

Plato, John of Damascus and the Æons

When the father creator saw the creature which he had made moving and living, the created image of the *eternal* (αιδιος) gods, he rejoiced, and in his joy determined to make the copy still more like the original; and as this was *eternal* (αιδιος), he sought to make the universe eternal (-), so far as might be. Now the nature of the ideal being was *eternal* (αιωνιος), but to bestow this attribute in its fullness upon a creature was impossible. Wherefore he resolved to have a moving image of *eternity* (αιωνος), and when he set in order the heaven, **he made this image eternal (αιωνιος) but moving according to number, while eternity (αιωνος) itself rests in unity; and this image we call time (χρονος)**. For there were no days and nights and months and years before the heaven was created, but when he constructed the heaven he created them also. They are all parts of time, and the past and future are created species of time, which we unconsciously but wrongly transfer to the *eternal* (αιδιος) essence; for we say that he "was," he "is," he "will be," but the truth is that "is" alone is properly attributed to him, and that "was" and "will be" only to be spoken of becoming in time, for they are motions, but that which is immovably the same 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. These are the forms of time, which imitates *eternity* (αιωνιος) and revolves according to a law of number. Moreover, when we say that what has become is become and what becomes is becoming, and that what will become is about to become and that the non-existent is non-existent -- all these are inaccurate modes of expression. But perhaps this whole subject will be more suitably discussed on some other occasion.¹

So far Plato, it is interesting how John of Damascus (650 - 754 AD) seems to refer to this when he explains the several meanings of Greek αιων:

It must then be understood that the word æon has various meanings, for it denotes many things. The life of each man is called an æon. Again, a period of a thousand years is called an æon. Again, the whole course of the present life is called an æon: also the future life, the immortal life after the resurrection, is spoken of as an æon. Again, the word æon 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** (αιδιος).

For æon is to things eternal (αιδιος) just what time is to things temporal.²

¹ <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Plato/Timaeus/timaeus1.htm>

² John of Damascus, DE FIDE ORTHODOXA

Especially Plato's idea of *æon* is often used to prove that it must mean "eternity" – whatever we understand with eternity:

"It is impossible to conceive any more positive statement that *αιων* is distinct, and to be contrasted with what has a beginning and belongs to the flux of time. *Αιων* is what is properly eternal, in contrast with a divine imitation of it in ages of time, the result of the creative action of God which imitated the uncreate as nearly as He could in created ages. **It is a careful opposition between eternity and ages; and *αιων* and also *αιωνιος* mean the former in contrast with ages.**"

So far John Nelson Darby on the subject, the meaning of *æon* Mr. Darby presents seems to be a rather philosophical and uncommon meaning; neither the biblical use – especially in the Septuagint, nor John of Damascus' use of *æon* implies that this was the common meaning.

It is significant that John of Damascus taught everlasting (i.e. endless) punishment yet he did not claim *αιων* nor *αιωνιος* means eternal, in fact by his use of the the noun, it seems it primarily meant an *age*.

Before the world was formed, when there was as yet no sun dividing day from night, there was not an *æon* such as could be measured, but there was the sort of temporal (*χρονικος*) motion and interval that is coextensive with the eternal (*αιδιος*). And in this sense there is but one *æon*, and God is spoken of as *αιωνιος* and *προαιωνιος*, for the *æon* itself is His creation.

It seems John of Damascus understands with *æon* an age of any possible length up to infinity, - *προαιωνιος* might be rendered *pre æonian*, before the *æon*, thus the *æon* is something in time, with beginning and end, that God is called *æonian* he seems to understand that God belongs to His creation, the *æon* – it doesn't seem that he understands *αιωνιος* to mean eternal; he uses *aidios* when he means "eternal", and further employs *ateleutêtos*, *aperantos* and *apeiros*, all these words mean *endless*.

Further, *æonian* life and *æonian* punishment prove that the *æon* to come is endless (*ατελευτητος*). For time will not be counted by days and nights even after the resurrection, but there will rather be one day with no evening, wherein the Sun of Justice will shine brightly on the just, but for the sinful there will be night profound and limitless (*απεραντος*).

This is very interesting, John of Damascus seems to assume that the *æonian* life is endless, therefore the *æon* to come has to be endless, as *æon* means age, *æonian* can probably only mean endless, when applied to an endless (*ατελευτητος*) *æon*.

Once again, his use of αἰών indicates that he understands thereby merely an age, now if this age is by assumption endless; but by assumption only, the Bible does not imply this in my opinion; only then means αἰώνιος, pertaining to the everlasting αἰών, endless.

As far as I know, all church fathers who taught endless punishment strengthened the meaning of αἰώνιος by adding unscriptural terms such as *ateleutêtos*, *aperantos* and *apeiros* – all meaning "endless".

It is conceded that the half-heathen emperor [Justinian] held to the idea of endless misery, for he proceeds not only to defend, but to define the doctrine he does not merely say, "We believe in αἰώνιον κολάσιν", for that was just what Origen himself taught. Nor does he say "the word αἰώνιος has been misunderstood; it denotes endless duration", as he would have said, had there been such a disagreement. But, writing in Greek, with all the words of that abundant language from which to choose, he says: "The holy church of Christ teaches an *endless æonian* (ατελευτητος αἰώνιος) life to the righteous, and *endless* (ατελευτητος) punishment to the wicked." If he supposed αἰώνιος denoted endless duration, he would not have added the stronger word to it. The fact that he qualified it by ατελευτητος, demonstrated that as late as the sixth century the former word did not signify endless duration.

Justinian need only to have consulted his contemporary, Olympiodorus, who wrote on this very subject, to vindicate his language. In his commentary on the Meteorologica of Aristotle, he says: "Do not suppose that the soul is punished for *endless æons* (απειρου αἰωνας) in Tartaros. Very properly the soul is not punished to gratify the revenge of the divinity, but for the sake of healing. **But we say that the soul is punished for an æonian period, calling its life, and its allotted period of punishment, its æon.**" It will be noticed that he not only denies endless punishment, and denies that the doctrine can be expressed by αἰώνιος declares that punishment is temporary and results in the sinner's improvement.³

It is remarkable that Olympiodorus contrasted αἰώνιος directly with infinite ages, therefore αἰώνιος can in itself most probably only mean a finite period, it is further interesting how well Olympiodorus' statement "*the soul is punished for an æonian period, calling its life, and its allotted period of punishment, its æon*" fits to John of Damascus' definition "*the life of each man is called an æon*". Also in Olympiodorus' use, noun and adjective are directly related to each other.

³ <http://hellbusters.8m.com/upd21.html>

Ages of Ages - Αἰῶνας τῶν Αἰῶνων

I will now consider this mysterious phrase, again John of Damascus' words:

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

If I understand it right, all the lives or æons of men are meant by *æons of æons*, at least there is not the slightest allusion, that the term *æons of æons* by itself denotes infinity.

This explanation comes a bit close to an explanation I found in a German book, with either Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox background, the phrase is explained thus:

[For the æons of æons,] this literal translation from the Greek corresponds with the Latin "in sæcula sæculorum" [into ages of ages]. Thereby is not meant the "eternity" (aidiotêtos, æternitas) 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 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.⁴

One might argue that the sum of all finite periods of time add up to infinity but eternity in a philosophical sense is indivisible, 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 æons of æons denote something in time, not God's infinity.

John of Damascus closes his book, DE FIDE ORTHODOXA, with the following statement:

But those who have done good will shine forth as the sun with the angels into life æonian, with our Lord Jesus Christ, ever seeing Him and being in His sight and deriving unceasing joy from Him, praising Him with the Father and the Holy Spirit into the endless (εἰς τοὺς ἀπειρούς) æons of the æons.

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http://books.google.de/books?id=3E3UfjByMiMC&pg=PA206&lpg=PA206&dq=aidiotes+ewigkeit&source=bl&ots=As_ZrEx0oK&sig=oexGA97DmmwglffOOafQyGWkaF0&hl=de&ei=vEVbStv4MZvumgPSsLVB&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2#v=onepage&q=aidiotes%20ewigkeit&f=false

Now if æons of æons denotes infinity, why adding endless (apeiros)? Why would anybody strengthen a phrase that already means infinity by adding "endless"? - earlier he defined æons of æons as "many æons in the sense of lives of men", obviously belonging to the seven æons of this present world (kosmos), as these æons of æons belong to the present *kosmos* they cannot be endless, for we should expect that they will have ceased (2Peter 3:6-13) when the final and everlasting, as he assumes, eighth æon will begin.

In Catholic liturgy we further find this e.g.:

PER DOMINUM NOSTRUM JESUM CHRISTUM FILIUM TUUM QUI
TECUM VIVIT ET REGNAT IN UNITATE SPIRITUS SANCTI DEUS, **PER
OMNIA SÆCULA SÆCULORUM**

PER OMNIA SÆCULA SÆCULORUM means "through **all** ages of ages" or "through **all** centuries of centuries", now if "ages of ages" denotes infinity, which sense does "**all** ages of ages" make? - this suggests that there are less than "**all** ages of ages", thus the period called "ages of ages" cannot be infinite, for there is a period greater than "ages of ages" which are "**all** ages of ages", but there can only be a period of greater, maybe infinite length ("**all** ages of ages"), if the other period is finite ("ages of ages").

Also the (in)famous Augustine wrote about this expression, "Augustine was the first in the long line of Christian persecutors, and illustrates the character of the theology that swayed him in the wicked spirit that impelled him to advocate the right to persecute Christians who differ from those in power. The dark pages that bear the record of subsequent centuries are a damning witness to the cruel spirit that influenced Christians, and the cruel theology that propelled it. Augustine 'was the first and ablest asserter of the principle which led to Albigensian crusades, Spanish armadas, Netherland's butcheries, St. Bartholomew massacres, the accursed infamies of the Inquisition, the vile espionage, the hideous bale fires of Seville and Smithfield, the racks, the gallows, the thumbscrews, the subterranean torture-chambers used by churchly torturers.'"

"Augustine brought his theology with him from Manichæism when he became a Christian, only he added perpetuity to the dualism that Mani made temporal. 'The doctrine of endless punishment assumed in the writings of Augustine a prominence and rigidity which had no parallel in the earlier history of theology and which savors of the teaching of Mohammed more than of Christ.'"⁵

I chose to quote Augustine as "authority", not because of his wisdom, his scholarliness, nor because of his orthodoxy or character, but because he endorsed the doctrine of everlasting torment as nobody before him. Let's look at his words concerning the æons of æons:

⁵ <http://hellbusters.8m.com/upd20.html>

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. ⁶

It seem Augustine had no idea what this phrase actually means, but it seems to me, he considered the SÆCULA SÆCULORUM (Latin for æons of æons) to be something that exists within time, he makes no allusion that it should be understood as endless perpetuity. Sometimes it is more significant what an author does NOT say, then what he says; if the chief-promoter of the doctrine of endless torment, does not use this phrase to support his doctrine, we can suppose he did not understand this phrase as to denote infinity, for would he have done so, he would surely used this phrase to support his doctrine, which as far I can tell he did not. His argumentation in favor for endless punishment seems to have been solely based on Matthew 25:46.

A universalist explanation of the phrase "ages of ages"

As it is a Hebrew idiom, I will quote a Messianic Jewish author:

The English phrase, "for ever and ever", actually makes no sense when you pause to think about it. 'For ever' is, by definition, eternal. So how can there be more than 'eternal'? Some translators do a song-and-dance routine, attempting to show that the phrase is an idiom meaning "forever and ever". They say it signifies ages tumbling upon ages. If that were the case, then the Holy of Holies ought to be idiomatic of "Holy **and** Holies" which is nonsense. The *Song of Songs* should then be idiomatic for "Song **and** Songs". Or perhaps they want us to believe that the Holy of Holies is a Holy Place tumbling upon countless other holy places. Then the *Song of Songs* would be a Song with an infinite number of stanzas which is just as absurd. No, we have to dismiss this foolishness and call the translators to repent for trying to twist scripture to fit in with their traditions and preconceived doctrines. The Word of Yahweh must be allowed to speak itself through its own Hebraic lenses. Let's also stick to the principle of Occam's Razor which says that the simplest explanation is probably the correct one. So, the Bible talks about the **Most** Holy Place (Holy of Holies) and the **greatest** Song and the **greatest** of the Ages. If we accept the plain truth, then everything harmonises, confusion vanishes, and we arrive at a state of each - *oneness*.⁷

The only problem with this explanation is, that the phrase *ages of ages*, does not only appear in the inspired writings but also in the uninspired apocryphal writings, namely in 4th Maccabees, this book is solely of Jewish origin and the writer could hardly have had in mind the *particular ages*, which the inspired writers called *ages of ages*.

4th Maccabees 18:24:

Ω η δοξα εις τους αιωνας των αιωνων αμην

To whom be glory into the æons of the æons. Amen.

Now whatever the writer of 4th Maccabees meant is not easy to say, Canon F.W. Farrar, author of "Mercy and Judgment" quotes WINDET in his work:

"The frequent *ledori doroth* of the Rabbis ("to generations of generations"), the equivalent of εις τους αιωνας των αιωνων of the New Testament, meant a finite period."⁸

Unluckily I was not able to find any further information about Windet's DE VITA FUNCTORA STATU, it seems to be a most interesting, very ancient book.

⁷ http://www.nccg.org/mlt/sermons/3_066.html

⁸ http://www.tentmaker.org/books/mercyandjudgment/mercy_and_judgment_ch8.html;
WINDET, De Vita functora statu, p. 170

However it seems to be confirmed that "to generations of generations" meant a finite period of time:

Noah, trustworthy righteous man who has been preserved, go forth boldly with your sons and wife and three daughters-in-law and fill the whole earth increasing and multiplying, dealing justly with each other, **to generations of generations, until the whole race of men comes to trial**, when there will be judgment for all. ⁹

A look in a dictionary will confirm that "generation" is a possible translation for both αἰών and SÆCULUM, "**a SÆCULUM is a length of time roughly equal to the potential lifetime of a person or the equivalent of the complete renewal of a human population**" - this perfectly fits as description of *generation*.

⁹ <http://ldolphin.org/floodleg.html>