmayde.

The English word “world” originally rather meant “age” than what we understand with world today, the Latin word for world in a local sense was “mundus” which Wycliffe rendered with “earth”, whereas *saeculum* meant age or world in a temporal sense; so Wycliffe translated analogous “till into the age, that is till to the Jubilee, the fiftieth year”, the same as Rashi stated, it seems Wycliffe added it to his translation for some reason. While “till into the age” is no satisfying translation since no specific age is referred to, it is basically the literal rendering of both *eis ton aiona* and *in saeculum*, a more satisfying rendering might be “in perpetuity” or “in the length of time”, since this would neither suggest that a particular age is meant nor endless duration.

I have shown various verses now where *eis ton aiona* clearly is limited in duration; I will later consider verses where it is less apparent. Before I do so I will come to Plato’s idea of *aion* and the appeal of infernalists to use him among others as their authority. But prior to that, I offer a different rendering for Jude 13 (Young’s Literal, altered by me):

These are in your love-feasts craggy rocks; feasting together with you, without fear shepherding themselves; clouds without water, by winds carried about; trees autumnal, without fruit, twice dead, rooted up; wild waves of a sea, foaming out their own shames; stars going astray, to whom the gloom of the darkness for all their life hath been kept.

I do not know if the Greek tense and the verb $\tau\eta\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ [têreô] allow the understanding that it is not a future eschatological event but that they already dwell in this darkness and remain therein their entire life, or until they repent. At least the context I think would allow this understanding; Mark 3:29 is more problematic so I will refer to it later.

I will now make a kind of break and relate to the use of *aion* in Plato and other philosophers; Darby wrote:

I have thought that, as one of the forms in which infidelity circulates at present is Universalism, or the Restitution of all things, it might be well to put out clearly and simply some facts (for that is what they are), which may deprive its advocates of one main ground of their reasonings, and that without any reasoning on the general subject of a doctrine, which, when examined, sets aside the truth of Christianity. I refer to the meaning of *aion*, and also of *aionios*. We are told by Dr. Farrar, with much pretension to competency in affirming it, that “everlasting” or “eternal” ought not to be found in the Bible; by Mr. Cox, that it means properly an “age” and “age-long,” and that it cannot be right to translate them eternal or everlasting. Mr. Jukes, with a wild imagination, takes the same ground. They simply echo one another.

...

Aion in Greek properly means “eternity.” I do not dispute here, whether we are to believe with Aristotle, that it is derived from *aei einai*; or with other modern writers from *aio*, I breathe, whence it had the meaning in Homer, Euripides, and other authors, of life and breath; or possibly these may be two different words, one from *aei on*, the other from *ao spiro*, whence the two very different meanings. This is certain, that the word is distinctly used by Plato, Aristotle, and Philo (and, according to the dictionaries, by Lycurgus, whom I have not the means of consulting) as “eternal,” in contrast with what is of time having beginning or ending, as its definite and proper meaning.

This is in line with what other infernalists claim, I do not know if they all echo Darby - what an irony, as he accused universalists of doing so - or Darby already echoed a scholar preceding him, the point is the arguments seem to have little changed since the 19th century.

Concerning Plato, there is no need to deny that he opposed *aion* to χρόνος [chronos], i.e. time; I will only quote a short passage from Plato's Timaeus:

Wherefore he resolved to have a moving image of eternity [aiōnos], and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal [aiōnion] but moving according to number, while eternity [aiōnos] itself rests in unity; and this image we call time [chronon].

Eternity to Plato is that “which is immovably the same (and) cannot become older or younger by time, nor ever did or has become, or hereafter will be, older or younger, nor is subject at all to any of those states which affect moving and sensible things and of which generation is the cause“. He earlier wrote “now the nature of the ideal being was eternal (*aionios*), but to bestow this attribute in its fullness upon a creature was impossible”, yet he called time an eternal (*aionios*) image of eternity (*aion*), though time came into being, prior in the passage he seems to have used *aionios* and αἰδιος [aidios] (which is properly rendered everlasting or eternal) synonymously. While his idea of eternity (*aion*) is clearer - eternity seems to be static and changeless and time a dynamic image of it - his use of *aionios* is difficult to conceive since he later writes:

Time, then, came into existence along with the Heaven, to the end that having been generated together they might also be dissolved together, if ever a dissolution of them should take place.

Now if time, the “eternal image“ of Plato's eternity, came into existence with the heaven and might dissolve together with the heaven, this image cannot be eternal in the sense that it was uncreated for it had a definite beginning; and if it will dissolve and cease with the dissolution of the heaven which Plato seems to consider at least being possible, it would not be everlasting either. But if this image (i.e. time) though it is called “eternal” (*aionios*) is neither uncreated nor everlasting, it is not truly eternal, not as we understand it today, and therefore it is questionable that *aionios* must be understood as endless; the 19th century universalist Hanson also examined this issue and wrote:

Again, he (Plato) speaks of that which is indestructible (*anōlethros*), and not *aionios*. He places the two words in contrast, whereas, had he intended to use *aionios* as meaning endless, he would have said indestructible and *aionios*.

However Hanson is in error here, to Plato eternality seems to have meant much more than endless existence or immortality but something qualitatively rather than quantitatively, this could explain why time - despite it had a beginning and might have an end - is called an eternal image, maybe it is ought to be eternal only in a ideally sense, the universalist William Barclay wrote:

Second, one of the key passages is Matthew 25:46 where it is said that the rejected go away to eternal punishment, and the righteous to eternal life. The Greek word for punishment is *kolasis*, which was not originally an ethical word at all. It originally meant the pruning of trees to make them grow better. I think it is true to say that in all Greek secular literature *kolasis* is never used of anything but remedial punishment. **The word for eternal is *aionios*. It means more than everlasting, for Plato - who may have invented the word - plainly says that a thing may be everlasting and still not be *aionios*.** The simplest way to out it is

that *aionios* cannot be used properly of anyone but God; it is the word uniquely, as Plato saw it, of God. Eternal punishment is then literally that kind of remedial punishment which it befits God to give and which only God can give.

Barclay refers to the same passage as Hanson (Plato, Laws X, 904a6-b6) and I think is right concerning Plato, if *aionios* does not denote endlessness but on the other hand means more than everlasting, it could only carry an ideally and qualitative sense, it is not about duration at all, but about eternal quality.

John 17:3 (KJV) might support this view:

And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.

According to this verse eternal life is to know God, this does not say anything of duration at all since Hebrews 6:4-6 says: “For it is impossible to renew again to repentance those once enlightened, and who have tasted of the heavenly gift, and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God, and the works of power of the age to come, and have fallen away, crucifying for themselves as they do the Son of God, and making a show of him.”, so eternal life in some sense might indeed come to an end.

While this understanding of eternity would be in line with universalism, eternal punishment, or chastisement - corrective punishment - would be only ideally eternal in a qualitative sense as inflicted from God, who alone is truly eternal, not in a quantitative sense of having neither beginning nor end; I nonetheless doubt that the Bible contains the Platonic notion of eternity, but has maintained the Hebrew notion of concealed, indefinite but terminable time. I will now turn to Aristotle, there might be more to say about Plato, but his witness should not be overvalued.

Darby: “**If Plato and Aristotle and Philo knew Greek, what these others say is false.**”

I will not quote Aristotle or what Darby or others concluded from his words in great detail, but it is interesting that Aristotle did not adopt Plato’s language, we do not find the adjective *aionios* in Aristotle’s writings but the anterior word *aidios*, which is properly rendered everlasting, though it was also used in a loose sense, I will come back to this when I examine the adjective *aionios* in greater detail. Darby is wrong when he says Aristotle used *aidios* as an equivalent to *aionios*, since Aristotle did not use *aionios* at all.

I will quote Dr. Keizer’s dissertation now (LIFE TIME ENTIRETY – A study of AIΩN in Greek Literature and Philosophy, the Septuagint and Philo, page 89 there):

Aristotle De Caelo II 1 283b26-30

“The universe as whole neither has come into being nor admits of destruction, as some assert that it does, but it is one and everlasting [*aidios*] with no beginning or end of the whole *aiōn* [*tou pantos aiōnos*], but containing and encompassing in itself the infinite time [*apeiros chronos*].”

This passage shows once more that for Aristotle *aiōn* describes the life, i.e. the ‘life/time-completeness’, of the universe. This life is everlasting (*aidios*).

In my own words, Aristotle spoke about the universe as an eternally (*aidios*) living being similar as Plato did, this being has neither end nor beginning but exists literally throughout all time past and future, time itself being uncreated and everlasting, its life or existence, i.e. its *aion* is eternal; not *aion* is eternity but this *aion*, life on a cosmic scale, the life of the uncreated universe is eternal, whereas a human *aion* is not.

I will quote here the scholars Ilaria Ramelli and David Konstan from a talk delivered in Edinburgh at the international conference of the Society of Biblical Literature, in 2006. A revised version appeared subsequently in the Mexican journal, *Nova Tellus* 24 (2006) 21-39.

Aristotle, as we have said, seems never to use the term *aiônios*, though there are nearly 300 instances of *aidios*, 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 *aidios* as the appropriate technical term.

I think there is not more to say about Aristotle, I turn now to Philo of Alexandria, also called Philo Judaeus, he was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who lived quite contemporary with Christ.

Philo wrote in his treatise on the unchangeableness of God:

But God is the creator of time also; for he is the father of its father, and the father of time is the world, which made its own mother the creation of time, so that time stands towards God in the relation of a grandson; for this world is a younger son of God, inasmuch as it is perceptible by the outward sense; for the only son he speaks of as older than the world, is idea, and this is not perceptible by the intellect; but having thought the other worthy of the rights of primogeniture, he has decided that it shall remain with him; therefore, this younger son, perceptible by the external senses being set in motion, has caused the nature of time to shine forth, and to become conspicuous, **so that there is nothing future to God, who has the very boundaries of time subject to him; for their life is not time, but the beautiful model of time, eternity [aiôn]; and in eternity [aiôn] nothing is past and nothing is future, but everything is present only.**

We have the same notion of eternity here as in Plato, timelessness, which is not astonishing since Philo was a Platonist, to this notion of eternity applies what already has been said concerning Plato.

His usage of *aion* is however more diverse than this single passage suggests but to examine this here would go too far. If anybody is interesting in a more extensive and scholarly examination I advise to read this dissertation from the Dutch scholar Heleen M. Keizer:

LIFE TIME ENTIRETY – A study of AIΩN in Greek Literature and Philosophy, the Septuagint and Philo

<http://books.google.de/books?id=1-SmshbeyUsC&printsec=frontcover&hl=de#v=onepage&q&f=false>

A short interim result so far:

The philosophical notion of eternity in Plato and Philo as I understand it, is rather timelessness and changelessness than endlessness or anything related to duration at all, timelessness or changelessness technically allows neither beginning nor end since this would be a change; but as this only applies to God, only God can be truly eternal in this sense, everything else is merely eternal in an ideally sense, of eternal quality, not of eternal quantity, if timelessness can have any quantity at all. Aristotle has not adopted Plato's idea but his idea seems to be an uncreated everlasting (*aidios*) universe, the infinite time (*apeiros chronos*) is co-perpetual with the universe and has ever existed and will ever exist. So the appeal to Aristotle in defense of eternal punishment is beside the mark since he did not employ *aionios* and did not adopt Plato's idea of eternity. Plato preceded the Septuagint; from the usage of *aion* therein we have seen so far, that it does not seem that the Jewish translators adopted his views or considered it to resemble the Biblical idea of *olam*.

I will now continue to further examine the use of the phrase *eis ton aiona* in the light of what we have learned about the Platonic idea of eternity.

Exodus 40:15 (ABIT)

And it will be so as to be them an anointing priesthood into the eon [*eis ton aiōna*], unto their generations [*eis tas geneas autōn*].

Generations do not belong to eternity, “into the eon” and “into their generations” is paralleled, so it seems to basically mean the same, in perpetuity, i.e. unto future generations.

Lamentations 5:19 (Brenton)

But thou, O Lord, shalt dwell for ever [*eis ton aiōna*]; thy throne shall endure to generation and generation.

Even when speaking about God, this phrase is paralleled with generations, something which belongs to time and is finite; of course a vast duration is meant but it still happens within time.

Deuteronomy 23:6(7) (ABIT)

You shall not address peaceable to them, nor be advantageous to them all your days into the eon [*pasas tas êmeras sou eis ton aiōna*].

Eternality is out question here, since eternity is not measured in days, the timespan in question is limited by their days on earth.

Psalms 73(72):12 (Brenton)

Behold, these are the sinners, and they that prosper always [*eis ton aiōna*]: they have possessed wealth.

Sinners prosper to eternity, really? The translator did not dare to render “forever” in this case, the same *eis ton aiona* applied to God elsewhere, is applied to the wealth of the sinners here.

Is this what Darby meant when he wrote “**but *eis ton aiona*, can only mean ‘for ever’, though ‘for ever’ may be used metaphorically when there is no withdrawal of the gift or promise, and the effect cannot last longer than that to which it applies**”? I doubt so.

I will now come to a last passage in regard to the phrase *eis ton aiona* before I examine the compound phrases and the adjective *aionios*.

Isaiah 34:9-17 (Brenton altered according to the AIT)

And her valleys shall be turned into pitch, and her land into sulphur; and her land shall be as pitch burning night and day; and it shall not be quenched **into the eon of time** [eis ton aiôna chronon], and her smoke shall go up: it shall be made desolate **into her generations** [eis geneas autês], and **for a long time** [eis chronon polyn] birds and hedgehogs, and ibises and ravens shall dwell in it: and the measuring line of desolation shall be cast over it, and satyrs shall dwell in it. Her princes shall be no more; for her kings and her great men shall be destroyed. And thorns shall spring up in their cities, and in her strong holds: and they shall be habitations of monsters, and a court of ostriches. And devils shall meet with satyrs, and they shall cry one to the other: there shall satyrs rest, having found for themselves a place of rest. There has the hedgehog made its nest, and the earth has safely preserved its young: there have the deer met, and seen one another's faces. They passed by in full number, and not one of them perished: they sought not one another; for the Lord commanded them, and his Spirit gathered them. And he shall cast lots for them, and his hand has portioned out their pasture, saying, Ye shall inherit the land **into the eon of time** [eis ton aiôna chronon]: they shall rest on it **for generations of generations** [eis geneas geneôn].

This is a remarkable and interesting passage for various reasons.

The phrase *eis ton aiona chronon* is rather uncommon, if *eis ton aiona* would mean “to eternity”, it would say “to the eternity of time” here; given the Platonic idea of eternity this makes no sense.

If we understand *aion* as duration in the sense of entirety then it could mean “for the duration of time” that is “for all time”, which literally would be everlasting if we understand time as endless, but “for all time” is commonly used in a more loose sense, also here, if this is the intended meaning.

If we understand *aion* here as an age, then the *aion* here is a part of *chronos* (time), which is entirely different from the Platonic idea of *aion*.

Personally I think the addition of *chronos* to the phrase *eis ton aiona* does neither enhance nor weaken it (this particular expression except further instances in Isaiah is only found elsewhere in Exodus 14:13) and should most likely be understood as same as *eis ton aiona* alone, but nobody would have added the word for time to an expression that denoted everlastingness or eternity.

“Into the eon of time” is paralleled with multiple generations and a long time and later with the compound phrase “for generations of generations”, the context shows that none of these expressions denotes everlastingness, since it says devils and wild animals shall dwell there in the future; this might be long but surely not forevermore.

The expression “generations of generations” is a good connection to the next topic I will consider, the compound phrase “ages of ages” and others.

The phrase “for generations of generations”, Greek “eis geneas geneôn”, virtually is the same idiom as “for ages of ages”, Greek “eis aiônas aiônôn” (Revelation 14:11), at least

grammatically. We have seen in the passage above that “generations of generations” was in fact used in a limited sense, however *aion* is still a stronger term than generation, though both my dictionary and Liddell Scott give also the possible meaning for *aion* as “generation”, nonetheless it was not used in this sense in the Bible, on the other hand *aion* and *aionios* are related to subsequent generations in various instances and *aionios* even was equated with several generations (Isaiah 61:4 in the LXX).

To come back to Isaiah 34:10 for a moment, where we read in the Greek, “into the eon of time”, “into her generations” and “for a long time”, the Hebrew has the usual *l’olam*, “from generation to generation” and the phrase *l’netzach netzachim*, the later might literally mean “for permanence of permanences” which is a similar compound phrase as “generations of generations” or “ages of ages”, the Latin renders it “in saeculum saeculorum”, “into age of ages”, whereas the Greek simply renders “much time” (*chronon polyn*), so at least the expression “into age of ages” or “for permanence of permanences” was understood by the ancient Hebrew translators as to merely mean a long time; *netzach* (Strong #H5331) is occasionally also claimed to mean eternal, the KJV renders *l’netzach netzachim* as “for ever and ever”.

We also find the phrase “age of ages” in Ephesians 3:20.21 (Darby):

But to him that is able to do far exceedingly above all which we ask or think, according to the power which works in us, to him be glory in the assembly in Christ Jesus unto all generations of the age of ages [eis tou aiōnos tôn aiōnōn]. Amen.

Since it is spoken of generations this implies something in time, this particular usage here further implies that a clearly marked out age in a succession of ages is meant, an understanding not clearly supported by the occurrences of the phrase “ages of ages”; the KJV has “throughout all ages, world without end”, which entirely misses the mark whereas Wycliffe preserves the literal rendering “in to alle the generaciouns of the world of worldis”.

To establish the proper meaning of “ages of ages” is more difficult since it was found only in a few occasions in the Septuagint including the Apocrypha and is not known in secular Greek.

It is in found in reference to future judgment in three occasions in the NT:

Revelation 14:11 (Darby):

And the smoke of their torment goes up to ages of ages [eis aiōnas aiōnōn], and they have no respite day and night who do homage to the beast and to its image, and if any one receive the mark of its name.

Revelation 19:3 (Darby):

And a second time they said, Hallelujah. And her smoke goes up to the ages of the ages [eis tous aiōnas tôn aiōnōn].

Revelation 20:10 (Darby):

And the devil who deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where are both the beast and the false prophet; and they shall be tormented day and night for the ages of ages [eis tous aiōnas tôn aiōnōn].

Notice that in the first two instances it is smoke that ascends for ages of ages, it is not said that human beings are tormented for so long, though some insist that if the smoke ascends for ages of ages, this must mean that they are tormented for so long, I think Revelation 19:3 rather supports my sentiment. The usage in 20:10 is different, since it is clearly said, that at least three entities, the devil, the beast and the false prophet of which none I consider to be a human being are actually tormented for ages of ages, commonly translated “for ever and ever”.

The problem is, the phrase ages of ages is applied to God in all other instances in the NT. Annihilationists have a problem to discuss Revelation 20:10 away, since it says nothing of destruction or a second death concerning these three entities, whereas the lake of fire is referred to as second death when it is applied to human beings, second death wouldn't make sense in regard to the devil at all since he was never subjected to death in the first place.

But I will not further dwell on this issue here. Infernalists claim that ages of ages is an idiom to express eternity, which they say consists of a succession of endlessly following ages. The infernalists are a bit inconsistent in their argumentation here, first they cite Plato and his idea of eternity to impart the notion of eternity on the phrase *eis ton aiona*; and here they claim eternity consist of an endless succession of ages, these two concepts are irreconcilable in my opinion, since a succession of ages implies change whereas Plato's eternity is ever changeless. They can't have it both ways; they can't impart the notion of eternity to the word *aion* on the authority of Plato and later dismiss his idea of eternity altogether and claim eternity consists of an endless succession of ages.

Universalists generally argue that “ages of ages” refers to particular future ages, prior to the final restitution at the end of all ages. The argument that “ages of ages” mean at least two particular future ages is weakened by the use of this phrase in the LXX which I investigate now, before I do so, I will remark here that where most English translations render “for ever and ever”, the Latin again got it right and renders “in saecula saeculorum”, “in ages of ages”.

I have so far omitted the more simplistic plural usage of *aion*, since it is not applied to future punishment in the NT but it might help to understand the phrase “ages of ages”.

Psalm 61(0):8(9) (ABIT; the verse numbers differ between the Hebrew and Greek version)

Thus I shall strum to your name into the eons [*eis tous aiōnas*], for me to render my vows day by day.

The infernalists are aware of the plural usage but argue that it means the same as the singular phrase, which to a certain degree is reasonable, since “for all time” pretty much means the same as “for all times”, I will however show that even the plural usage was used in a limited sense, even more apparent as above, while it is possible that David had also the future life in view, the understanding that it merely applies to his lifetime whilst on earth is more natural, especially since “into the eons” is paralleled with “day by day”.

In Daniel 2:4 we read (Brenton):

And the Chaldeans spoke to the king in the Syrian language, saying, O king, live for ever [*eis tous aiōnas*]: do thou tell the dream to thy servants, and we will declare the interpretation.

They hardly wanted express their wish that Nebuchadnezzar literally would live forevermore, but rather live a long life.

Daniel 12:3 (Brenton)

And the wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and [some] of the many righteous as the stars for ever and ever [eis tous aiōnas kai epi].

It literally says “into the eons and still”, like “into the eon and still” in Exodus 15:8 and Micah 4:5; so even the plural-form *eis tous aionas* does not denote everlastingness. In the Hebrew we had the singular *olam ad*, “into age and beyond”, the LXX renders *olam ad* not uniformly, this is why I said the usage of the idiom “ages of ages” in the LXX does not support the idea that it means specific, clearly marked out future ages, as they appear to use this terms with no apparent reason.

In Psalm 21(20):4(5) (ABIT)

He asked life of you, and you gave to him duration of days, into eon of eon [eis aiōna aiōnos].

The expression “eon of eon” or “age of age” is also found in the NT in Hebrews 1:8 which is a citation of Psalm 45(4):7 following the LXX, however the Hebrew has *olam ad* both in Psalm 21:4 (LXX 20:5) and 45(4):7, yet for some reason the translators rendered “age of age” instead of “age and beyond”, it is questionable therefore that they had a particular age in mind, this would likewise apply for Hebrews 1:8 since it appears to be a 1:1 quotation from the Septuagint. Darby renders Hebrews 1:8 thus:

But as to the Son, Thy throne, O God, is to the age of the age [eis aiōna aiōnos], and a sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.

Since “age of age” is not used in reference to future punishment in the NT and as far as I know only in this instance at all I will not further examine its usage in the LXX.

In Psalm 84(3):4(5) (Brenton) we read:

Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will praise thee evermore [eis tous aiōnas tôn aiōnôn]. Pause.

Here we find the standard expression from the NT, “into the ages of the ages”. Strangely we find no corresponding expression in the Hebrew text except maybe a form of “ad”; it is also the only occurrence of this phrase in the LXX apart from the Apocrypha, maybe it is a later insertion, but if not, it is unlikely that they meant particular ages by this phrase as universalists understand it; or the Hebrew text has been altered, whereas the LXX (which is older than the Hebrew text modern Bibles are based on) preserved the original phrase.

In 4 Maccabees 18:24 we find the same phrase:

To whom be glory into the eons of the eons [eis tous aiōnas tôn aiōnôn]. Amen.

But as it is not an inspired writing we cannot conclude that they meant particular ages as might have the inspired writers; I think it is not easy to establish a proper meaning for this phrase.

I will cite now several definitions I came across; the first I found in a recent German book, with either Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox background and translated it, the phrase is explained thus:

[For the eons of eons,] this literal translation from the Greek corresponds with the Latin “in saecula saeculorum” [into ages of ages]. Thereby is not meant the “eternity” (Greek *aidiotêtos*, Latin *aeternitas*) as infinite, unfading time that only applies to the triune God Himself; but the sum of all finite and fading periods of time. The translation from “eternity to eternity” [the idiomatic German equivalent of the English “forever and ever”] or in “all eternity” is at least misleading. Theologically more of relevance is, that by this use of “eternity”, it’s no longer possible to conceive that God’s “eternity” is of different kind than the “fullness of times”, given as gift to the creatures.

One might argue that the sum of all finite periods of time add up to infinity but eternity in a philosophical sense is indivisible, past, present and future is all at once, the sum of all finite periods should in itself be finite alike. If they all will end, also their sum will have an end, at least I see it that way; to me it seems the eons of eons denote something in time, not God’s eternity, this definition isn’t authoritative anyway.

John of Damascus whom I quoted earlier seems to have understood it similarly as in the book I cited, maybe their explanation derived from him.

But we speak also of eons of eons, inasmuch as the seven eons of the present world include many eons in the sense of lives of men, and the one eon embraces all the eons, and the present and the future are spoken of as eon of eon.

He also thinks that “eon of eon” refers to a particular age, or ages, this world and the world to come, whereas the Hebrew translators seem to have chosen this expression rather randomly without a clearly marked out future age in view. With “ages of ages” as I understand him, he means all the lives of men during the seven eons of this present world, which for him must be something terminable as there will be a future world after the resurrection.

I will now quote Augustine, one of the chief promoters of the doctrine of everlasting punishment in Church history, it should be noted however that he was almost illiterate of the Greek language and had to rely on the Latin version, which might have concealed some truths, as the meanings of Latin *saeculum* are more limited than the meanings of *aion*.

I do not presume to determine whether God does so, and whether these times which are called ages of ages are joined together in a continuous series, and succeed one another with a regulated diversity, and leave exempt from their vicissitudes only those who are freed from their misery, and abide without end in a blessed immortality; or whether these are called ages of ages, that we may understand that the ages remain unchangeable in God's unwavering wisdom, and are the efficient causes, as it were, of those ages which are being spent in time. Possibly ages is used for age, so that nothing else is meant by ages of ages than by age of age, as nothing else is meant by heavens of heavens than by heaven of heaven. For God called the firmament, above which are the waters, Heaven, and yet the psalm says, Let the waters that are above the heavens praise the name of the Lord. Which of these two meanings we are to attach to ages of ages, **or whether there is not some other and better meaning still, is a very profound question**; and the subject we are at present handling presents no obstacle to our meanwhile deferring the discussion of it, **whether we may be able to determine**

anything about it, or may only be made more cautious by its further treatment, so as to be deterred from making any rash affirmations in a matter of such obscurity. For at present we are disputing the opinion that affirms the existence of those periodic revolutions by which the same things are always recurring at intervals of time. Now whichever of these suppositions regarding the ages of ages be the true one, it avails nothing for the substantiating of those cycles; for whether the ages of ages be not a repetition of the same world, but different worlds succeeding one another in a regulated connection, the ransomed souls abiding in well assured bliss without any recurrence of misery, or whether the ages of ages be the eternal causes which rule what shall be and is in time, it equally follows, that those cycles which bring round the same things have no existence; and nothing more thoroughly explodes them than the fact of the eternal life of the saints.

To sum it up, Augustine did not know what it meant; it is remarkable though that none of these sources, all from an Orthodox or Catholic background, defined it as to denote everlastingness or God's perpetual existence.

I came about a quote which is of little authority but interesting none the less, it is a medieval document about a Portuguese king; I translated it from German into English, the document itself was written in Latin.

The lord, King Alphonsus may live and possess the kingdom. If he has male descendants, they shall live and possess the kingdom too, so that it is not necessary to make them kings again. They shall follow in this order. When the father had the kingdom, then the son shall have it, then the grandson, then son of the grandson and then the sons of the sons in ages of ages for always [in saecula saeculorum per semper].

This is the first usage of this idiom I found outside a biblical context, "ages of ages" is here applied to subsequent generations, it is amazing that they used this phrase - a phrase commonly used applied to God's glory - when referring to a mortal man and his descendants, "ages of ages" seems to be even strengthened by "per semper", "forever" or more likely "for always". Thus they could have hardly understood "ages of ages" as to express everlastingness, further since Portugal was a Catholic country, as most European countries back then, they would not have dared to use an expression reserved for God's glory to apply to mortal men. Of course this source is too recent to establish the proper meaning of "ages of ages" but they were closer to the original usage than we are and it is in line with the similar idiom "generations of generations" which was definitely used in a limited sense.

I feel not able to establish a profound meaning for the term "ages of ages", we have seen that both the phrase *eis ton aiona* in singular and *eis tous aionas* in plural were used and understood in a limited sense, even though they are applied to God in numerous instances, so it is reasonable to assume the same may be the case with "ages of ages", they express everlastingness when referring to God and continuous duration during subsequent generations of whatever length when referring to everything else than God. Dr. Keizer in her dissertation suggests that a similar compound phrase rather might express 'definity' than 'infinity' (p. 142 there).

I do not know if the Biblical context allows the idea of an endless succession of ages at all, since this would imply perpetual change, how else is an age marked out between others, if not by some kind of change? I think the Bible strongly suggest an end of history as one might call it, a final state of harmony, without further succession of ages; nothing static and timeless as Plato's eternity though.

In 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 (KJV) we read:

Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith, all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.

Once God is all in all it is hard to imagine a further succession of ages of ages, even if we do not understand this passage in an universalist sense but adhere to the doctrine of everlasting punishment, it would not change the fact that everything is settled for all future eternity, while the saved spend all futurity with God, the damned undergo never-ending torment for all futurity or are annihilated, where is room for a further succession of definable ages in these scenarios? Also, if there are only two great eons as some believe, this world and the world to come, what sense does an endless succession of ages then make? It would equally apply what I said above.

1 Corinthians 10:11 (ABIT) says:

And these things all came to pass to them as models; and they were written for our admonition, unto whom the ends of the eons are arrived [telê tôn aiônôn katêntêsen].

I do not know if we can infer from this verse that generally all eons end. Maybe we can understand this verse that they perceived the ends of all eons, rather than that the ends of the eons already took place. Since it is spoken of future eons in Ephesians 2:7 (Darby):

That he might display in the coming ages [tois aiôni tois eperchomenois] the surpassing riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

And in Hebrews 1:1.2 (Young's Literal) we read:

In many parts, and many ways, God of old having spoken to the fathers in the prophets, in these last days did speak to us in a Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He did make the ages [tous aiônas epoiêsen];

1 Timothy 1:17 (Darby) further says:

Now to the King of the ages [basilei tôn aiônôn], the incorruptible, invisible, only God, honour and glory to the ages of the ages [eis tous aiônos tôn aiônôn]. Amen.

Since the eons are God's creation through Christ and God is called the King of the eons, it is unlikely that His eternity is expressed by the same word. Unlike the eons, time as such is nowhere explicitly said to have been created as Plato taught, or more relevant, to end.

Later ecclesiastical writers seem to have used the Greek term *aidiotês/aidiotêtos* when referring to God's eternity; in Latin Catholic theology there later seems to have been made a distinction between *aevum* (etymologically related to *aion*), created "eternity" and *aeternitas*, God's eternity, but these are later developments not important for the issue at hand and I haven't investigated it further by myself. Yet in the Vulgate we even find the following rendering in Daniel 12:3:

Qui autem docti fuerint, fulgebunt quasi splendor firmamenti: et qui ad justitiam erudiunt multos, quasi stellae in perpetuas aeternitates.

Literally in "perpetual eternities", *aeternitas* is the strongest term in Latin denoting eternity I am aware of, yet this term was used in plural back then. This suggests that our modern notion of eternity was foreign to the ancients. Wycliffe renders this verse thus:

Forsothe thei that ben tauyt, schulen schyne as the schynyng of the firmament, and thei that techen many men to riytfulnesse, schulen schyne as sterris in to euerlastyng euerlastyngnessis.

"Everlasting everlastingnesses", but this is more an amusing oddity than a matter more to dwell on, but his translation is careful and literally correct, as it should be expected from a Bible translator.

If the inspired writers would have wanted to express the endlessness of future punishment they could have done so by rendering e.g. that the wicked are to be punished "eis apeiros chronos", for infinite time, or by the negation "without end", or they could have employed the stronger term *aidios* (though even this term is partly obscure) rather than *aionios*.

We have seen so far that both *eis ton aiona* and the plural phrase *eis tous aionas* were used in a limited sense, the phrase *eis tous aionas ton aionon* has remained more obscure but denotes likely terminable duration unless applied to God, since a multitude of ages implies long though not necessarily endless duration. It is further difficult to conceive that the smoke of Babylon is ought to ascend as long as God will exist henceforth, even in a figuratively sense that only the remembrance would be eternal, since the Bible says "For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind" (Isaiah 65:17).

The adjective *aionios* is more problematic in so far that while it is commonly accepted that the noun *aion* has various meanings, it is claimed *aionios* has no other meaning than eternal or everlasting. At least concerning the NT, this claim is reasonable in so far, that in the vast majority of instances in the NT it is applied to the future life of the righteous. In my examination I will switch between LXX, NT and extra-biblical usage; we have already encountered *aionios* in various instances at the beginning; I will quote two verses again.

Genesis 21:33 (Brenton)

And Abraam planted a field at the well of the oath, and called there on the name of the Lord, the everlasting [aiônios] God.

Habakkuk 3:6 (Brenton)

the earth stood at his feet and trembled: he beheld, and the nations melted away: the mountains were violently burst through, the everlasting [aiōnioi] hills melted at his everlasting [aiōnias] going forth.

In Genesis 21:33 it is applied to God, in Habakkuk 3:6 both to molten hills and God's ways in one and the same sentence. If we accept that *aionios* can mean "everlasting" then it has at least a twofold meaning, infinite and finite.

We find a similar usage in the NT in Romans 16:25.26 (Darby):

Now to him that is able to establish you, according to my glad tidings and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, as to which silence has been kept in the times of the ages [chronois aiōniois], but which has now been made manifest, and by prophetic scriptures, according to commandment of the eternal God [aiōnion theou], made known for obedience of faith to all the nations;

It has been argued from the use of *aionios* in verse 26 that it must mean eternal since it is applied to God, however it is usually omitted that in verse 25 it is applied to past times, Darby renders *aionios* as "of the ages" whereas the KJV has "since the world began".

Again an apparently twofold meaning in one and the same sentence, finity and infinity. I have written that the question is also warrantable, that if *olam* or *aion(ios)* do not express God's eternity, is it intended to express something entirely else maybe?

John of Damascus whom I already quoted twice wrote:

Before the world was formed, when there was as yet no sun dividing day from night, there was not an eon such as could be measured, but there was the sort of temporal (*chronikos*) motion and interval that is coextensive with the eternal (*aidios*). And in this sense there is but one eon, and God is spoken of as eonian (*aiōnios*) and pre-eonian (*proaiōnios*), for the eon itself is His creation.

I do not know what he means with the temporal motion that is coextensive with the eternal, but it is interesting that he uses *aionios* here as to mean that God is called eonian in the sense that the eon is God's creation, and also pre-eonian in the sense that God existed before there was an eon, maybe *aion* here is time related to the created cosmos, whereas there was also some sort of time before creation, when only God and maybe the heavenly host existed.

Dr. Keizer in her dissertation observes:

Philo explains the Biblical predicate *aiōnic* as referring to the *aiōn*, i.e. to something "related to us", and he contrasts it with the Biblical locution *pro aiōnos*, which is an indication of the domain of God. *Aiōnic* is the predicate of the name "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". Whereas God himself is undoubtedly "before *aiōn*", his *aiōnic* name precisely describes his relation to man, i.e., to the *aiōn*.

In my own words: Contrary to what infernalists claim, *aionios*, e.g. to Philo, does not express God's eternity, but God's acting within time - within the eons and the created world; which is quite the opposite, it does not express God's existence outside time and creation but His acting therein. I think this understanding is reasonable since God created the eons, therefore He is the eonian God, this does not mean that God is not also eternal, that God is the God of Israel (e.g. Exodus 5:1) does not mean He is not also the God of the whole world, but it would be foolish to infer from this expression, that "Israel" must mean the whole world. Likewise it is not valid to infer that if God is called *aionios*, - *aionios* must mean eternal. It is interesting that both Philo and John of Damascus speak about the time before the *aion*, "pro aionos".

It must be admitted here though, that Philo appears to have also used *aionios* synonymously with *aidios* (everlasting), but his use of *aion* and *aionios* differs in the various contexts. On the other hand the following quote is ascribed to Philo, yet I was not able to confirm it in lack of a Greek text, it might also have been wrongly ascribed to him:

Interestingly, Philo used the exact phraseology we find in Matthew 25:46 (just as Christ used it) in the context of temporal affairs between people: "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 aeonian punishment (*kolasis aiônios*) from such as are more powerful" (Fragmenta, Tom. ii., p. 667).

Since I cannot confirm it with certainty I will not further dwell on this passage ascribed to Philo. The phrase *eonian times* is further found in the NT in 2 Timothy 1:9 and Titus 1:2.

I will only cite Titus 1:2 (Darby):

in [the] hope of eternal life [zôês aiônion], which God, who cannot lie, promised before the ages of time [pro chronôn aiôniôn],

These "eternal" times had an end, Darby renders it "ages of time", but it is the adjective that is used, the adjective claimed to mean eternal.

So we have at least three instances in the NT where *aionios* is used in a limited sense and in two occasions where it might be used with twofold meaning in one and the same sentence, infinite when applied to God, finite when applied to times, infinite when applied to the future life of the righteous, finite when applied to times; similar as in Habakkuk 3:6.

There is a further instance where the limited usage of *aionios* is strongly implied, Philemon 15.16 (ABIT):

For perhaps in account of this he was separated for an hour, that eternally [aiônion] you should receive him; no longer as a bondman but above a bondman, a beloved brother, especially to me, and how much more to you, both in flesh and in the Lord.

I'm inclined to believe that *aionios* primarily refers to lifetime here, but it is possible that it refers here to something that exceeds the boundaries of this life, though literal eternity seems to be exaggerated, but this verse is not decisive and both understandings might be valid, I came across an interesting quote in this context:

In the multivolume THEOLOGICAL DICTIONARY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT (begun in German under the editorship of Gerhard Kittel) Hermann Sasse admits, "The concept of eternity [in *aionios*] is weakened" in Romans 16:25; 2 Timothy 1:9 and Titus 1:2 (vol.1. p.209). He explains that these passages use "the eternity formulae" which he had previously explained as "the course of the world" perceived as "a series of smaller *aiones*" (p.203). **Sasse also refers to the use of *aionios* in Philemon 15, which he feels "reminds us of the non-biblical usage" of this word, which he had earlier found to signify "lifelong" or "enduring" (p.208).**

This is a good connection to examine the extra-biblical usage of the word *aionios* at about the time the New Testament was written, before I turn to the Septuagint usage. The passages I will cite can be found at www.perseus.org.

I will begin with the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus from the 1st century AD who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem.

In "The Wars of the Jews", Book 3, the English section begins at section 361, the underlined part is found section 374 in the Greek, he writes:

Do not you know that those who depart out of this life according to the law of nature, and pay that debt which was received from God, when he that lent it us is pleased to require it back again, enjoy eternal fame [kleos aiônion]; that their houses and their posterity are sure, that their souls are pure and obedient, and obtain a most holy place in heaven, from whence, in the revolutions of ages [peritropês aiônôn], **they are again sent into pure bodies**; while the souls of those whose hands have acted madly against themselves are received by the darkest place in Hades, and while God, who is their Father, punishes those that offend against either of them in their posterity? for which reason God hates such doings, and the crime is punished by our most wise legislator. Accordingly, our laws determine that the bodies of such as kill themselves should be exposed till the sun be set, without burial, although at the same time it be allowed by them to be lawful to bury our enemies (sooner).

Josephus seems to have believed in reincarnation, as surprisingly this might sound, he also described the Pharisees as to have believed in reincarnation, "eternal" fame is linked to their houses and their posterity, a place in heaven, from which however after eons they are sent back into pure bodies, so *aionios* in this context could rather be understood as something cyclical rather than endless, eonian fame until the next incarnation. A similar belief in reincarnation might be suggested in the Apocrypha, in Wisdom 8:19.20; John 9:2 might further confirm that the idea of reincarnation was not entirely foreign to the Jewish thought at the time of Christ, the idea seems to have derived from Platonism, but this is not the topic here.

In Book 6, the English section begins at section 427, the underlined part is found section 434 in the Greek, he writes:

As for John, he wanted food, together with his brethren, in these caverns, and begged that the Romans would now give him their right hand for his security, which he had often proudly rejected before; but for Simon, he struggled hard with the distress he was in, till he was forced to surrender himself, as we shall relate hereafter; so he was reserved for the triumph, and to be then slain; as was John condemned to perpetual imprisonment [desmois aiōniois]. And now the Romans set fire to the extreme parts of the city, and burnt them down, and entirely demolished its walls.

Given the context, perpetual or eonian imprisonment can at most mean a life sentence; I have read elsewhere that John was released three years later, possibly he escaped by chance or was freed; possibly the sentence was unlimited in the sense that the Roman authorities imprisoned him without verdict how long he should be imprisoned, but as long as it pleases them, be it months, years or lifelong. In this case maybe 3 years, but this would not have changed the fact that the imprisonment was open-ended; whatever was the case, *aionios* cannot mean more than lifelong here, when speaking about the beliefs of the Pharisees, in reference to future punishment in the afterlife, he used the word *aidios*, everlasting.

In “The Antiquities of the Jews” we find the following citation, Book 11, section 55:

And when the princes and rulers looked one upon another, he began to speak about truth; and he said, “I have already demonstrated how powerful women are; but both these women themselves, and the king himself, are weaker than truth; for although the earth be large, and the heaven high, and the course of the sun swift, yet are all these moved according to the will of God, who is true and righteous, for which cause we also ought to esteem truth to be the strongest of all things, and that what is unrighteous is of no force against it. Moreover, all things else that have any strength are mortal and short-lived, but truth is a thing that is **immortal and eternal** [aidion]. It affords us not indeed such a beauty as will wither away by time, nor such riches as may be taken away by fortune, but righteous rules and laws. It distinguishes them from injustice, and puts what is unrighteous to rebuke.”

In this context, it is absolutely valid to understand truth as to be eternal in its fullest sense; however he employs the stronger term *aidios* here. Yet even this word could have been used in a loose sense, Thucydides, a Greek historian and Athenian general who lived about 400 BC has the following phrase:

The Peloponnesian War, Book 6, chapter 24, section 3

All alike fell in love with the enterprise. The older men thought that they would either subdue the places against which they were to sail, or at all events, with so large a force, meet with no disaster; those in the prime of life felt a longing for foreign sights and spectacles, and had no doubt that they should come safe home again; while the idea of the common people and the soldiery was to earn wages at the moment, and make conquests that would supply a never-ending fund of pay [aidion misthophoran] for the future.

To understand *aidios*, here rendered “never-ending” as literally endless for millennia is a bit far-fetched. A commentary states: “*aidion misthophoran* - this is explained by editors to mean that the addition of Sicily to the empire would lead to continual campaigns; but Gilbert rightly paraphrases: ‘they hoped to get permanent employment out of the acquisition somehow’: *misthophora* is used loosely for pay for any services.”

I mention this term for two reasons, it is the proper Greek word for everlasting or eternal; and it is used in reference to future judgment in one instance in the NT, Jude 6 (Darby):

And angels who had not kept their own original state, but had abandoned their own dwelling, he keeps in eternal [aidiois] chains under gloomy darkness, to the judgment of the great day;

It are the chains that are called eternal, *aidios*, not the imprisonment itself, however the imprisonment seems to be limited to the Day of Judgment, no mention here of what will become of them thereafter.

I will again cite Ilaria Ramelli and David Konstan:

We turn now to the two uses of the more strictly philosophical term *aïdios* in the New Testament. The first (Romans 1:20) refers unproblematically to the power and divinity of God. In the second occurrence, however (Jude 6), *aïdios* is employed of eternal punishment - not that of human beings, however, but of evil angels, who are imprisoned in darkness “with eternal chains” (desmois *aïdiois*). 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 *aïdios* 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.

The next author to consider is Diodorus Siculus. He was a Greek historian, who wrote works of history between 60 and 30 BC. From a historian we should expect that he uses words in their usual meaning, whereas poets, philosophers or theologians might use common words in an unusual or fancy sense or impose new meanings on words.

The first passage is Library, Book 13, chapter 23

But for us to maintain the quarrel forever [*aiônion*] and to pass it on to children's children is neither kindly nor safe; since it sometimes happens that those who appear to be more powerful turn out to be weaker by the decision of a moment than their former subjects.

A similar passage is found in chapter 24

Was it not in order that the memorials of the enmity, lasting as they would for a brief time, should quickly disappear? Speaking generally, if you wish to establish the quarrel for all time [*aiônion*], know that in doing so you are treating with disdain human weakness; for a single moment, a slight turn of Fortune, often brings low the arrogant.

I have not read the entire context, but it is about quarrel between mortal men or entire nations, *aionios* is both rendered “forever” and “for all time”, but literal everlastingness is out of question given the context, *aionios* seems to refer to subsequent generations here.

In the Septuagint in Isaiah 61:4 we read (ABIT):

And they shall build up wildernesses everlasting [aionios], being made desolate prior. They shall rise up and revive cities of wildernesses, having been made desolate for generations.

Aionios is here equated with generations, it is clear that *aionios* is not endless here, but I come back to the LXX later.

Again a similar expression in chapter 32 as in chapter 23 and 24:

"Yet, by Zeus, someone will say, it is a good thing not to make our enmity eternal [aiônion]. Very well, then, after the punishment of the malefactors you will, if you so agree, put an end to your enmity in a suitable manner. For it is not just that men who treat their captives like slaves when they are the victors, should, when they in turn are the vanquished, be objects of pity as if they had done no wrong. And though they will have been freed of paying the penalty for their deeds, by specious pleas they will remember the friendship only so long as it is to their advantage.

Eternal enmity between human beings, it either refers to lifetime or subsequent generations.

Book 15 Chapter 50

Some of the students of nature ascribed the origin of the torch to natural causes, voicing the opinion that such apparitions occur of necessity at appointed times, and that in these matters the Chaldeans in Babylon and the other astrologers succeed in making accurate prophecies. These men, they say, are not surprised when such a phenomenon occurs, but rather if it does not, since each particular constellation has its own peculiar cycle and they complete these cycles through age-long [aionios] movements in appointed courses. At any rate this torch had such brilliancy, they report, and its light such strength that it cast shadows on the earth similar to those cast by the moon.

Here *aionios* is rendered “age-long” as universalists insist it should always be rendered, that it does not mean endless in this instance is clear since the cycles are said to complete, one cycle is *aionios* as I understand it.

In Book 17, chapter 112 we read

While he was still three hundred furlongs from the city, the scholars called Chaldaeans, who have gained a great reputation in astrology and are accustomed to predict future events by a method based on age-long [aionios] observations, chose from their number the eldest and most experienced.

Aionios refers here to past times or generations, a usage we will also find in the LXX.

Book 15, chapter 66

Now Epameinondas, whose nature it was to aim at great enterprises and to crave everlasting [aionios] fame, counseled the Arcadians and his other allies to resettle Messene, which for many years had remained stripped of its inhabitants by the Lacedaemonians, for it occupied a position well suited for operations against Sparta. When they all concurred, he sought out the remnants of the Messenians, and registering as citizens any others who so wished he founded Messene again, making it a populous city. Among them he divided the land, and reconstructing its buildings restored a notable Greek city and gained the widespread approbation of all men.

Everlasting fame, as a poetic expression I think it is valid, but I would doubt literal endlessness as if fame for trillions of years and more was meant.

The last passage I cite is Book 17, chapter 71:

The second wall is in all other respects like the first but of twice the height. The third circuit is rectangular in plan, and is sixty cubits in height, built of a stone hard and naturally durable [aionios].

Aionios is rendered “naturally durable” here, this is the most profane use of *aionios* I have encountered so far, I think everybody would agree that such a stone is not meant to be everlasting and much less eternal, uncreated and without end.

A short summary, we have seen now that *aionios* was used in a limited sense by both Josephus and Diodorus, both more or less contemporary with Christ, if the passage from that fragments is correct and properly ascribed to Philo, also he used it in a limited sense, at most meaning “lifelong” in the questionable passage, the very same expression as found in Matthew 25:46, *kolasin aiônion*. The later might have used *aionios* and *aidios* interchangeably; on the other hand even *aidios* was used in a loose and limited sense. We have also seen that *aionios* was used in a limited sense in both the NT and the LXX in various instances.

I will now further investigate the use of *aionios* in the LXX.

Aionios in reference to future punishment is found in Daniel 12:2 (Brenton):

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life [zôên aiônion], and some to reproach and everlasting shame [aischynên aiônion].

Zoe aionios is the usual expression translated “eternal life” in the NT; in preserved Greek fragments of the pseudepigraphical book of Enoch *zoe aionios* seems to be limited to 500 years:

Enoch 10:10 (Knibb)

They will petition you, but the petitioners will gain nothing in respect of them, for they hope for eternal life [zôên aiônion], and that each of them **will live life for five hundred years**.

I have read the argument that they (evil watchers) both asked to live for 500 years (on earth) and to gain everlasting life (in heaven or wherever), while grammatically this understanding might be valid, I think the context does not support it.

It should be noted that the book of Enoch is preserved entirely only in the Ethiopic language, it is generally believed that the book was composed by various authors, this might explain a certain inconsistency in this book. The first part of the book, till chapter 36, suggests that even the righteous will receive only a merely temporary life on earth, in this context it seems likely that the author equated 500 years with *aionios*, it is believed that the book of Enoch was originally written in Aramaic, so the original rendering would have been a form similar to *olam*, as we have learned that *olam* can be 50 years or until the Jubilee, so why should an author not equate *olam* with 500 years? *Olam* was then rendered with *aionios*, which should not surprise given the limited usage of *aionios* elsewhere (e.g. Isaiah 61:4 in the LXX).

Enoch 10:17

Then all the righteous will be humble, and will live until they father thousands. And all the days of their youth, and their old age, they will fulfill in peace.

Maybe “till they father thousands” is an idiom for everlastingness, but since the book of Enoch is full of silly notions it might very well be meant literally, also “days of youth and old age” implies a finite life. This book of course is of little value despite the fact that it heavily influenced later popular belief about the fallen angels and hell till the present day and is even considered canonical by a multitude of people; but none the less it shows how the ancient Semites used this word and that even their idea of future life was that of a long and blessed rather than an literally everlasting life.

This is further supported by Enoch 25:6

Then they will rejoice with joy and be glad in the Holy place. They will each draw the fragrance of it into their bones, and they will live a long(er) [pleiona] life on earth, as your fathers lived. And in their days sorrow, pain, labor and punishment, will not touch them.

The German translation says they (the righteous) will live longer on earth than their fathers; the Greek text supports this rendering as far as I can judge, this supports my understanding, in the context this happens after the great judgment, so the idea of future life in the book of Enoch is that of long but terminable life on earth after the final judgment, so there is no reason not to understand *aionios* as being equated with 500 years in Enoch 10:10.

In Isaiah 54:4 (ABIT) we read:

For you shall forget your everlasting shame [aischynên aiônion]; and the scorn of your widowhood in no way shall be remembered any longer.

Brenton renders it thus:

Fear not, because thou has been put to shame, neither be confounded, because thou was reproached: for thou shalt forget thy former shame, and shalt no more at all remember the reproach of thy widowhood.

The LXX translators felt it suitable to render “of thy youth” (Strong #H5934) with *aionios*, “everlasting” or “former shame” is the same expression in the Greek as in Daniel 12:2

Isaiah 58:12 (ABIT):

And the everlasting [aiônioi] desolate places shall be built to you, and your everlasting [aiônia] foundations will be in generations of generations; and you shall be called a builder of barriers.

It first says that eonian desolate places shall be rebuild, so they will not be desolate everlastingly, then *aionios* is equated with generations of generations, the context does not suggest eternity.

Once again Isaiah 61:4:

And they shall build up wildernesses everlasting [aionios], being made desolate prior. They shall rise up and revive cities of wildernesses, having been made desolate for generations.

In Isaiah 63:11 we read:

And he remembered everlasting days [êmerôn aiôniôn]; the bringing up from the land the shepherd of the sheep.

Eternal days, does that make sense? As much as eternal years I guess; in Psalm 77(6):5(6) it says:

I reasoned about ancient days; and I remembered everlasting years [etê aiônia].

Proverbs 22:8

Do not remove the everlasting [aiônia] boundaries which your fathers set.

These boundaries are not ought to be eternal.

Job 22:11-13

And they remain as everlasting [aiônia] sheep, and their children play before them, taking up the psaltery and harp, and they are gladdened at the sound of a psalm. And they complete their existence with good things and in the rest of Hades they go to sleep.

Job says this about the impious! That *aionios* does not mean endless here is further evident as the text reads that they complete their existence, i.e. they die.

I think I have provided sufficient evidence, that *aionios* was used in a limited sense in the NT itself, in the Septuagint, extra-biblical writings in a Biblical context, be it the Apocrypha or the works of religious Jews; and among secular Greek writers.

Of course there are two possible approaches, to search for instances where the meaning “eternal” is strongly suggested, which is the common attempt of infernalists; or you do as I did and search for instances where the meaning cannot be “eternal”. Both approaches fall short to a certain degree. I was not able to prove that *aionios* never means eternal; whereas infernalists cannot prove that it always means eternal. So from thesis and antithesis one should create a synthesis, this could be that the words in question denote infinity only in reference to God, when the context demands it. A further difficulty might be that the idea of extraordinary long, but finite, time easily mingles with the idea of literally endless time, e.g. when an author speaks about “everlasting fame”, is it meant literally or hyperbolic. Or when an author writes “till the heavens be no more” (Job 14:12), is it an idiom for everlastingness or is it meant literally, that the heavens pass away one day? (Matthew 24:35).

The salvation of all creation is not primarily up to the translation of the words in question. Universalists do not claim that because the eons are terminable, all men will be saved as they are sometimes accused of, but that since the Bible states that God is the savior of all men (1 Timothy 4:10) there cannot be such thing as everlasting punishment.

I will try to give an explanation for Mark 3:29 and Matthew 25:46, that is in line with this understanding. I would suggest rendering *eis ton aiona* with “beyond the distant horizon of time”, while I know that this is a laborious phrase, I think it preserves the meaning of Hebrew *l’olam* the best, what is meant is not a particular age, but that what is not in view. I would render *aionios* as “perpetual” in all instances. I do not understand “perpetual” as do denote endlessness but it might carry this connotation when the context demands it, e.g. when applied to God, and it is a term more poetically and stronger than “enduring”, “lasting” or “continuous”; I think it preserves the ambiguity of the Greek term and does not foist a preconceived meaning on a text, which the renderings “eternal”, “everlasting” but also “age-long” do.

I would render Mark 3:29 thus:

But whosoever shall speak injuriously against the Holy Spirit, has no forgiveness beyond the distant horizon of time [*eis ton aiōna*]; but lies under the guilt of a perpetual [*aiōniou*] sin.

Matthew 12:32 (Darby) says:

And whosoever shall have spoken a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this age [*en tō nyn aiōni*] nor in the coming one [*en to mellonti*].

The age to come I understand primarily as the millennium, so those who blasphemed the Holy Spirit have neither forgiveness in this age and the millennium, this means that when Jesus warned his audience to utter such words, it was a timespan of at least almost 3000 years.

From a human point of view 3000 years are very much beyond the horizon of time; since it are at least two eons in which this sin cannot be forgiven it is properly called eonian or perpetual.

To them might apply what we have read in Hebrews 6:4-8 (Darby):

For it is impossible to renew again to repentance those once enlightened, and who have tasted of the heavenly gift, and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God, and the works of power of the age to come, and have fallen away, crucifying for themselves as they do the Son of God, and making a show of him. **For ground which drinks the rain which comes often upon it, and produces useful herbs for those for whose sakes also it is tilled, partakes of blessing from God; but bringing forth thorns and briars, it is found worthless and nigh to a curse, whose end is to be burned.**

A ground is burned not to torment it, if that were possible, or to extinct it but to renew and restore it, so the analogy implies a remedial punishment; likewise those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit cannot be granted repentance anymore, that they might escape judgment, but they can only be restored by judgment; they will not live in the millennium, which for a religious Jew was a very sad lot. This is at least my understanding.

Matthew 25:46 I would render thus:

And these shall go away into perpetual chastisement [kolasin aiônion], but the righteous into perpetual life [zôên aiônion].

With “chastisement” I mean remedial punishment, the Greek word is κόλασις [kolasis] (Strong #G2851), Liddell Scott gives the following meanings “checking the growth of trees”, “chastisement”, “correction”. Plato and Aristotle have defined it as remedial punishment as opposed to τιμωρία [timôria] (Strong #G5098), which is defined by Liddell Scott as: “retribution”, “vengeance” (differing from *kolasis*, corrective punishment).

It is argued that in later times, when the NT was written, it has lost its notion of remedial punishment but meant punishment in general, or even torture, I do not know if this claim is valid. As far as I can judge it is still a milder term than *timoria* or *basanos* (torture).

We have seen how *zoe aionios* was limited to 500 years in Enoch 10:10, I will not make the attempt to claim that the future life is terminable, but the phrase *zoe aionios* seems not carry the connotation of endlessness in itself, from the Biblical context we know that the future life of the saved will indeed be never-ending, since there will be no more death. It has been argued that the life of the saved must be co-perpetual with the punishment of the damned, and that either both are terminable or endless. What it is interested by this argument that it seems to have been accepted that *aionios* might indeed very well mean a limited period of time, but that if this were the case, also the life were limited and this could understandably not be true to them.

I do not think that is understanding is valid, we have seen that *aionios* might have a twofold meaning, even in one and the same sentence when applied to different things; life and chastisement are entirely different things, perpetual life as a gift from God can be assumed endless because of God's goodness and the Biblical context; perpetual chastisement can be assumed terminable likewise because of God's goodness and the Biblical context.

This is why I said that I would favor the rendering "perpetual" for *aionios*, various things might be called perpetual and endure for a longer or shorter duration or even endlessly, but only because two things are called perpetual, this does not mean that they are co-perpetual and that the one lasts as long as the other lasts. On the other hand, those who insist that the Bible teaches everlasting punishment could still claim that perpetual means everlasting in the context, not on the authority of the word "perpetual" itself of course, but according on their understanding of the Bible; whereas those who believe that all men are saved would not have to write papers to an extent as this, but simply could state that they do not understand perpetual to be endless here, those who disagree would have to proof then, that it is indented to mean endless rather than the way around. But the Bible says in Proverbs 25:2, "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the glory of kings is to search out a thing", so maybe this confusion has its deeper sense.

In Mark 10:29.30 we read (Darby):

Jesus answering said, Verily I say to you, There is no one who has left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, [or wife], or children, or lands, for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, that shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time: houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions, and in the coming age [aiôni tô eperchomenô] life eternal [zôên aiônion].

"Eonian life" is directly related here to the eon to come and therefore I am inclined to understand it here as merely "life of the future eon" rather than "eternal life", if the word *aion* has a multitude of meanings, and also fixed phrases as *eis ton aiôna* might have apparently twofold meanings, this might likewise apply to *zoe aionios*, whereas in John it means to know God, here it primarily may mean life pertaining to the age to come, this is also my favorable understanding of "eonian life" and "eonian chastisement" in Matthew 25:46, it is life and chastisement pertaining to the eon to come.

I will come to a last verse before I close my examination.

2 Corinthians 4:18 (Darby):

While we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen; for the things that are seen are for a time [proskaira], but those that are not seen eternal [aiônia].

From this verse it has been argued that *aionios* is the opposite of temporal, i.e. eternal, also Darby himself used that argument, however his translation here is better than most others, this applies to his translation in general which was the reason I used it to a large amount.

Since he was a strong adherent of everlasting punishment himself, nobody could accuse him of a personal bias in this matter, whereas Darby renders “for a time” others render “temporal”, suggesting a Platonic distinction between time and eternity. However the Greek word used here is [proskairos], it is not related to time (*chronos*) as such; this would be *chronikos*, John of Damascus e.g. used *chronikos*, “temporal”, as opposed to “eternal” (*aidios*) in the passages I quoted earlier; however *proskairos* rather means a “season”, a short time, this is proven for example by Matthew 13:21 (KJV):

But they have no roots. So they last only a short time [proskairos]. They quickly fall away from the faith when trouble or suffering comes because of the message.

So I would suggest the following understanding for 2 Corinthians 4:18:

The things that are seen are **for a short time**, but those that are not seen **exceed the boundaries of this life and world, they reach beyond the distant horizon of time.**

I think this understanding would be totally in line with the meaning of Hebrew *olam*, whereas the idea of endlessness is ignored. I will once again quote Keizer’s dissertation, as a result:

In the meanings of the ancient Greek word ΑΙΩΝ (*aion*: lifetime, life-lot, generation, all time, “eternity”) three notions play a part, in variable combinations and with a variable centre of gravity. These notions are: LIFE, TIME, ENTIRETY.

The meaning of the words *aion* and *aiōnios* in the Greek Bible (Septuagint and New Testament) is primarily that of the Hebrew word *olam*.

The Hebrew word *olam* indicates time as it constitutes for us, humans, the horizon within we live and which limits the scope of knowledge given us. The horizon can be limited as a human lifetime, but can also be – the widest conceivable – encompassing all time that is concomitant with the created world and its future.

When Plato pronounces his famous dictum that time (*chronos*) is “an *aion*ic image-which proceeds according to number-of *aion* which remains at one” (*Timaeus* 37d), the term “eternity” as the classic translation of *aion* does not give expression to the fact that the word here stands for time as a whole: a completeness of time comparable to a lifetime.

Infinity is not an intrinsic or necessary connotation of *aion*, either in the Greek or in the Biblical usage.

I think I have provided sufficient evidence that the words and phrases in question do not by necessity or at all denote that which is endless, admittedly some writers may have used it in this sense; but this argument is too weak to establish the doctrine of everlasting punishment on the words in question especially since the Bible clearly states otherwise.

Appendix:

As I occasionally referred to the Latin version to back up by claims, since it is more genuine than modern English Bibles, and with modern I also mean the KJV, and even considered authoritative by the Catholics as far as I know I want to offer an explanation how the confusion in English Bibles arrived.

We have seen that the nouns *aion* and *olam* (the Vulgate partly is translated from the Hebrew, partly from the Septuagint, as far as I know Jerome did not translate it from scratch but also revised existent versions and compiled them together) were interchangeably rendered with *in aeternum* and *in saeculum* in Latin, however the adjective *aionios* was rendered with *aeternum* in all except three instances as far as I am aware of, these three instances are Romans 16:25, 2 Timothy 1:9 and Titus 1:2, when we read “eonian times”; the Latin has *saecularis* there, from which “secular” derives.

The plural or compound occurrences of *aion* or *olam* where commonly rendered with a form of *saeculum*, *saecula saeculorum*, (ages of ages), *saeculum saeculi* (age of age), whereas *eis ton aiona* or *l'olam* commonly were rendered *in aeternum*; though interchangeably with *in saeculum* as shown.

This makes sense, in so far that when not a clearly marked out age is meant, the rendering “to the remote future” is preferable than “to the age”, however in plural “for ages” makes sense in either case, be it clearly marked out ages or just a long time. The compound phrases were either not understood as eternal, be it in a strict or loose sense; or not understood at all and therefore rendered literally, if a careful translator does not understand an idiom he would rather translate it literally than to foist an entirely wrong meaning on it, not all translators have this diligence of course. That the Vulgate renders in “aeternum et ultra” equally makes sense, *aternum* was simply not understood as (necessarily) endless back then, and therefore the rendering “to the remote future and beyond” is preferable than “to the age and beyond”, as there was no particular age referred to.

I wondered why *aionios* was not translated with *saecularis* more often, but I think I found the reason. Whereas *saeculum* properly means age, though in more limited sense, such as “century” or “generation”, than *aion*; its adjective rather means “profane” or “worldly” despite the fact that the Latin word for “world” was *mundus*.

It is interesting how *saecularis* was used in the Latin version except the three instances already mentioned:

1 Corinthians 6:3.4 (Darby)

Do ye not know that we shall judge angels? And not then matters of this life? If then ye have judgments as to things of this life, set those to judge who are little esteemed in the assembly.

2 Timothy 2:4 (Darby)

No one going as a soldier entangles himself with the affairs of life, that he may please him who has enlisted him as a soldier.

Hebrews 9:1 (KJV)

Then verily the first covenant had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary.

This rendering is correct; the Greek has *kosmikos*, the adjective of *kosmos* (world).

Titus 2:12 (KJV)

Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly [kosmikon] lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world [nyn aiōni];

In this verse we see how the Latin and English translation are becoming imprecise, the Greek version speaks about worldly (*kosmikos*) lusts in the present age (*aion*), *kosmikos* and *aion* are not related to each other, neither in meaning nor etymologically; the Latin has *saecularis* and *saeculum*, which are etymologically related to each other, but seem to differ in meaning, *saecularis* appears not to be a time word in its primary meaning, but rather an ethical word, meaning “profane” or “worldly”, exactly what also modern “secular” means, I thought this might have been a later development but this seems not to be case given the usage in the Vulgate, both *kosmikos* and other Greek words related to (this worldly) life have been rendered with *saecularis*, so *saecularis* is apparently no time word in the first place whereas *saeculum* always is used in a temporal (as opposed to a local) sense as far as I know except James 1:27, where the Greek has *kosmos* and the Latin renders *ab hoc saeculo*, “from this age”, maybe ‘the world’ in a pejorative sense was identified in a temporal meaning there with the present eon and therefore rendered with *saeculum*.

In Titus 2:12 we witness a slight loss in meaning in both the Latin and English (KJV), which is not dramatic in this instance, since “world” can also be understood in a temporal sense, whereas *aion* and *saeculum* do not mean “world” in a local sense, this would be *kosmos* in the Greek and *mundus* in the Latin.

In Ephesians 2:2 the Latin reads:

in quibus aliquando ambulastis secundum saeculum mundi huius secundum principem potestatis aeris huius spiritus qui nunc operatur in filios diffidentiae

In the Greek we read *ton aiōna tou kosmou totou*, it is the same as *saeculum mundi huius*, both means “age of this world”, Darby’s translation is again right:

...in which ye once walked according to the age of this world [ton aiōna tou kosmou totou], according to the ruler of the authority of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience...

I quoted this verse to prove that the Latin has a proper word for “world”, *mundus*, as the Greek has *kosmos*, and that both should not be mixed up with either *saeculum* or *aion* since they mean entirely different things otherwise they would have not been joined here in the way they are.

So this is what I think happened:

When originally *saeculum*, “age” and *aeternum*, “eternity” (in the sense of a long time) were more or less interchangeably it came to pass that through Catholic theology, possibly by

Tertullian (but this is my speculation), the meaning of eternity as it has today was foisted on *aeternum*, whereas *saeculum* retained its meaning in Latin.

When centuries later Wycliffe translated the Bible from the Latin, he could hardly other than to understand *aeternum* as everlasting, whereas he rendered *saeculum* with "world", which in his days rather meant "age" than world in the sense of cosmos or earth. The limited usage of *aion* was thereby no longer apparent. Later the word "world" in English seems to have developed the meaning it has now. So when at the beginning Latin *saeculum* and *aeternum* were interchangeably, it happened that *saeculum* and *mundus* apparently were considered to be synonymous and thus translated with the same word and without distinction between them. This has further concealed the temporal meanings of *aion* and the existence of various eons and might explain the inconsistency in many Bible translations, where *aion* is both translated as "forever" and "world", in regard to the word *aion* many translations still show a horrible inaccuracy, Darby's translation is outstanding here, though he adhered to the doctrine of everlasting punishment, at least the plural and compound phrases he translated literally. The Latin version is not to blame for this confusion since Jerome could not have rendered *aionios* as *saecularis* because than Jesus would have been said to have offered "profane life" which is of course nonsense, Wycliffe is not to blame either, since he could not other than to follow the Latin.

I think I have shown in great detail why it is necessary and valid to challenge the traditional renderings of the words in question and look at the original Hebrew and Greek texts because most English translations are not reliable in this issue, possibly for a large part due to the aftermath of the Vulgate and the translations that originated from it or were at least influenced by it.