'ETERNITY' REVISITED
A Study of the Greek Word αἰών

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The Greek word αἰών (*aiôn*) has a wide-ranging meaning as well as a wide-ranging history: it is most commonly translated as 'eternity' but has as its first meaning 'life' or 'lifetime'; it has its place in Greek literature and philosophy, but also in the Greek Bible, where it represents the Hebrew word *'olâm*. In this article I intend to sketch the history of the meaning and interpretation of *aiôn* from the word's first attestation in Homer up until the beginning of the Christian era. The expanded version of this study was defended as a doctoral dissertation, entitled *Life Time Entirety: A Study of AIΩN in Greek Literature and Philosophy, the Septuagint and Philo,* on 7 September 1999 at the University of Amsterdam.[1]

In what follows, I will first give a survey of the 'history of *aiôn*' as it emerges from the texts in which the word occurs (§1). Then I will single out a number of passages — from Plato, Aristotle, the Septuagint, and Philo of Alexandria — in which *aiôn* has a philosophical meaning or philosophical (and theological) implications: passages which lead us into reflections on what is usually called 'eternity' (§2). At the end (§3) I will gather some fruits of insight this study may offer in the field of reflection on 'eternity' and time, a field in which also the tradition of reformational philosophy has made its contributions.

1. AIΩN *in Greek Literature and Philosophy, the Septuagint and Philo*

Let me start with the remark that my approach is primarily of a philological nature. I have examined (and discussed in my book) a large number of passages, each time establishing the meaning of *aiôn* on the basis of the context. I describe the history of the meanings of a *word*, and do not give a historical or systematic exposition of a *concept* (such as, for example, the concept of eternity).[2] My work covers the literary or general, the philosophical, the 'Septuagintal', and Philo of Alexandria's exegetical usage of *aiôn*. Thus, it does not include the usage of the word in the New Testament and the interpretation by the Church Fathers, nor its philosophical and religious meaning in the Greco-Roman period and the Gnostic usage. This later — and decisive — part of the history of *aiôn* is the subject matter of my ongoing research.

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[1] I am grateful to the editorial board of *Philosophia Reformata* for the opportunity given to me to present a summary of my research in its pages. The book is not for sale in the bookstore, but can be obtained from the author.

[2] A word, in contradistinction to what I call a concept, normally has several meanings (connected to various usages); a concept in my definition conveys a single (univocal) idea, which sometimes cannot even be described by just one word.

Mine is certainly not the first study, nor the first dissertation, devoted to
aiôn.[3] Studies so far, however, have concentrated either on the 'Greek' or on
the biblical meaning of the word, but have not made a balanced assessment of
both side by side. With regard to the research done on either side, let me
mention the following points of criticism. Expositions of 'Greek' *aiôn* either
jump from the word's first attested meaning, 'life(time)', to the (philosophi-
cal) concept of 'eternity' which then, without further explanation, is taken as a
new meaning, or they limit themselves to the philosophical usage. Students of
the biblical word *aiôn* pay little attention to the Old Testament usage of the
word in its own right. Moreover, they tend to explain one of the usages (viz.
the plural) and meanings (viz. 'age') of the word in both the Old and the New
Testament with unwarranted appeal to extra-biblical usage of *aiôn*. With regard
to Philo, the extent to which he takes into account the biblical meaning of *aiôn*
(= *'olâm*) is not sufficiently recognized. Although my study indubitably will turn
out to have its own limitations, what I have tried is to approach *aiôn* in a more
consistent and comprehensive way.

The following survey presents my conclusions regarding the meaning of the
word *aiôn* as it is used (a) in Greek literature in a non-philosophical way, (b) in
Greek philosophy, (c) in the Septuagint, and (d) in Philo of Alexandria.

1a. Greek literature

The history of *aiôn* starts with *aiôn* being a word for 'life'; indeed, in Homer
aiôn is far from being a word for 'time' but rather has the connotation of 'force
of life'.[4] A word with which *aiôn* in Homer is combined, is *psuchê*. The Greek
language has yet two other words to designate life: there is *zôê*, indicating the
state of being alive (not yet in Homer), and *bios*, indicating the ways and means
of maintaining that state. Thus while *zôê* refers to the life 'bred' and *bios* to the
life 'led', *aiôn* can well be characterized as designating the life 'had'.[5] My

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[3] See for broad studies C. Lackeit, *Aion. Zeit und Ewigkeit in Sprache und Religion der Griechen.
Erster Teil: Sprache* (diss. Königsberg, 1916); E. Degani, *AIΩN da Omero ad Aristotele* (Padova,
1961); G. Zuntz, *Aion, Gott des Römerreichs* (Heidelberg, 1989) and *AIΩN in der Literatur der
Kaiserzeit* (Wien, 1992). For the specifically philosophical meaning of *aiôn* I single out G.
Böhme, *Zeit und Zahl. Studien zur Zeittheorie bei Platon, Aristoteles, Leibniz und Kant* (Frankfurt am
Main, 1974) and R. Brague, *Du temps chez Platon et Aristote. Quatre études* (Paris, 1982). For the
Septuagint usage see e.g. H. Sasse, 'αἰών, αἰώνιος in G. Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen
Testament* 1 (Stuttgart, 1933) 197-209, and for *'olâm* E. Jenni, "Das Wort *'ôlâm* im Alten
Testament", *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 64 (1952) 197-248 and 65 (1953) 1-35,
and " *'ôlâm* Ewigkeit" in: E. Jenni & C. Westermann (eds.), *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum
Alten Testament* (München - Zürich, 1976) 2, 228-243. For (philosophical) *aiôn* in Philo, J.
Whittaker, *God Time Being. Two Studies in the Transcendental Tradition in Greek Philosophy* (Oslo,
1971).
[4] As regards etymology, the noun *aiôn* appears to be derived from the Indo-European root
*aiw-, to which etymologists have attributed the meaning 'force of life' or 'duration (of life)' or
both. The Latin word *aevus/aevum* has the same root, as does, e.g., English *age* and Dutch *eeuw*
(age; century).
[5] Two thirds of this formulation I owe to C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge, 1967[2])
218 (here not talking about *aiôn*): " 'life', taken not as the life 'led' but as the life 'had', so that
it is almost synonymous with lot or future".

investigation of *aiôn* in Greek literature from Homer to Hellenism has shown me a coherent complex of meaning of the word, which turned out to be built up from the following three notions: 'life', 'time', and what I call 'completeness', 'wholeness', or 'entirety'. *Aiôn* refers to 'life' as a 'whole' of 'time' — hence, besides 'lifetime' it can also designate life's 'lot'. Highly illustrative of the meaning of *aiôn* is a passage in Euripides' *Supplices* (line 1084). Here one of the personages heaves the sigh that something done wrong in daily life ("at home") can easily be rectified, "but *aiôn* it is not possible to rectify". *Aiôn* is 'complete' or 'completed' life. From the tragedians onwards, the word is frequently used also to designate '(all) time' without the notion of 'life' playing a discernible part; the notion of 'completeness' or 'whole', however, remains attached to it in that usage. It is remarkable that only very rarely we find the word in the plural, viz. twice in Empedocles (5th cent. BC) and once in the Hellenistic poet Theocritus (3rd cent. BC; the next time is in Flavius Josephus, 1st cent. AD): in all of these three cases it conveys the meaning of '(successive) generations'. Especially this last meaning may make one expect to find *aiôn* used in the sense of a historical 'age' named after someone living (e.g. the 'Augustan age') — as alleged by C. Lackeit (1916) and also by G. Zuntz (1992). I have not, however, found this borne out in the texts. The same holds for the interpretation of *aiôn* as 'period of time': I conclude that insofar as 'period' designates for us a 'part' of time, it is not an adequate interpretation. *Aiôn* denotes 'time' always in the sense of 'all time'; it denotes a 'part' of time only in the sense of either (all time of) the future, or (all time of) the past. According to the presentation of Lackeit, the meaning of *aiôn* developed from relatively small ('life') to bigger ('period'), big ('long time'), and biggest ('eternity'). This is a logical line of argument, but the purported development of meaning is not supported by the actual texts. My investigation suggests that 'period' is, so to speak, an 'anachronistic' meaning — and that the same holds true for 'eternity'.[6] So far, we have been offered an understanding of *aiôn* comprising the notions of life, time, and whole (entirety). For the meaning of *aiôn* in terms of eternity we will have to turn to philosophical texts.

1b. Greek philosophy

Gathering my conclusions about the role allotted to *aiôn* successively in the philosophy of Empedocles, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoa and Epicurus, I observe that this role is a cosmological one. In Empedocles (fragment B16 Diels-Kranz) we seem to meet *aiôn* for the first time on a cosmic scale as the 'life' of the cosmos, coinciding with the whole of time. For Plato (discussed in more detail in §2a), *aiôn* — usually translated 'eternity' — is the unitary whole of

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[6] The interpretation in terms of 'period' or definable 'age' feeds on the biblical usage: notably the biblical use of *aiôn* in the plural (but see my remark in §1c) and, more importantly still, on the New Testament speaking of 'the present *aiôn* (< *'olâm*)' and 'the *aiôn* (< *'olâm*) to come' (although here too the two *aiôn*s are not just two successive 'ages'). For 'eternity' as an anachronistic meaning see §3.

'life(time)' on the intelligible level, which *chronos* (time) displays or 'counts out' on the sensible level. In Plato for the first time we find *aiônios* as the adjective form of *aiôn* ('*aiôn*ic'). Aristotle (more about him in §2b) defines *aiôn* as that which encompasses the infinite time of the cosmos, in analogy of *aiôn* as that which encompasses the time of an individual person's life; the particular term Aristotle uses here is *telos* ('the *telos* encompassing the time...'). In Plato's system, *aiôn* is reserved for the intelligible, transcendent world; in Aristotle, *aiôn* (called divine, and as *telos* touching upon the first, transcendent, principle) is the comprising sum of the immanent, sensible world of time itself. Plato and Aristotle in their various ways position *aiôn* on a superior level from which it gives 'meaning' to time.[7] The Hellenistic philosophies of the Stoa and Epicurus, by contrast, do not assume distinct levels of reality, hence *aiôn* in their thought does not have a (transcendent) position above (immanent) time; to the extent that they use the word in a philosophical sense or context, *aiôn* is time on the cosmic scale, time which manifests itself to the eyes of man as infinite.

My examination of the expression 'from *aiôn* for/to *aiôn*' as found in pseudo-Philolaus, Marcus Aurelius[8] and the treatise *On the cosmos* (transmitted under the name of Aristotle but of much-disputed authorship and date; the Latin title is *De mundo*) led me to the conclusion that this expression means 'since all (infinite) time and for all (infinite) time',[9] this in spite of the resemblance to expressions like 'from age to age' or 'age after age'. In Greek philosophical reflection we find neither the plural of *aiôn* nor the suggestion of a possible plural. Accordingly, we do not find *aiôn* in the sense of 'age' or 'world-period'. *Aiôn* is the entirety of the time that is concurrent with the universe.

There are no indications that the term *aiôn* in Greek sources dating from the period I have considered was charged with 'oriental' notions — as was certainly the case later on, when the term came to be used in the syncretistic environment of the Greco-Roman world. Regarding Greek sources, however, I have so far left out of account an important body of Greek texts: texts which do have *aiôn* with an 'oriental' meaning, since the word is used to represent the Hebrew word *'olâm*. I am speaking of the Septuagint, which must now be discussed.

1c. The Septuagint

The Greek Old Testament or 'Septuagint' consists in the first place of the Pentateuch (the five Mosaic books), which was translated by Jewish translators in Alexandria in the first half of the third century BC.[10] In the second place the

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[7] Thus I would like to say, taking an anachronistic stance, that the Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of *aiôn* refer to what in Dutch can be called 'de *zin* van de tijd'.

[8] Marcus Aurelius (AD 121-180) is of a much later period than the one I have considered in this study, but he is relevant for reasons of comparison.

[9] As holds true also for the parallel expression in the Septuagint, for which see §2c.

[10] Latin *septuaginta* = 'seventy' (also indicated by LXX), after the seventy translators as tradition has it.

Septuagint corpus comprises the Prophets and the other canonical books: these were translated after the Pentateuch, in the third and second centuries BC. It also includes translations of non-canonical Hebrew or Aramaic books (e.g. Tobit, Sirach), and, finally, some books not translated but originally composed in Greek (e.g. Wisdom). All books that are translations of Hebrew (or Aramaic) originals show, notwithstanding their diversity in translation techniques, an invariable pattern: they use the Greek words *aiôn* and *aiônios* as standard equivalent of the Hebrew word *'olâm* (and Aramaic *'âlam*).[11] In the Septuagint *aiôn* thus is a 'stereotyped' rendering of *'olâm* — 'stereotyping' being a common phenomenon in Septuagint translation. In order, then, to understand the meaning of *aiôn* in the Septuagint I have first investigated the meaning of *'olâm*.[12]

In the Hebrew Bible, the word *'olâm* (and *'âlam*) is used either adverbially or adnominally,[13] but never as a subject or object of a sentence — with one notable exception: namely, the famous passage of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) 3:11, where *'olâm* is the direct object in a sentence (and has the definite article). There we find something which comes closest to an explicit reflection on *'olâm*: God has given the *'olâm* in the hearts of men. Having investigated the meaning of *'olâm* in all of the Hebrew Bible, I have come to the following definition: *'olâm* is time constituting the temporal horizon of created life (men) in the created world. This horizon can be far (e.g. the remote past, Genesis 6:4) and rather near (e.g. the end of one's life, Exodus 21:6), purposed-but-postponed ("life for-*'olâm*", Genesis 3:22) as well as decided-but-diminished ("until *'olâm* ... until ...", Isaiah 32:14-15). In its widest sense *'olâm* describes all time, i.e., time as given with creation (e.g. Psalm 90:2; see also §2c). To say the same in other words: *'olâm* designates time of which the limit is not known, in the sense either that the limit, though sure, cannot be fixed (Exodus 21:6, Isaiah 32:14-15), or that a limit is not to be envisaged (e.g. Psalm 89). In practice, we may render *'olâm* most often by 'all time', 'always',[14] 'ever'. The plural, *'olâmim*, has a dividing-and-multiplying, that is, intensifying import. God is called the Rock of *'olâmim* (Isaiah 26:4), but also God of *'olâm* (Isaiah 40:28). His kingdom is a kingdom of all *'olâmim* (Psalm 145:13). We do not find in the contexts in which the plural occurs any indication that it implies a restricted meaning of the singular, i.e., that *'olâmim* denotes a plurality of distinct 'ages'. Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is any distinct *'olâm* set against another distinct one — as will happen later, notably in the New Testament.

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[11] The Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible has 439 instances (in 430 phrases) of the noun *'olâm* and 20 instances (in 17 phrases) of *'âlam*. In only 17 cases the Septuagint does not have *aiôn* or *aiônios* as translation of *'olâm*. An appendix to my dissertation lists all instances of *'olâm* (and *'âlam*) and *aiôn(ios)* in the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint.

[12] *'Olâm* and *'âlam* may etymologically be related to the Hebrew root '*lm*, 'to be concealed'.

[13] I.e., either in an adverbial phrase such as *le'olâm* ("for *'olâm*" – this most frequently) or as a genitive with the function more of less of an adjective (e.g. "covenant of *'olâm*" > "everlasting covenant", Gen.9:16).

[14] The Dutch equivalent of 'always' is nicely *altijd*: literally 'all-time'.

To say that *'olâm* is something like a *horizon* does justice to the fact that the word is always used in an adverbial or adjectival (i.e., so to say, 'surrounding') way. The term 'horizon' as such denotes the outermost limit of our view.[15] The definition of *'olâm* as 'time that *constitutes* the horizon' is meant to be taken to include all time which is contained within or reaches up to that horizon: *'olâm* includes what is inside the — always receding — borderline. The definition is perfectly in line with Qohelet 3:11 ("the *'olâm* given in their hearts") and its context. That context brings out that the *'olâm* is the maximum of what is given to the human view. Human beings are aware that there is also a 'beyond', but this indeed is beyond their view: it is God's domain ("the work of God from beginning to end", as Qohelet 3:11 calls it).

Comparing at this point the meaning of *'olâm* in the Hebrew Bible with the meaning of *aiôn* in Greek literature, we observe that *aiôn* has several connotations without parallel in *'olâm*. The meaning of *aiôn* is constituted by the notions of 'life', 'time', and 'whole'; an ensuing connotation was that of a defined life's 'lot'. The word *'olâm* by itself does not convey a notion of 'life'. Moreover, although both *'olâm* and *aiôn* denote time which bears relation to life, the implied 'views' of time (and life) are different. E. Jenni (1976) called *'olâm* an *Extrembegriff*; I suggest that *aiôn*, then, might rather be called a *Totalbegriff*. In *aiôn*, life and time is seen as a whole (total, complete), which implies a view 'from outside'. *'Olâm* too refers to all of time, but seen as constituting the temporal and human horizon, which implies a view 'from inside'. While *aiôn* can stand for a determined life's 'lot', *'olâm* is the 'scope' for life to be full.

The Septuagint, as noted, consistently renders *'olâm* (and *'âlam*) by either *aiôn* or *aiônios*. But not only *'olâm* itself, also the embedding phrases or syntactic constructions in the Hebrew are consistently reflected in the Greek version. Some Greek renderings reproduce the original in such a way that we must call them Hebraisms. For example, also the use of *aiôn* in the plural, reflecting the plural of *'olâm/'âlam* in the original, can be considered a Hebraism, since in the Septuagint corpus it is far more frequent than in the contemporary, non-biblical Greek language. When the Greek renderings of *'olâm*-phrases diverge from the Hebrew constructions (e.g. in the use of the definite article where the Hebrew does not have one)[16], this is usually due to the rules of the Greek language and does not interfere in the conveyed sense of *aiôn* = *'olâm*. Sometimes, however, the divergence is due to the conscious choice of translators and is intended to bring out an aspect of *aiôn* which either may or may not also apply to *'olâm*. An example of the prior is the strange phrase *eis ton aiôna chronon* (literally "for/into the *aiôn* time", e.g. Isaiah 9:7); a significant example of the latter will be discussed in §2c: *aiôn* used in a way which goes beyond the usage of *'olâm*.

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[15] Greek *horizôn [kuklos]* = 'delimiting [circle]'.

[16] As in *eis ton aiôna = le'olâm*. The phrase *eis ton aiôna* does not occur in earlier Greek literature and is probably coined by the Septuagint translators. In the Septuagint it is the most frequently occurring *aiôn*-phrase.

An important expression in the Septuagint is *theos aiônios* ('*aiôn*ic God'), which is a translation of "God of *'olâm*" (Genesis 21:33, Isaiah 40:28). Whereas the Greek expression easily elicits an interpretation in terms of eternity as a property of God, it is worthwhile to notice that the Septuagint renders the same title also as "God of the *aiôn*" (LXX-version of Daniel 5:4, Sinaiticus-version of Tobit 14:6), even "God of the *aiôn*s" (Sirach 36:17[22]). The Bible, I observe, does not speak in terms of the 'eternity of God', only about the God of eternity — if indeed we choose to use the latter term to represent *'olâm/ aiôn*. Inasmuch as there are biblical passages which refer to what we may call the 'eternity of God', they describe with the terms *aiôn* and *aiônios* God's presence and power *in* all time (Isaiah 40:28, Psalm 90[LXX89]:2). Psalm 90[89]:4 refers to God's superiority *over* time, but without using *'olâm/ aiôn*. *Aiôn* is bound up with creation; 'God Eternal' is He who is God above and in all time, He who never at any time lets down his creation. Instead of 'eternity', we may call the *'olâm/ aiôn* the 'entirety' of time. With regard to the notion of infinity the following can be said. The first *'olâm/ aiôn*-text in the Old Testament, Genesis 3:22, shows life (Hebr. *chai*, which is life in full force and well-being) as having the implied purpose of being without death and hence of being "for *'olâm/ aiôn*". Thus, when *'olâm/ aiôn* represents 'world without end' this is due not to the very nature and definition of *'olâm/ aiôn* but to the prospect of the extinction of death.

1d. Philo of Alexandria

In Philo of Alexandria (ca. 15 BC – AD 50) we meet a Jewish exegete and philosopher whose native tongue was Greek (he probably did not know Hebrew) and whose project was to interpret the Holy Scriptures (which for him was the Septuagint, and primarily the Pentateuch) in such terms as were communicable in the Hellenistic intellectual milieu to which he belonged. Philo is a valuable source for a study of the meaning and the early inter-pretation of the words *aiôn* and *aiônios* as they are used both in the Scriptures and in Greek philosophy.[17] Since Philo is an exegete, a first distinction suggests itself: namely, between Philo's own usage of *aiôn/ aiônios* and his exegesis of these words when he finds them in the biblical text. Hence the question may be raised: is there a difference between the meaning of *aiôn* and *aiônios* when Philo uses these words on his own account and the meaning which he ascribes to them when they occur in a biblical passage which he is exegeting? I did indeed find a difference inasmuch as Philo himself uses *aiôn* in a philosophical sense. I label as philosophical a usage of *aiôn* which explicitly places the term in a particular relationship with *chronos*; a specific form of this philosophical usage is the Platonizing usage, in which *aiôn* is attributed to the intelligible and *chronos* to the material world. The interesting thing is, that Philo in my view was sensitive to and respected the difference between the philosophical and

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[17] In Philo's extensive extant Greek oeuvre we find 76 instances of *aiôn* (4 of which in biblical quotations) and 29 of *aiônios* (6 in biblical quotations). An appendix to my dissertation lists and categorizes them all.

biblical meaning of *aiôn*. I infer his sensitivity from the fact that he himself never introduces the word in a philosophical sense when dealing with a biblical text containing *aiôn* or *aiônios*, but only when dealing with particular biblical expressions of time which *lack* these words. Biblical texts containing *aiôn(ios)* certainly do occasion him to speak of *aiôn*, but not in a philosophical, let alone Platonic, sense (see §2d).

When Philo uses *aiôn* on his own account, the word has as a rule the meaning of '(all) time'; in four (or even eight) cases the right translation is '(all) life' or 'lifetime'. Normally, *aiôn* in this usage is unthematized and has a non-technical meaning, though less so when Philo in three passages evaluates 'life' and 'day' alongside *aiôn*. These three passages show once more that the notions constituting the meaning of *aiôn* are life, time, and a certain wholeness (represented by 'day').[18]

Biblical *aiôn(ios)* is understood by Philo as denoting time which has an intrinsic relation to man and to the created world as a whole; this holds true also where *aiônios* pertains to God. As is apparent from his paraphrases and exegeses, the noun *aiôn* in the Greek Bible for Philo means: 'all (continuous) time'.[19] The biblical adjective *aiônios* for him generally means: 'all time enduring', also 'immortal';[20] applied to God, it is explained by Philo as referring to God's incessant care for his creation,[21] and applied to God's name as designating that this name pertains to 'the *aiôn* related to us (men)'.[22]

As we noted, it is not the occurrence of *aiôn(ios)* in a biblical text that moves Philo to start speaking of *aiôn* in a philosophical way; but other temporal expressions in Scripture, such as 'today', 'three days', and 'three years', do. Philo interprets these expressions in an allegorical way as referring to 'the *aiôn*' or 'the whole *aiôn*'. In its turn, the *aiôn* is equated with 'all time (*chronos*)' or 'the whole of time', which is also 'tripartite time' (past, present and future). More specifically, the *aiôn* is explained as time seen in its oneness, viz. represented by the sun (and by 'today').[23] Another temporal expression, viz. 'the other year', instigates Philo to speak of *aiôn* in an unmistakably Platonizing way. Distinguishing between the material and the higher, invisible world, he locates *chronos* in the former and elevates *aiôn* to the latter.[24] The most philosophical and Platonic treatment of *aiôn*, finally, is found in Philo's treatise

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[18] *Jos.* 24: "even the longest-lived is short-timed when measured against *aiôn*"; *Spec.* 1.170: "the seventh day ... the birthday of the whole cosmos [is] of equal value to *aiôn*"; *QE* 2.20 "each day of a wise man is of equal value to *aiôn*".

[19] *Gig.* 19-20 (discussing Gen.6:3, which contains the phrase *eis ton aiôna*); *LA* 3.198-199 (Exod.21:5-6, *eis ton aiôna*); *Plant.* 51 and 53 (Exod.15:18, *ton aiôna kai ep' aiôna kai eti*).

[20] *LA* 3.199; *Fug.* 78.

[21] *Plant.* 89 (discussing Gen.21:33, *theos aiônios*).

[22] *Abr.* 54; *Mut.* 12 (for this text see §2d). Both passages discuss Exod.3:15.

[23] *LA* 3.25 (discussing Gen.35:4, which contains the word 'today'); *Fug.* 57 (Deut.4:4, 'today': "the truthful name of *aiôn* is 'today'. For the sun does not change but is always the same, going now above now below the earth; and through it day and night, the measures of *aiôn*, are distinguished"); *Sacr.* 47 (Gen.30:36, 'three days'); *Plant.* 116 (Lev.19:23, 'three years'); *Her.*165 (Gen.1:3-13, the two times three days of creation). In the last-mentioned passage Philo hints already at a Platonic distinction between *aiôn* and *chronos*.

[24] *Mut.* 267 (discussing Gen.17:21, 'the other year'): "*Aiôn* is the description of the life (*bios*) of the intelligible cosmos, as time (*chronos*) is of the perceptible".

On the unchangeableness of God. Philo asserts here that the intelligible world, including 'the archetype and paradigm of time' = *aiôn*, stays in the presence of God as his 'elder son'. He continues: "in *aiôn* nothing is past nor will be future, but it is only in a present state".[25] This statement[26] is quoted by some scholars as evidence of Philo's familiarity with the conception of 'non-durational eternity'. It is indicative of the elusiveness of the subject, however, that another scholar takes *aiôn*, where Philo relates it to the intelligible realm, precisely to mean 'duration'.[27] In my view, Philo's point in this passage — the treatise centers on the concept of the unchangeableness of God — is not to develop a notion of 'non-durational' or 'atemporal eternity' but to stress that 'in *aiôn*' there is no change: all the more, so Philo argues, must God, who is above *aiôn*, be free from change. *Aiôn* thus represents the unchanging aspect of time. It is located here in the intelligible world, and for Philo, the intelligible world no less than the perceptible is created by God. *Aiôn* is not, therefore, the life of God, as a double text emendation in this passage has led scholars to believe.[28] I conclude that in whatever way Philo uses or interprets *aiôn* or *aiônios*, the words refer to what belongs to the created realm.

2. *Philosophical and biblical* aiôn

The preceding survey of the history of the word *aiôn* up to and including Philo was necessarily concise and inevitably unsatisfactory: it offers the reader more statements than arguments. The present section is meant to make up for this deficiency, although here too the exposition will be succinct and, as far as the Greek is concerned, restricted. For this section I have selected those passages from Plato and Aristotle which have been decisive for the philosophical meaning of *aiôn*, as well as such passages from the Septuagint and Philo as to give an exciting example of the biblical usage of the word (making discernable Hebrew and Greek aspects).

2a. *Aiôn* in Plato's *Timaeus*

The *Timaeus,* one of Plato's most famous dialogues, offers an account of the nature and 'genesis' of the universe and of man. This account is set in the broader context of a discussion about what might be the ideal society. The dialogue ends by exhorting us to lift up our heads towards the heavens, in order to contemplate and absorb the heavens' perfect, harmonious revolutions and thereby to "attain to that end (*telos*) of life which is set before men by the gods as the best both for the present and for the time to come" (*Tim.* 90d5-7). According to Plato, the universe, especially in its wonderful aspect of the starry

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[25] *Deus* 32.
[26] Together with *Fug.* 57, quoted in n. 23.
[27] Cf. Whittaker (see n. 3) 12 and 33ff. (non-durational) with E. Starobinski-Safran, *De fuga et inventione*, Les oeuvres de Philon d'Alexandrie (Paris, 1970) 77 n. 1 (duration).
[28] The manuscript reading *di' hôn ho bios estin autôn* in *Deus* 32 has been emended to *aiôn ho bios estin autou* and interpreted as "*aiôn* is His [God's] life".

heavens, tells us how we are to live, individually as well as in society. It is in this setting that Timaeus (the main speaker in the dialogue) offers his creation account, including his discussion of time (*chronos*) and *aiôn*. According to the most common interpretation, in the *Timaeus* Plato made *aiôn* mean 'eternity' as opposed to 'time'. But what Plato meant by this 'eternity' is a matter of dispute. Our current notion of 'eternity', generally suggesting something like endlessness or timelessness, came about through the development after Plato up to our own time, and it may well be that it does little justice to what Plato really meant. I have attempted to come to a fresh understanding of philosophical *aiôn* in the *Timaeus* by taking as my starting-point *aiôn*'s basic, non-philosophical meaning 'life(time)' — which meaning is present also in Plato.[29]

The following passage from the *Timaeus* is the crucial one as far as *aiôn* is concerned. Timaeus is speaking of the 'demiurge' (artificer) who is making the material cosmos, also called the All, after a perfect immaterial, intelligible model. The model belongs to the realm of 'being' which has no 'becoming' (*genesis*) — a basic distinction in Plato's thought. It is from this passage that almost all scholars start translating *aiôn* by 'eternity'. *Timaeus* 37d:

> As this [model] now is in fact an everlasting (*aïdion*) Living Being, he set out to finish also the All around us so far as possible like that. Now the nature of the Living Being happened to be *aiôn*ic (*aiônios*), and it was not possible to bestow that completely on what is generated; but he thought to make an image in motion of *aiôn*, and in the very act of setting the heavens in order, he made of *aiôn*, which remains at one, an *aiôn*ic image which proceeds according to number: that which we have named time (*chronos*).

The context in which the term *aiôn* is introduced here points out two aspects of the universe, namely an aspect of 'life' and one of 'completeness': this may help us understand the term. Greek literature has shown us *aiôn* to designate 'life' in a 'complete' sense. Timaeus declares both the model and the copy universe to be a *living being* (consisting of body and soul), and at issue is the finishing touch which will make the created universe *complete* or perfect (on the level, that is, of the copy, which never attains to the level of the model). This finishing touch should bestow an '*aiôn*ic' aspect on creation, resulting in what we call time.

It is worthwhile to note that Plato in this passage, far from treating time as a negative aspect of the material world, sees it as adding to the completeness of this world as a successful copy of the immaterial one. This attitude towards the role of time, maintained in Timaeus' subsequent discourse, is in contrast to evaluations of time as a principle of decay and futility.

Also remarkable in our passage is, that of the two instances of the adjective *aiônios* the first applies to the model and the second to the copy. This has troubled commentators who considered *aiôn*ic as a property of the model *qua* model, and interpreted it as 'eternal' in the sense of 'supra-temporal' (which practically amounts to non-temporal), while the corresponding property of the copy would precisely be its temporality. Along this line of thought, *aiôn* and *chronos* tend to be contraries: something, however, which is hard to reconcile

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29 *Prot.* 345c, *Gorg.* 448c, and *Leg.* III 701c.

with their relationship as model and copy.[30] As it is, in the context of Plato's doctrine of Ideas it need not be a problem that model and copy are both called *aiôn*ic, since according to this doctrine both the Idea in the intelligible realm and its representation in the material world bear the same name: Good and good, Horse and horse, etc. This point is made explicit in *Timaeus* 52a5, where the copy is said to be 'homonymous' with the model. Thus, when the model is called *aiôn*ic, the copy can be predicated accordingly. But we may note that although the copy is called *aiôn*ic (the derived adjective), we never find it called *aiôn* (the noun).

The demiurge makes an image of *aiôn*, let us say: of 'lifetime'. This lifetime is qualified as 'remaining at one' — a qualification in ready agreement with *aiôn*'s connotation of completeness or wholeness. By contrast, the image/copy (time) is said to be 'in motion' and 'proceeding according to number'. Further on in the dialogue the difference between the copy and the model is once more explained as one between movement and unmovability: something 'proceeding in time' and involved with 'motions' is opposed to something 'unmovably staying the same' (37e5-38a8). Thus, while time and the heavens imply motion, *aiôn* according to Plato implies rest. Motion involves plurality of (places and hence of) number, but rest represents the unity of the One. That which is counted out in the orderly movement of time remains a resting 'whole of life' in the invisible world.

Two scholars, G. Böhme (1974) and R. Brague (1982), have already emphasized the importance of the notion of 'life' for our understanding of *aiôn* in Plato. As Böhme asserts, *aiôn* (*Lebenskraft, Leben, Lebenszeit*) is not at all a fitting term to express what is outside time (*das Ausserzeitliche*): we should understand *aiôn* in the *Timaeus* as temporality *par excellence*.[31] Time is the 'unfolding' of *aiôn*.[32]

We have seen that in the Greek word *aiôn* the notion of life, in which time is implied, is linked with that of wholeness or completeness. The *Timaeus* applies *aiôn* and *aiônios* exclusively and systematically on the scale of the cosmos (the model as well as the copy) as a *whole*. Wholeness/completeness includes here perfection.[33] When we look at the wonderful starry image above our heads and see the heavens' rational order, movement and numbers, which is what we call time, Plato wants us to see this as the representation of *aiôn*. Interpreted in this way, time may be regarded as setting out fullness or completeness rather than duration or infinity. It is certainly 'according to' duration, succession and even infinity that time fulfills its role,[34] but this role consists in displaying 'life/time-completeness'.[35]

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[30] The question of Böhme (see n. 3) 73 is to the point: "Wäre es nicht absurd innerhalb des Kosmos ausgerechnet in der Zeit die Darstellung der Überzeitlichkeit suchen zu wollen?".

[31] Böhme (see n. 3) 74.

[32] Böhme (see n. 3) 95.

[33] *Tim.* 39d: the material universe "as like as possible to the perfect (*teleos*) and intelligible Living Being." Cf. in 37d, quoted in the text, *apotelein* ('to complete') and *pantelôs* ('completely'), words of the same root. Aristotle will speak of *telos* (see below, §2b).

[34] Our passage, 37d, speaks of 'proceeding' and 'according to (*kata*) number'.

[35] The 5th cent. AD neoplatonist Damascius in his commentary *in Platonis Parmenidem* c. 139 equates Platonic *aiôn* with *holotês kai zôê*, 'wholeness/totality and life'.

Earlier in the dialogue, Timaeus has stated that the universe lives forever without end. We find this in 36e, when Timaeus has narrated the compounding of the body and soul of the material cosmos, which thus became a living being. He then declares that this compounding accounted for the "divine start of an unceasing and intelligent life (*bios*) for all time (*chronos*)". Subsequently, in 37d which I have discussed here, time is credited with a relationship with *aiôn*. This suggests that we should not so much interpret Plato's *aiôn* in terms of *chronos* (supra-temporal, durational or non-durational, etc.), but rather *chronos* in terms of *aiôn*.

The visible cosmos is regarded by Plato as a living being (*zôion*) with a body, a soul (*psuchê*) and a life (*bios*) for all time (*chronos*), and considered to be a copy of the everlasting (*aïdion*) Living Being. We have here a complete list of Greek words which together constitute the semantic field of *aiôn*. Greek language and thought knows of every human being's *psuchê*, *zôê*, *bios* and *aiôn*. For Plato, *psuchê*, *zôê* and *bios* pertain also to the cosmic being — and so should *aiôn*. Only then is the picture complete. The *aiôn* of the (ideal) cosmos is lifetime as a completeness and this is what gives the time of our (material) world its form.

2b. *Aiôn* in Aristotle's *De caelo*

In the first book of *De caelo*, chapter 9, Aristotle offers an almost lexicographic description of what the word *aiôn* in his view conveys. *De caelo*, in Greek *Peri ouranou*, is a work on physics, dealing with cosmology: Aristotle uses the word *ouranos* (Lat. *caelum*) not only to designate the heavens but also the cosmos, or universe. The universe, Aristotle argues in I 9, is made of the totality of matter, and so 'outside the universe' there is neither matter nor what is associated with matter, viz. space and time. When Aristotle subsequently talks about the things or beings 'over there', *De caelo* as a work on physics touches upon the divine: it appears to refer to the prime, unmoved Mover, also elaborated as a plurality of unmoved Movers, which is the divine transcendent principle discussed by Aristotle in book XII, chapters 6-8, of his *Metaphysics*. I now quote *De caelo* I 9 279a18-30:

> Therefore, those-over-there are not such as to be in place, nor does time cause them to age, nor does change work in any way upon any of those that are arrayed beyond the outermost motion: unalterable and impassive, in having the best and most self-sufficient life (*zôê*) they continue (throughout) the whole *aiôn*.
>
> a22   Indeed, that name [sc. *aiôn*] has been divinely uttered by the ancients.
> . For the completion (*telos*) which encompasses the time of everyone's life (*zôê*), which cannot in nature be exceeded, has been named everyone's *aiôn*.
> . Along the same line of thought also the completion of the whole universe, the completion which encompasses time as a whole and infinity, is *aiôn*, having taken the name from *aei einai* [to be always], being immortal and divine.
>
> From there depends for all other things, for some more directly, for others more obscurely, being and life (*zên*).

Directing our attention to the digression on the word *aiôn* (a22-28), we observe that it is elicited by the statement that those outside the universe "continue (*diatelei*) in having the best and most self-sufficient life (*zôê*) throughout the whole *aiôn*" (a21). The expression 'throughout the whole *aiôn*' (*ton hapanta aiôna*) is in itself not philosophical or technical; we find it in Greek literature alternating with 'throughout the whole of time' (*ton hapanta chronon*). Indeed, the verb *diatelein* occurs in Aristotle also construed with the latter expression and with other phrases carrying the word *chronos*. Using now the variant expression 'throughout the whole *aiôn*', Aristotle finds almost 'by surprise' an occasion to reflect on *aiôn* in a philosophical way: a way which distinguishes it from *chronos*. In the immediately following digression *aiôn* is defined in terms of time *and* life. The focus of the definition, moreover, is the notion of *telos*, notoriously difficult to translate and rendered here by 'completion'.[36] It is this notion that characterizes *aiôn* and that is absent from *chronos,* just as it is absent from *zôê* (and *bios*).

Aristotle's first definition of *aiôn*, "the *telos* which encompasses the time of everyone's life", fits in perfectly with what I have indicated above as characterizing *aiôn* in earlier writers ('the ancients'), viz. that the word refers to a person's life as a complete(d) whole with the inherent aspect of time. Aristotle subsequently points out that *aiôn*, thus defined, applies to the entire cosmos as well — in doing so he implicitly follows Plato.

That *telos* in the present discourse is something like 'completion' is brought out by its being qualified as 'encompassing' (*periechon*) in the above passage (and again in *De caelo* II 1 283b30).[37] The word *telos* is of the same root as *teleios*, 'complete' or 'perfect'. In Aristotle's (teleological) philosophy *telos* is also the term for the final 'end' to which everything in the universe strives: the 'end' which in the ultimate sense is the Prime Mover itself.[38]

At the start of the second book of *De caelo*, Aristotle summarizes what he has demonstrated in the first book. I quote *De caelo* II 1 283b26-30:

> the universe as a whole neither has come into being nor admits of destruction, as some assert that it does, but is one and everlasting (*aïdios*) with no beginning or end (*teleutê*) of the (/its) whole *aiôn*, but containing and encompassing in itself the infinite time (*chronos*).

From this passage it is unambiguously clear that *aiôn* applies to the universe itself. The earlier quoted passage, by contrast, is ambiguous: *aiôn* in its capacity of *telos* can be considered also as belonging to the level of the transcendent,

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[36] W. K. C. Guthrie (1939, Loeb) translates *telos* here as 'sum of existence', P. Moraux (1965, Budé) and S. Leggatt (1995, Aris & Phillips) have 'term(e)'; R. Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* (London, 1983) 127, 'completeness', J. Barnes (1984, rev. Oxford transl.) 'fulfillment'. Plotinus also defines *aiôn* as a *telos*, a 'partless completion' (A. H. Armstrong's translation of *telos ameres, Enn.* III 7, 3 line 18, Loeb).

[37] It is, moreover, defined here as "which cannot in nature be exceeded": in *De caelo* II 4 286b18 this is the definition of *teleion*, i.e. the 'complete' or 'perfect'. See also *Met.* V 16 and X 4,2-3 1055a14-17.

[38] Aristotle speaks of *telos* (the *causa finalis* or *to hou heneka*) also elsewhere in *De caelo*, notably II 12 292b1-19 in relation to the movements of the heavenly bodies. The Prime Mover as *telos* is discussed in *Met.* XII 7,4 994b9 and cf. 8,17 1074a30.

Prime Mover from which "depends for all other things being and life" (a28).[39]
The digression on *aiôn* in the first text opened with the remark that the name
aiôn "has been divinely uttered by the ancients" (a22). 'Divinely' is here to be
understood as 'under divine inspiration' but pertains also to the subject matter
of the utterance, i.e., *aiôn*, which at the end of the digression is called
"immortal and divine" (a27). Aristotle argues that *aiôn* is an apt word since it
means *aei ôn*, i.e., 'always being', and therefore refers to something immortal
and divine (a27).[40] But 'divine' too is a predicate that Aristotle applies to both
the sphere of the stars in the universe and the transcendent Prime Mover.
Likewise, the *telos* of an action — in this context we should think of the actions
of the celestial bodies — can be *external* (transcendent) to the action as well as
being the action itself.[41]

   We can conclude that Aristotle, unlike Plato, does not reserve *aiôn* for the
transcendent. *Aiôn* pertains to the entirety of time that is bound up with the
(everlasting) life of the universe. Time (*chronos*) exclusively belongs to and is
immanent in the universe; it is inextricably connected with movement, notably
of the celestial bodies, and change. But this movement has also an unchanging
aspect. Aristotle in the sequel to our first-quoted passage speaks of the
'outermost' cosmic sphere of fixed stars which moves unchangingly and
unceasingly in a circle, so that "the place it begins from and ends at are the
same" (*De caelo* 279a30-b3). The sphere of fixed stars 'borders' upon what is
transcendent, and so, we can say, does *aiôn*. Time according to Aristotle is
infinite but, due to *aiôn*, not incomplete: it is endless but not without 'end',
since its 'end', or 'completion', or 'fulfillment', i.e., *telos*, is *aiôn*.

   2c. Psalms and Proverbs in the Septuagint

In this section I will discuss a number of passages from the Septuagint which,
in my view, are the most significant for establishing the connotations peculiar
to the Greek word *aiôn* as distinct from the Hebrew word it translates, i.e.,
'olâm. In these passages, which are from the books of the Psalms and Proverbs,
the Greek translation turns out to put things differently in comparison to the
Hebrew usage of *'olâm*. I start with the opening of Psalm 89 (nr. 90 in the
Hebrew Bible). The subsequent quotation is from Proverbs 8, the famous
chapter about Wisdom's role and position in creation. I give an English
translation of the Greek version; the Hebrew of both passages contains the
same *'olâm*-phrase.

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[39] The relationship between *aiôn* and the transcendent principle is made explicit in *Met.*
XII 7,9 1072b26-31: "life (*zôê*) belongs [to god]. For the actuality of thought is life, and he is
that actuality; and the essential actuality of him is life most good and everlasting (*aïdios*). We
hold, then, that god is a living being, everlasting, most good; and therefore life (*zôê*) and *aiôn*
continuous and everlasting belong to god; for that is what god is."
[40] Aristotle uses this etymology to 'prove' that *aiôn* properly describes a divine life, since
'always being' is a divine property.
[41] Cf. *De caelo* II 12 292b1-19 and Leggatt's commentary.

Psalm 89(90):1b-2:
1b   Lord, you have been our refuge in generation and generation.
2   Before the mountains were born and the earth was formed and the (inhabited) world
       and from the *aiôn* (*mê'olâm*) until the *aiôn* (*'ad-'olâm*) you are.

Proverbs 8:22-24a [Wisdom says:]
22   The Lord created me as the beginning of his ways towards his works,
23   before the *aiôn* (*mê'olâm*) he founded me
       in the beginning,
24   before he made the earth ...

Psalm 89 (90):2b has the standard rendering of the Hebrew expression *mê'olâm*, viz. *aiôn* governed by the preposition *apo* ('from, since'). Verse 2a expresses that God is prior to his creation; verse 2b indicates moreover — note the word 'and' — that He is present throughout all time (concurrent with the created world): 'from/since the *aiôn* until/so long as the *aiôn*'. By pointing backwards and forwards this compounded expression implies a position of the speaker inside, surrounded by, the *aiôn*.

Proverbs 8:23 too translates *mê'olâm*, but instead of *apo* it has the preposition *pro*. From a grammatical point of view this rendering can be deemed incorrect;[42] on the point of interpretation it is revealing. *Mê'olâm* in the Hebrew Bible stands for 'since ever', 'from all time'. The Hebrew text of Proverbs 8:23 says that Wisdom is founded:

from *'olâm*, from the beginning, from the old times of the earth.[43]

According to the Greek translation, however, Wisdom is founded:

before the *aiôn*, in the beginning, before the Lord made the earth.

So, while the Hebrew expresses that Wisdom was there *since* ever, the Greek translation pronounces that she was there *before* the *aiôn* (v. 23), i.e., before the created world (v. 24). Thus the Greek translator of Proverbs synchronizes (the start of) the *aiôn* with (the start of) creation, and envisages also something preceding the *aiôn*.

Now one may well hold that not only according to the Greek, but also according to the Hebrew text of Proverbs 8 the Lord, in virtue of his being the Creator, is pre-existent to his creation (and hence to the *'olâm*). However, this pre-existence remains implicit in the Hebrew. The Greek translation by contrast introduces the notion of 'before the *aiôn*', with the result that the Creator's 'pre-existence' is made explicit, and not only his, but also that of Wisdom.[44] The application of *pro aiônos* in Proverbs 8:23 cannot be explained from a common usage of this phrase in Greek, since the phrase is not found in

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[42]   The preposition *min/mê* never means 'before'. The Hebrew word translated *pro*/'before' in Ps.89(90):2 is *beterem*, literally 'at the beginning of'.
[43]   Three times the same Hebrew preposition *min/mê*.
[44]   The idea that Wisdom (Sophia) precedes the whole of creation, can well be placed in a context of philosophical, Middle Platonist reflection. Cf. the role of Wisdom as God's agent in creation in the Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-26; 8:4; 9:1-2, and in Philo (who identifies Wisdom with the Logos): *Her.* 199; *Det.* 54. For Philo see also §2d. I note that the sequence in Greek Prov.8:23 'before the *aiôn*, in the beginning, before ... the earth' bears the implication that 'in the beginning (*archê*)' also refers to something *prior to* creation. Such an interpretation of the term *archê* (used also in Gen.1:1) can be found in Philo and the Church Fathers.

earlier texts; hence it appears to be consciously employed in this context. The preposition *pro* compels us to conclude that 'the *aiôn*' coincides with the created world.[45]

There are two other canonical instances of *aiôn* governed by *pro*: Psalm 54(55):20 speaks of God "existent before the *aiôn*s", and Psalm 73(74):12 says: "God is our king before *aiôn*". The Hebrew in both texts has the word *qedem*, which denotes 'bygone days, olden times'. The Greek text in Psalm 54(55):20 is very clear in expressing that God is 'pre-existent' with regard to the *aiôn*s (now in plural), which cannot but mean, again, to (the times of) the created world. From the use of *pro aiônos* in Psalm 73(74):12 we get the impression that this phrase has now almost become a standard *aiôn*-phrase in relation to God:[46] taken literally it yields a paradox since God is called 'our king' before 'we' were there.

'Before' in the temporal sense has the implication of 'outside': something taking place before a certain stretch of time is 'outside' that time. Whereas *'olâm*, as the 'temporal horizon of creation', represents time as seen only 'from inside', *aiôn* can convey the concept of time as seen 'from outside'. Unlike the Hebrew, which never says "before *'olâm*", the Septuaginta a number of times says "before *aiôn*". Thus translators have exploited connotations of *aiôn* ('whole of time', and 'surveyable from outside') which are peculiar to the Greek word but absent from the Hebrew *'olâm*. They have made explicit that *aiôn* designates (created) time as it accompanies the (created) world. The temporal indication 'before (the) *aiôn*(s)' is applied and applicable only to God or his Wisdom. 'Before the *aiôn*s' recurs in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 2:7): there indeed it is again applied to the wisdom of God.

2d. Philo's exegesis

Above (§1d) I have elaborated somewhat on the philosophical meaning of *aiôn* in Philo, indicating only briefly Philo's exegesis of biblical *aiôn*. The present section, by contrast, will demonstrate Philo's biblical exegesis. We will see that the definitely 'Greek', even philosophical, approach of this exegesis employs and confirms the biblical meaning of *aiôn* we have found in the Septuagint.

In his treatise *On the change of names* Philo quotes Exodus 3:14, where God in the Greek version says: "I am He Who Is (*ho ôn*)". According to Philo, this is God's most authentic, but properly 'unnameable' name. In the subsequent verse, Exodus 3:15, God reveals himself as "God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob" and adds: "This is my *aiôn*ic name and a memorial to generations". Philo in *On the change of names* 12 gives the following word-to-word commentary:

> For "this", he says, "is my *aiôn*ic name": being examined as it were in the *aiôn* related to us, not in that (which is) before *aiôn*;
> "and a memorial": not set beyond memory or apprehension;

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[45] Exactly the same observations hold true for the two parallels of Prov.8:23 found in the Greek of Sirach 1:4 and Sirach 24:9.

[46] See also below, §2d.

and again "to generations": not to ungenerated beings.
For those who have come to mortal birth (*genesis*) are in need of some substitute for the divine name...

We observe that Pilo, inspired by the biblical adjective *aiônios*, in his explanation uses the substantive *aiôn*. '*Aiôn*ic' as a biblical predicate of God's name is interpreted by him as: "being examined in the *aiôn* related to us",[47] i.e., having its relevance in time (and life) as we, generated human beings, know it. This 'human-relatedness' of the *aiôn*ic name is elaborated by the sequel of the biblical quotation and Philo's comments on it: the *aiôn*ic name, Philo explains, is within human comprehension ("memorial") and designed to be used by generated, i.e., created [human] beings ("generations").

In his interpreting remark, Philo opposes 'in the *aiôn* related to us' to 'in that before *aiôn*'. The structure of the sentence enticed J. Whittaker (1971) to read the latter expression as 'in the *aiôn* before *aiôn*'[48] — a reading, however, which taken literally and logically amounts to an internal contradiction. The Greek language allows for substantivizing of prepositional phrases, and, in my view, the prepositional phrase *pro aiônos* is best understood as derived from the Septuagint. It can be understood as an indication of the 'time' that belongs to God, as in Psalm 73(74): "God is our king before *aiôn*". We have seen above that 'before (the) *aiôn*' in the Septuagint means 'before the time of the world', i.e., before God created the cosmos.

Philo thus explains the biblical predicate *aiôn*ic as referring to the *aiôn*, i.e., to something 'related to us', and he contrasts it with the biblical locution *pro aiônos*, which is an indication of the domain of God. *Aiôn*ic qualifies the name "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". Whereas God himself is undoubtedly 'before *aiôn*', his *aiôn*ic name precisely describes his relation to man, i.e., to the *aiôn*. This contrast between *aiôn*ic and 'that which is *pro aiônos*' reflects Philo's interpretation of Exodus 3, verses 14 and 15, developed in the wider context of our passage.[49] According to Philo, God in Exodus 3:14 is speaking of Himself as He truly *is*, i.e., in and for himself; in Exodus 3:15, by contrast, he names himself with his '*aiôn*ic name' in a relational and accommodating way. This distinction made by Philo between God as he is in himself and God as he stands in relation to his people, is inspired by Greek philosophy and the ontologizing Greek translation of Exodus 3:14. It cannot be sustained in the light of the biblical context itself (be it the Hebrew or the Greek), which says precisely that 'He Who Is has sent Moses to his people'.[50] Notwithstanding this fact, Philo's usage and interpretation of *aiôn* and *aiônios* here is completely in line with what we have found regarding the biblical meaning of these words.

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[47] 'Related to us', Gr. *kath' hêmas,* means both 'concerning us (humans)' and 'with which we are concerned'.

[48] Whittaker (see n. 3) 35 *en tôi pro aiônos aiôni.* According to Whittaker, "*ho kath' hêmas aiôn* corresponds to the life-period of the universe and *ho pro aiônos* to that of God." Whittaker - incorrectly — speaks of 'the *aiôn* of God' on account of both this text and *Deus* 32 (cf. n. 28).

[49] See D. T. Runia, *Philo and the Church Fathers. A Collection of Papers* (Leiden - New York - Köln, 1995) 214.

[50] Runia (see n. 49) 216, also quoted by A. P. Bos, *Geboeid door Plato. Het christelijk geloof beknels door het glinsterend pantser van de Griekse filosofie* (Kampen, 1996) 97.

Philo's concise comment on Proverbs 8:22-23 which he gives in *On drunkenness* 31 will corroborate this agreement:

> "God acquired me as the very first of his works, and before the *aiôn* he founded me" [says Wisdom]; for it was necessary that all that has come to birth (*genesis*) is younger than the mother and nurse of the All.

To say that Wisdom was founded 'before the *aiôn*' according to Philo is the same as saying that 'the mother and nurse of the All' was before 'all that has come to *genesis*'. Hence the latter, i.e., the created world we live in, for Philo concurs with the *aiôn*. Philo's interpretation runs parallel with his comments on *aiôn* given in the earlier quoted passage, as well as with our inference from the Septuagint translation of Proverbs 8:23 that 'the *aiôn*' correlates with the created world.

3. *Eternity and entirety*

Discerning as I do in the (extra-biblical) meaning of *aiôn* three notions, I have described the first as 'life', the second as 'time', and the third variously as 'whole', 'completeness', 'totality', or 'entirety'. The third notion distinguishes *aiôn* when used as a word for 'life' from the other words *zôê* and *bios*, and when *aiôn* is used as a word for 'time' this notion adheres to its meaning no less. *Aiôn* is the 'entirety' of time; 'eternity' is too much an 'anachronistic', misleading or unclear rendering.

The noun 'eternity', that is, *aeternitas*, by its very form witnesses to a development of language and thought. From the simple Latin noun *aevum* was derived the adjective *ae(vi)ternus*, from which then was formed the abstract noun *aeternitas* (first attested in Cicero, 1st cent. BC). An analogous development took place in Greek, where *aiôn* produced the adjective *aiônios* and ultimately also the (rare) abstract noun *aiôniotês* (first attested in Didymus the Blind, 4th cent. AD). Seen in this light, the word *aiôn* has its counterpart in *aevum* (as is also true etymologically), so that the interpretation of *aiôn* as *aeternitas*/'eternity' entails a sort of asymmetry already from a historical-linguistic point of view. Additionally, the term 'eternity' conveys meanings which have developed later (notably in Christian and Medieval context) than the period in which the meanings of *aiôn* originated. Thus we should recognize all the more that *aiôn* cannot be explained as 'eternity' without qualification.

My study has led to the conclusion that infinity is not an intrinsic or necessary connotation of *aiôn*, either in the Greek or in the biblical usage (< *'olâm*). The word's primary meaning in Greek is 'lifetime', with the connotation of completeness. It is in the secondary sense of 'all time' that *aiôn* takes on an implication of being infinite. In the biblical usage, the temporal horizon described by *aiôn* (*'olâm*) is for its being finite or infinite wholly dependent on the One decreeing it.

Where in Aristotle *aiôn* is said to encompass all (infinite) time of the universe, it is called 'divine' and regarded as bordering on the transcendent; *aiôn*, moreover, is also applied by Aristotle to the transcendent divine principle itself. The biblical *aiôn*, as noted, is created. Neither Philo, nor later the

Church Fathers use the word to refer to the 'eternity' of God: this in contrast to the Latin term *aeternitas*, which in Medieval philosophy is reserved for God's 'eternity'. Greek *aiôn* and biblical *aiôn* (*'olâm*) fit together in the meaning of 'entirety of time', each bringing in its own perspective. *Aiôn*, 'entirety of time', is more than just time going on: it is time made into a meaningful whole.

In conclusion, let me pluck and name four fruits from the investigated fields. The first fruit is the conclusion (pertinent to reflections on 'eternity') that the word *aiôn* refers to *time*, that is, time seen in a special way, viz. as an *entirety* (analogous to a lifetime). The second fruit is an outcome of theological relevance: that in the biblical usage *aiôn* refers to something belonging to *creation*, not to God in himself. The third fruit consists of the observation that a perspective characteristic of Greek thought and language (time — like the cosmos — viewed as a whole, from 'outside') has received its place in the biblical world of thought (viz. through the expression 'before the *aiôn*'). The final fruit may be formulated as follows: that *aiôn* in conveying both a *Totalbegriff* (in Greek thought) and a *Extrembegriff* ('horizon', in the biblical context) instructs us about the position and condition of us, humans, and our knowledge.