

HISTORY OF THE WORD "ETERNAL."

THEOLOGICAL controversy first awakened English attention to the distinction between *eternal* and *everlasting*; and the almost entire displacement of *everlasting* from the revised version of the New Testament excited some murmurs on doctrinal grounds; but the revisers had clearly no option: they found two distinct words, *ἀίδιος* and *αἰώνιος*, in the Greek text, and translated them by the two nearest English equivalents. It may perhaps be regretted that they retained *everlasting* in Jude 6; for just as *ἀεί* does not always mean *for ever*, but often denotes continuity for a certain time, so *ἀίδιος* seems there to mean the *continual* bondage of the rebel angels from the time of their revolt to the day of judgment; but the correctness of *everlasting* in Romans i. 20 is recognised by all. It is, however, of *eternal* that I desire to write: this is in fact *αἰώνιος*, first latinised, and then adopted into the English language; for *αἰών* written in Latin became *ævum*, and *ævternus* contracted from *æviternus* is the adjective answering to *ævum* as *αἰώνιος* to *αἰών*. *Eternal* and *αἰώνιος* are therefore convertible terms in English and Greek respectively. But it is still maintained that the change from *everlasting* to *eternal* is a distinction without a difference, seeing that the two words are synonymous and express the same idea. Popular theology understands by eternity an endless existence in contradistinction to time. For the incorrect translation

to Paul himself, while he supposes the rest of the letter to have been written for Paul by a friend—probably Luke. Ebrard also thinks the letter was written at Paul's instance, but he holds that these four verses were added by the compiler. Zeller attributes the whole letter to a writer of later date, who added this supplement in order to make it pass as a Pauline Epistle. But surely, in such a case, the forger would have mentioned Paul in a more distinct and positive manner. The first two hypotheses have, critically, no ground to rest upon, and seem to have had no other design than to maintain a close connexion between the Epistle and Paul himself, since even the critics dare not go so far as to attribute the letter directly to the apostle.

of *αἰώνιος* and *αἰών* as *everlasting* and *for ever*, etc., in the English Bible has confused together two distinct ideas. But it is the duty of Greek scholars to aim at a clear perception of divine truth by careful study of the original language in which the apostles wrote; and English Christians ought to welcome gladly an argument which maintains the essential distinction between that eternal life which is their glorious birthright in Christ, and the everlasting existence which may be the portion and the curse of devils or irretrievably wicked men.

Let me therefore review the history of these two words in Greek literature and the Greek Bible. I have not traced back the adjective further than the time of Plato; but this is immaterial, as the substantive and adjective stand in the closest relation to each other throughout the Bible, and the substantive *αἰών* belonged to Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus, and the Attic poets, as well as to the Septuagint, and had in all a clear, well defined meaning. The connexion of *αἰών* with *ἄημι* (*breath*), is disputed; but its combination of the two ideas *life* and *time*, which might naturally originate in a conception of the breath of life, is very distinct in all the Greek poets. Occasionally it denoted some of the functions of physical life in lower animal forms; Hermes for instance, in the Homeric hymn addressed to him, is described as boring out with an auger the *life* of the tortoise. But generally it signified *human life*, or the definite term for which it lasts, *lifetime*. A single instance may suffice, the Homeric record of early death: "short was his span of life" (Il. iv. 478). The religious spirit of Greek poetry associated with *αἰών* a further idea of a destiny which controls the lives of men, so that it became a spontaneous expression of Greek belief in an overruling providence which shapes our lives to an appointed end. From the original conception of a *lifetime*, language readily evolved that of time as the limit within

which action reaches a final issue. Just as we have learned to speak of the *lifetime* of a nation or a race, of a creed or institution, of an opinion or a word, so the Greeks, by an unconscious use of figurative language, described any definite cycle of time as an *αἰών*; and the idea of time became eventually more prominent in the word than that of life. Hence Aristotle defines it as an *end*, primarily of human life, but secondarily of any existence. Plato applies the term *eternal* to the highest forms of divine creation, but calls the gods themselves *everlasting*.

After this *αἰών* and *αἰώνιος* passed into the hands of the Greek-speaking colony of Jews in Egypt, and were used by them for the expression of Hebrew thought in the Septuagint. They were naturally pressed into constant service, as embodying with more distinctness than any other Greek word that conception of a world under Divine government which formed the central doctrine of the Hebrew faith. Unfortunately *αἰών* has no exact equivalent in English, and the word *eternal* is almost unknown to the Old Testament, while the paraphrases *everlasting*, *for ever*, etc., which are adopted in our version, give a palpably false colour to the Hebrew thought. I shall perhaps best convey my idea of the language of the Septuagint by rendering *αἰώνιος* always *eternal*, while translating *αἰών* as *age*, *end*, or *life*, according to the shade of meaning which the context demands. English readers of the Bible may learn with surprise that *eternal* is hardly ever used as an epithet of Jehovah, apparently from a sense of its unworthiness and inadequacy, but is freely used to describe such transitory ordinances as the covenant of circumcision, the trumpet blowing, the scapegoat, the ritual of atonement, and the Levitical sabbath. Israel's possession of Canaan, the priesthood of Aaron, and the reign of the house of David are alike spoken of as lasting *to the end*, or *until the end*. It has been suggested that these things are only called

eternal, because they are typical of things eternal. But the Septuagint applies the epithet, not to the antitypes, but to the things themselves, and has no scruple in coupling it with other words which implied temporary and earthly existence, as for instance "eternal throughout your generations." The words clearly conveyed to the Greek reader simply the idea of permanent institutions established for the whole period of national existence, and no more. *Αἰών* expressed in fact the same idea of a definite period that it does in other Greek literature; the length of the period is very various and can only be determined by the context. The covenant with Noah, that seedtime and harvest, summer and winter should not cease, was made "for eternal generations," that is to say, so long as the material world should last. The gates of the old Jebusite fortress of Sion were designated as *eternal* (Ps. xxiv. 7), apparently because they were formed in the solid rock and coeval with nature. Again *εἰς τ. αἰῶνα* often denotes simply *for life*: the slave who declined freedom in the sabbatical year became a slave *for life* (Exod. xxi. 6); God purposed to establish Moses' personal authority over His people *for life* (Exod. xix. 9); the Psalmist prayed to be led "in an eternal," *i.e.* a lifelong "way" (Ps. cxxxix. 24). Throughout the historical portions of Scripture there is the same variety and the same limitation of the period; it may mean the personal life of the author, the life of the king, the lifetime of Israel, or the existence of the world. And this holds good equally of prophecy: Isaiah for instance predicts the desolation of Idumea by "fire which shall not be quenched until the end" (*εἰς τ. αἰῶνα χρόνον*), yet the Greek text interprets this immediately afterwards as "much time," and limits the desolation to *generations* (Isa. xxxiv.).

The hope and expectation of Israel were specially concentrated on the coming and kingdom of the Messiah. His age was designated by evangelical prophecy as "the last

days," and His kingdom constituted the close of Israel's *life*: to this therefore belong the most glorious predictions of eternity, "all flesh is grass; . . . surely the people is grass; the grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand unto the end." But the same phrases are also used of the end of heathen nations.

It may seem that *αἰών* is given as the measure of God's own existence in such passages as Deuteronomy xxxii. 40, "I live unto the end," but this is clearly a mistake; for in Exodus xv. 18 He is said to live not only to the end of the age, but also "for an age and beyond" (*εἰς τ. αἰῶνα καὶ ἐπ' αἰῶνα καὶ ἔτι*); Psalm liv. (lv.) 20, describes Him as "existing before the ages"; and the beginning of Divine wisdom is dated "before the age" (Prov. viii. 23). In passages which speak of God's justice and mercy abiding *to the end*, the end naturally conceived is the limit of human life. So in doxologies the end contemplated is the compass of man's future life as the utmost conceivable limit of human praise; but there the language employed bears constant witness to its own inadequacy for expressing an indefinite futurity; for the writer resorts to such phrases as "for age upon age," "for the age and onwards" (*ἐπέκεινα*), "for the age and beyond" (*καὶ ἔτι*).

In spiritual and devotional language the nature of the case forbids any such precise limits as in historical; for spiritual aspiration reaches onward to a future of indefinite remoteness; and the periods of spiritual life do not admit of the same visible and tangible limits as those of outward life. But the conception of *the end* recurs constantly, sometimes in the form of *εἰς τ. αἰῶνα*, sometimes in the alternative phrase, *εἰς τέλος*. On the whole, the one general conception of *αἰών* throughout the Septuagint is that of finality.

In the later days of Judaism, however, *the end* is naturally postponed to another world, for the resurrection of man had then become the creed of religious Israelites; and they

recognised a life beyond the grave. Like Plato, they applied the term *eternal* to this second life. Plato, for instance, derided ancient mythology for the "eternal carouse" at the banquets of the gods assigned to the just as their reward after death. A pathetic passage in the Book of Tobit represents him under the crushing burden of accumulated misery craving dissolution as the only possible release, "Command therefore that I may now be delivered out of this distress and go into the eternal place" (Tob. iii. 6). He contemplates death as a life of eternal rest, a sort of oriental Nirvana. With this may be compared the picture of death as the home of man's life (Eccles. xii. 5), and that of the dead lying in darkness who shall not see light until the end, Ps. xlix. (xlvi.) 20. Messianic hope, and belief in man's immortality, combined to lift the prophet Daniel to nobler visions of the time to come. He beheld in spirit one like unto a son of man receiving an eternal dominion which shall not pass away, and a kingdom which shall not be destroyed (Dan. vii. 14), and it was revealed to him that the saints of the Most High should possess this kingdom till the end of an age of ages. Again he beheld that "many of them that sleep shall awake, some to eternal life, some to shame and eternal contempt," and that "they that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars for the ages and beyond" (καὶ ἔτι, Dan. xii. 2, 3). The prophet's thought seems to pierce beyond the compass of time, and to embrace an indestructible kingdom; but this idea is not conveyed by the epithet *eternal*, which declares only that it shall last till the end of time, but is contained in the indefinite "beyond."

It may be observed that as the religious horizon of the Israelite enlarged, and his mental vision embraced a wider view of God's world, the dispensations of God were spoken of in the plural number, and greater cycles were mentioned which comprehended lesser within them (αἰῶνες αἰώνων)

but this multiplication in no way implied infinity, but the reverse; infinity is one, but times are manifold.

Several generations elapsed between the close of the Old Testament and the coming of Christ. The interval was fruitful in religious teaching and witnessed a strong religious revival. Under these influences theological phrases became current in the language of the people which affected the use of the word *αἰών*. The faith which prophecy had kindled in the coming Messiah found expression in the application of the verbs *μέλλειν* and *ἔρχεσθαι* to Himself and all things connected with His coming; accordingly the Messianic age was designated *αἰών μέλλων* and *αἰών ἐρχόμενος*, or sometimes *αἰών ἐκεῖνος*, *the other life*, in contrast with the previous period, which was known as *this life* (*αἰών οὗτος*). A moral significance also was often attached to the same phrase *αἰών οὗτος*, like that which belongs to *this life* and *this world* in English, as expressing the temptations and irreligious tendencies of existing human life and society. The Messianic age was the culmination of Israel's history, including the whole period of His coming and His reign; it embraced the restoration, the judgment on enemies, and the triumphant dominion of the saints. The first coming was therefore placed *at the end of the ages* (*συντελεία τ. αἰώνων*, Heb. ix. 26); and *the ends of the ages* were said to have devolved on that generation of Christians (1 Cor. x. 11), while the final judgment was also placed *at the end of the age* (*συντέλεια τ. αἰῶνος*, Matt. xiii. 40).

But the thoughts that clustered round certain combinations of *αἰών* could make no essential change in its own meaning; *that* was permanently fixed for every scribe that spoke Greek in the language of his Greek Bible. The word *eternal* developed a new force as it issued from the lips of Christian apostles; but this was not because the word itself was changed, but because it came in contact with new ideas and was made the vehicle of a new faith. Christians ceased

moreover to call some things *eternal* which the Hebrews had so designated; but this also implied a change of faith and not of language. The word itself retains in the Greek Testament the same force as in the Septuagint. In spite, for instance, of the new dignity imparted to it by Christian teaching, it is only once applied as an epithet to God, and that is in the closing doxology to the Epistle to the Romans (xvi. 26), which has with some reason fallen under suspicion of being an early Christian addition to the manuscript of St. Paul's epistle. The power and divinity of God are not described as *eternal*, but as *everlasting* (Rom. i. 20); His counsels are traced back beyond eternal times (*πρὸ χρόνων αἰώνων*, 2 Tim. i. 9), and beyond the ages (*πρὸ τ. αἰώνων*, 1 Cor. ii. 7). In the future likewise, St. Paul contemplates the Son's final surrender of His kingdom to the Father, eternal as it is elsewhere described (1 Cor. xv. 24). The *ages* on the other hand (whether *αἰών* is used in the singular or the plural) are continually identified with the creation and existence of man (compare *τ. ἀπ' αἰῶνος προφητῶν*, Acts iii. 21; *ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τ. αἰώνων*, Eph. iii. 9; *ἐποίησε τ. αἰῶνας*, Heb. i. 2; *κατηρτίσθαι τ. αἰῶνας*, Heb. xi. 3). The use of *αἰών* in doxologies continues the same as in the Septuagint, except that plural forms are more frequent. In several passages we are almost forced to interpret *εἰς τ. αἰῶνα* as *for life*; for instance, the immediate withering of the fig-tree responds most distinctly to the words of Christ, when we understand that the curse was laid on it, not *for ever*, but *for its life* (Matt. xxi. 19). The distinction between a bondservant and a son in John viii. 35 is obscure, until we read "the bondservant abideth not in the house *for life*, but the son abideth *for life*." All trace of exaggeration is removed from Peter's passionate protest, "Thou shalt not wash my feet *as long as I live*" (John xiii. 8); and from Paul's vehement declaration "if meat maketh my brother to stumble, I will eat no

flesh *all my life long*" (1 Cor. viii. 13). Even *αἰώνιος* retains in one passage the same force of *lifelong* that it has in Psalm cxxxix. 24; for in sending back Onesimus to his master Philemon, to render the faithful service of a Christian brother, St. Paul says, "Perhaps he was therefore parted from thee for a season, that thou shouldest have him back for a *lifelong* bondservant, no longer as a bondservant, but more": the relation between master and slave can hardly be conceived as extending beyond this life.

The sentence of *eternal fire* inflicted on Sodom and Gomorrha denotes obviously their final desolation under God's providence in the course of nature (Jude 7). The same words acquire a much more awful meaning in Matthew xxv. from their connexion with the final judgment; the whole passage borrows its imagery from the Hebrew prophets, mainly from the visions of Daniel. The image of *fire* naturally recalls Isaiah's terrible picture of the fiery wrath of God against His enemies at His coming, and Malachi's description of the Second Advent as a refiner's fire. This is no place to discuss whether this *eternal fire*, and the *eternal punishment* (κόλασις), which our Lord in the same passage substitutes in place of the *eternal contempt* of which Daniel wrote, be of a penal or remedial character. Enough that the epithet *eternal* conveys a solemn warning that it will abide till God's appointed end.

There are, however, two conspicuous changes visible in the Greek Testament use of *αἰών* and *αἰώνιος*; the idea, which constantly recurs in the Septuagint, that the lifetime of Israel was God's appointed term, and that the institutions and ordinances of Israel were *eternal*, disappears from the New Testament, and the word *eternal* is transferred by all the writers of the Greek Testament to the sphere of man's personal or spiritual life. Both these changes can be distinctly traced to the lessons of Christ. The imperfect revelations of Hebrew prophecy had presented

the Messiah as a national king leading forth His people to battle, dyeing His garments with the blood of the slain, judging the vanquished, putting enemies to the sword, and riding in triumph into the gates of Sion. The apostles themselves clung obstinately to the hope of an outward restoration of the kingdom of David in the person of Christ; and until His final rejection by the voices of priest and people, and His actual death, they could not dissociate their hope of His future kingdom from the lifetime of the chosen nation. But as the lessons of His life and death sank by degrees into their minds, the Spirit taught them that Israelite institutions were not final, but only a temporary means of educating God's servants to a higher faith; and they ceased to call them *eternal*.

Again the Jews did not connect the thought of an eternal life beyond the grave with a spiritual change, but regarded it as an inheritance to be earned by good deeds (Luke x. 25, xviii. 18). Christ's doctrine of a new life here on earth, as the great blessing which the Messiah came to give, startled His Jewish hearers. Nicodemus could not comprehend the mystery of a new birth of the Spirit. When Jesus spake of Himself as the bread of life, by which this new life was to be sustained, many of His disciples found it a hard saying, and walked no more with Him. Yet this doctrine constituted the very essence of Christianity. The apostles summed up the promises of the gospel in "Christ our life." To them He was "the life": and in Him "the life had been manifested." They had learned from their Master that this life, which is God's special gift in His Son and by His Spirit, was the only real life, so real in comparison with what men call life, and so distinct from it, that whosoever is minded to save what is called life shall lose what is indeed his life, and whosoever shall lose that life for Christ's sake shall find his real life (Matt. xvi. 25).

A name was further needed to distinguish this life in

Christ from ordinary life. Jesus might well have called it the *true* life (ζωὴ ἀληθινή), just as He spoke of the *true* light, the *true* bread, and the *true* vine. So St. Paul has in one place borrowed the language of the Platonists to express the spirit of his Master's teaching, and entitled it "the life which is life indeed" (τ. ὄντως ζωῆς)—a reading which was changed in the received text, and appears in our Bible as "eternal life," but has now been replaced in the revised version of 1 Tim. vi. 19. The name which Christ and His apostles did adopt, was borrowed, as might be expected, from the Old Testament, and recurs more than forty times in the New,—*eternal life*. The name is full of meaning, if we bear in mind that the word *eternal* signifies permanence, not absolutely, but in relation to a life, whether long or short; and not an accidental prolongation of existence, but a permanence inherent in its original constitution. For Christ insisted strongly on permanence as a characteristic feature of the new life; He contrasted for instance "the meat that abideth unto eternal life," with "the meat that perisheth"; and the living water He had to give, with the water of Jacob's well: "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall not thirst unto the end, but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a fountain (πηγή) of water springing up unto eternal life." Again He said, "I am the living bread . . . if any man eat of this bread, he shall live unto the end." The same thought finds expression in His words, "He that believeth hath eternal life," and "this is eternal life, that they should know Thee, the only true God." In both places the word *eternal* declares the true nature of the believer's life, as lifted above the accidents of time and circumstance which fetter and limit human life on earth. As the Mosaic legislation was declared *eternal* independently of its eventual duration, because God originally stamped upon it the character of permanence, and identified it with the life of Israel as an

essential part of the national constitution, so Christ claimed for the new life this quality of permanence; but in a far higher sense, as an essential property of its inherent nature. For outward life is transitory and its riches are unsubstantial, but permanence is a distinct attribute of the spiritual world. To declare a life permanent is to assert its vitality in the struggle with death, and by calling this spiritual life *eternal* Christ declared its triumph over death, and asserted the abiding power of His indwelling Spirit to resist death and survive the dissolution of the body. By revealing the intense reality of that unseen world which is eternal, and bringing it within immediate grasp of a living faith, He was enabled to use it as a leverage to overthrow the dominion of the flesh and the world.

Turning to apostolic language, we find St. John continually absorbed in the one topic of eternal life, and repeating the phrase three and twenty times. St. Paul has truly caught the spirit of his Master when he counts the affliction, under which the outward man is wasting away, a light burden beside "the eternal weight of glory," which the daily renewal of the inward man is working; and adds, "for the things that are seen are temporal, the things that are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. iv. 17, 18). This I take to be the *eternal encouragement* to which he refers in 2 Thessalonians ii. 16. Again "the life which is life indeed," on which he bids Timothy charge the rich to lay hold, is clearly but another name for the life *eternal*, on which Timothy is himself to lay hold (1 Tim. vi. 12, 19). The Epistle to the Hebrews delights to rise above the gloomy contemplation of final judgment on the earthly Israel into the bright light of an ideal world. The Hebrews beheld with sorrowful amazement the worship, which had once been called eternal, sinking into ruin together with its covenant, its inheritance and its priesthood; but the author had learned in the school of Christian philosophy how intensely real and

abiding is the spiritual life which God has given us in His Son. Hence his fondness for the word *eternal*: Christ is in his language Mediator of an eternal covenant, Author of an eternal salvation and of eternal redemption, the inheritance He bestows is eternal, His priesthood abides to the end. St. Peter speaks likewise of Christ's eternal glory and eternal kingdom. The vision of an angel "having an eternal gospel to proclaim in Revelation xiv. 6, seems a reminiscence of Isaiah xl. 8, "The word of our God shall stand unto the end" (compare 1 Pet. i. 25).

Some modern theology seems to me to degrade this Christian ideal by confounding eternal life with an everlasting existence in the future; and I desire to bring into clearer view this unseen but eternal world, which is ever within us and lies close about us. Reason may teach us, as it taught Plato, to believe in the indestructibility of a human soul; and there is no difficulty in reconciling this with the Christian doctrine of a glorified body and a new earth as well as a new heaven to come. But assuredly faith in the present reality of the invisible world lies nearer to the heart of religion; and to this sphere belongs our eternal life. For it is God's gift to us now from heaven; in spite of present weakness of the flesh it has a real source of strength hidden with God in Christ; it is rich in ever-growing knowledge and love of God, as well as promise of the life to come. Why then should we be anxious about the end, so we be drawing ever nearer to our God! the end is in His hands, and we may safely leave it there. Enough for us that we shall be like Him and shall see Him as He is: this is eternal life.

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