

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

ON THE SUPPOSED SCRIPTURAL EXPRESSION
FOR ETERNITY:¹

(By Thomas de Quincey.)

FORTY years ago (or, in all probability, a good deal more, for we have already completed thirty-seven years from Waterloo, and my remembrances upon this subject go back to a period lying much behind that great era) I used to be annoyed and irritated by the false interpretation given to the Greek word *αἰὼν*, and given necessarily, therefore, to the adjective *aionios* as its immediate derivative. It was not so much the falsehood of this interpretation, as the narrowness of that

¹ Polemics do not enter into the design of THE EXPOSITOR, least of all the polemics of theology. Momentous as the question is in itself, therefore, and much as it just now engages the public attention, I do not propose to introduce into these pages any discussion on the nature and duration of future punishment. To find room for it, indeed, would be impossible, except at the cost of excluding many of those expositions of Scripture which it is the leading aim of this Magazine to furnish. But it is quite consistent with that aim to insert fine and delicate criticism of New Testament words and phrases, even although these words and phrases should be involved in the controversies of the hour. Such criticism, especially if it is not animated by a controversial spirit, cannot fail to be welcome and helpful to men of every school of thought. And therefore I have much pleasure in reproducing a paper of De Quincey's, which, though it is one of the most charming and characteristic he ever wrote, has not found a place in his Collected Works, and hence is inaccessible to many students who would be glad to consult it, and even to most. It appeared in "Hogg's Instructor" some twenty-five years ago, and I have taken pains to secure an exact reproduction of it. It is marked by the accuracy, the delicacy of thought, the felicity of diction, for which De Quincey was famous. And as it carries the weight of his commanding authority on all questions of Greek scholarship, I am not without hope that it may be held to determine one point which is still often debated by scholars of an inferior grade, viz., the true meaning of the words *αἰὼν* and *αἰώνιος* as used in the Scriptures of the New Testament.—EDITOR.

falsehood, which disturbed me. There was a glimmer of truth in it; and precisely that glimmer it was which led the way to a general and obstinate misconception of the meaning. The word is remarkably situated. It is a scriptural word, and it is also a Greek word; from which the inevitable inference is that we must look for it only in the *New Testament*. Upon any question arising of deep, aboriginal, doctrinal truth, we have nothing to do with translations. Those are but secondary questions, archæological and critical, upon which we have a right to consult the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures known by the name of the Septuagint.

Suffer me to pause at this point for the sake of promising an explanation needful to the unlearned reader. As the *reading* public and the *thinking* public is every year outgrowing more and more notoriously the mere *learned* public, it becomes every year more and more the right of the former public to give the law, preferably to the latter public, upon all points which concern its own separate interests. In past generations no pains were taken to make explanations that were not called for by the *learned* public. All other readers were ignored. They formed a mob, for whom no provision was made. And that many difficulties should be left entirely unexplained for *them*, was superciliously assumed to be no fault at all. And yet any sensible man, let him be as supercilious as he may, must on consideration allow that amongst the crowd of unlearned or half-learned readers, who have had neither time nor opportunities for what is called "erudition" or learned studies, there must always lurk a proportion of men that, by constitution of mind and by the bounty of

nature, are much better fitted for thinking, originally more philosophic, and more capaciously endowed, than those who are, by accident of position, more learned. Such a natural superiority certainly takes precedency of a merely artificial superiority; and, therefore, it entitles those who possess it to a special consideration. Let there be an audience gathered about any book of 10,100 readers: it might be fair in these days to assume that 10,000 would be in a partial sense illiterate, and the remaining 100 what would be rigorously classed as "learned." Now, on such a distribution of the readers, it would be a matter of certainty that the most powerful intellects would lie amongst the illiterate 10,000, counting, probably, 15 to 1 as against those in the learned minority. The inference, therefore, would be, that, in all equity, the interest of the unlearned section claimed a priority of attention, not merely as the more numerous section, but also as, by a high probability, the more philosophic. And in proportion as this unlearned section widens and expands, which every year it does, in that proportion the obligation and cogency of this equity strengthens. An attention to the unlearned part of an audience, which fifteen years ago might have rested upon pure courtesy, *now* rests upon a basis of absolute justice. I make this preliminary explanation in order to take away the appearance of caprice from such occasional pauses as I may make for the purpose of clearing up obscurities or difficulties. Formerly, in a case of that nature, the learned reader would have told me that I was not entitled to delay *him* by elucidations that in *his* case must be supposed to be superfluous; and in such a remonstrance there would once have been some equity.

nature, are much better fitted for thinking, originally more philosophic, and more capaciously endowed, than those who are, by accident of position, more learned. Such a natural superiority certainly takes precedency of a merely artificial superiority; and, therefore, it entitles those who possess it to a special consideration. Let there be an audience gathered about any book of 10,100 readers: it might be fair in these days to assume that 10,000 would be in a partial sense illiterate, and the remaining 100 what would be rigorously classed as "learned." Now, on such a distribution of the readers, it would be a matter of certainty that the most powerful intellects would lie amongst the illiterate 10,000, counting, probably, 15 to 1 as against those in the learned minority. The inference, therefore, would be, that, in all equity, the interest of the unlearned section claimed a priority of attention, not merely as the more numerous section, but also as, by a high probability, the more philosophic. And in proportion as this unlearned section widens and expands, which every year it does, in that proportion the obligation and cogency of this equity strengthens. An attention to the unlearned part of an audience, which fifteen years ago might have rested upon pure courtesy, *now* rests upon a basis of absolute justice. I make this preliminary explanation in order to take away the appearance of caprice from such occasional pauses as I may make for the purpose of clearing up obscurities or difficulties. Formerly, in a case of that nature, the learned reader would have told me that I was not entitled to delay *him* by elucidations that in *his* case must be supposed to be superfluous; and in such a remonstrance there would once have been some equity.

The illiterate section of the readers might then be fairly assumed as present only by accident, as no abiding part of the audience ; but, like the general public in the gallery of the House of Commons, as present only by sufferance, and officially in any records of the House whatever utterly ignored as existences. At present, half-way on our pilgrimage through the nineteenth century, I reply to such a learned remonstrant—that it gives me pain to annoy him by superfluous explanations, but that, unhappily, this infliction of tedium upon *him* is inseparable from what has now become a duty to others.

This being said, I now go on to inform the illiterate reader that the earliest translation of the Hebrew Scriptures ever made was into Greek. It was undertaken on the encouragement of a learned prince, Ptolemy Philadelphus, by an association of Jewish emigrants in Alexandria. It was, as the event has shewn in very many instances, an advantage of a rank rising to providential, that such a cosmopolitan version of the Hebrew sacred writings should have been made at a moment when a rare concurrence of circumstances happened to make it possible : such as, for example, a king both learned in his tastes and liberal in his principles of religious toleration ; a language, viz., the Greek, which had already become, what for many centuries it continued to be, a common language of communication for the learned of the whole *οικουμένη* (*i.e.*, in effect of, the civilized world, viz., Greece, the shores of the Euxine, the whole of Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Carthage, and all the dependencies of Carthage ; finally, and above all, all Rome, then beginning to loom upon the western horizon), together with all the dependencies of Rome,

and, briefly, every state and city that adorned the imperial islands of the Mediterranean, or that glittered like gems in that vast belt of land, roundly speaking, 1000 miles in average breadth, and in circuit running up to 5000 miles. 1000 multiplied into 5 times 1000, or, otherwise expressed, a thousand thousand 5 times repeated, or, otherwise, a million 5 times repeated, briefly, a territory measuring 5,000,000 of square miles, or 45 times the surface of our two British islands—such was the boundless domain which this extraordinary act of Ptolemy suddenly threw open to the literature and spiritual revelation of a little obscure race, nestling in a little angle of Asia, scarcely visible as a fraction of Syria, buried in the broad shadows thrown out on one side by the great and ancient settlements on the Nile, and on the other by the vast empire that for thousands of years occupied the Tigris and the Euphrates. In the twinkling of an eye, at a sudden summons, as it were from the sounding of a trumpet, or the Oriental call by a clapping of hands, gates are thrown open, which have an effect corresponding in grandeur to the effect that would arise from the opening of a ship canal across the Isthmus of Darien, viz., the introduction to each other—face to face—of two separate infinities. Such a canal would suddenly lay open to each other the two great oceans of our planet, the Atlantic and the Pacific; whilst the act of translating *into* Greek and *from* Hebrew, that is, transferring out of a mysterious cipher as little accessible as Sanscrit, and which never *would* be more accessible through any worldly attractions of alliance with power and civic grandeur or commerce, *out of* this darkness *into* the golden light of a language the most beautiful, the most

honoured amongst men, and the most widely diffused through a thousand years to come, had the immeasurable effect of throwing into the great crucible of human speculation, even then beginning to ferment, to boil, to overflow—that mightiest of all elements for exalting the chemistry of philosophy—grand, and, for the first time, adequate conceptions of the Deity. For although it is true that, until Elias should come—that is, until Christianity should have applied its final revelation to the completion of this great idea—we could not possess it in its total effulgence, it is however certain that an immense advance was made, a prodigious usurpation across the realms of chaos, by the grand illuminations of the Hebrew discoveries. Too terrifically austere we must presume the Hebrew idea to have been; too undeniably it had not withdrawn the veil entirely which still rested upon the Divine countenance; so much is involved in the subsequent revelations of Christianity. But still the advance made in reading aright the Divine lineaments had been enormous. God was now a holy spirit that could not tolerate impurity. He was the fountain of justice, and no longer disfigured by any mode of sympathy with human caprice or infirmity. And if a frown too awful still rested upon his face, making the approach to him too fearful for harmonizing with that perfect freedom and that childlike love which God seeks in his worshippers, it was yet made evident that no step for conciliating his favour did or could lie through any but *moral* graces.

Three centuries after this great epoch of the *publication* (for such it was) secured so providentially to the Hebrew theology, two learned Jews—viz., Josephus and Philo-Judæus — had occasion to seek a cosmo-

politan utterance for that burden of truth (or what they regarded as truth) which oppressed the spirit within them. Once again they found a deliverance from the very same freezing imprisonment in an unknown language, through the very same magical key, viz., the all-pervading language of Greece, which carried their communications to the four winds of heaven, and carried them precisely amongst the class of men—viz., the enlightened and educated class—which pre-eminently, if not exclusively, their wish was to reach. About one generation *after* Christ it was, when the utter prostration, and, politically speaking, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation, threw these two learned Jews upon this recourse to the Greek language as their final resource, in a condition otherwise of absolute hopelessness. Pretty nearly three centuries *before* Christ it was (284 years, according to the common reckoning), when the first act of communication took place between the sealed-up literature of Palestine and the Greek catholic interpretation. Altogether we may say that 320 years, or somewhere about ten generations of men, divided these two memorable acts of intercommunication. Such a space of time allows a large range of influence and of silent unconscious operation to the vast and potent ideas that brooded over this awful Hebrew literature. Too little weight has been allowed to the probable contagiousness and to the preternatural shock of such a new and strange philosophy acting upon the jaded and exhausted intellect of the Grecian race. We must remember that precisely this particular range of time was that in which the Greek systems of philosophy, having thoroughly completed their evolution, had suf-

ferred something of a collapse; and, having exhausted their creative energies, began to gratify the cravings for novelty by remodellings of old forms. It is remarkable, indeed, that this very city of Alexandria founded and matured this new principle of remodelling, applied to poetry not less than to philosophy and criticism. And, considering the activity of this great commercial city and port, which was meant to act, and *did* act, as a centre of communication between the East and the West, it is probable that a far greater effect was produced by the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures, in the way of preparing the mind of nations for the apprehension of Christianity, than has ever been distinctly recognized. The silent destruction of books in those centuries has robbed us of all means for tracing innumerable revolutions, that nevertheless, by the evidence of results, must have existed. Taken, however, with or without this additional result, the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in their most important portions must be ranked amongst what are called "providential" events. Such a king — a king whose father had been a personal friend of Alexander, the mighty civilizing conqueror, and had shared in the liberalization connected with his vast revolutionary projects for extending a higher civilization over the globe—such a king, concurring with such a language, having advantages so absolutely unrivalled, and again this king and this language concurring with a treasure so supernatural of spiritual wisdom as the subject of their ministrations, and all three concurring with political events so auspicious—the founding of a new and mighty metropolis in Egypt, and the silent advance to supreme power amongst men of a new empire,

martial beyond all precedent as regarded *means*, but not as regarded *ends*—working in all things towards the unity of civilization and the unity of law, so that any new impulse, as, for instance, impulse of a new religion, was destined to find new facilities for its own propagation, resembling electric conductors, under the unity of government and of law—concurrences like these, so many and so strange, justly impress upon this translation, the most memorable, because the most influential of all that have ever been accomplished, a character of grandeur that places it on the same level of interest as the building of the first or second Temple at Jerusalem.

There is a Greek legend which openly ascribes to this translation all the characters of a miracle. But, as usually happens, this vulgarizing form of the miraculous is far less impressive than the plain history itself, unfolding its stages with the most unpretending historical fidelity. Even the Greek language, on which, as the natural language of the new Greek dynasty in Egypt, the duty of the translation devolved, enjoyed a double advantage: first, as being the only language then spoken upon earth that could diffuse a book over *every* part of the civilized earth; secondly, as being a language of unparalleled power and compass for expressing and reproducing effectually all ideas, however alien and novel. Even the city, again, in which this translation was accomplished, had a double dowry of advantages towards such a labour, not only as enjoying a large literary society, and, in particular, a large Jewish society, together with unusual provision in the shape of libraries, on a scale probably at that time unprecedented, but also as having the most extensive

machinery then known to human experience for *publishing*, that is, for transmitting to foreign capitals all books, in the readiest and the cheapest fashion, by means of its prodigious shipping.

Having thus indicated to the *unlearned* reader the particular nature of that interest which invests this earliest translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, viz., that in fact this translation was the earliest *publication* to the human race of a revelation which had previously been locked up in a language destined, as surely as the Welsh language or the Gaelic, to eternal obscurity amongst men, I go on to mention that the learned Jews selected for this weighty labour happened to be in number seventy-two; but, as the Jews systematically reject fractions in such cases (whence it is that always, in order to express the period of six weeks, they say *forty days*, and not, as strictly they should, *forty-two days*), popularly, the translators were called "the seventy," for which the Latin word is *septuaginta*. And thus in after ages the translators were usually indicated as "The LXX.," or, if the work and not the workmen should be noticed, it was cited as *The Septuagint*. In fact, this earliest of scriptural versions, viz., into Greek, is by much the most famous; or, if any other approaches it in notoriety, it is the Latin translation by St. Jerome, which, in this one point, enjoys even a superior importance, that in the Church of Rome it is the authorized translation. Evidently, in every Church, it must be a matter of primary importance to assign the particular version to which that Church appeals, and by which, in any controversy arising, that Church consents to be governed. Now the Jerome Version fulfils this function for the Romish

Church ; and accordingly, in the sense of being published (*vulgata*), or publicly authorized by that Church, it is commonly called *The Vulgate*.

But, in a large polemic question, unless, like the Romish Church, we uphold a secondary inspiration as having secured a special privileged translation from the possibility of error, we cannot refuse an appeal to the Hebrew text for the Old Testament, or to the Greek text for the New. The word *aeonios* (*αιωνιος*), as purely Grecian, could not connect itself with the Old Testament, unless it were through the Septuagint translation into Greek. Now, with that version, in any case of controversy, none of us, Protestants alike or Roman Catholics, have anything whatever to do. Controversially, we *can* be concerned only with the original language of the Scriptures, with its actual verbal expressions textually produced. To be liable, therefore, to such a textual citation, any Greek word must belong to the *New* Testament. Because, though the word might happen to occur in the Septuagint, yet, since *that* is merely a translation, for any of us who occupy a controversial place, that is, who are bound by the responsibilities or who claim the strict privileges of controversy, the Septuagint has no virtual existence. We should not be at liberty to allege the Septuagint as any authority, if it happened to countenance our own views ; and, consequently, we could not be called on to recognize the Septuagint in any case where it should happen to be against us. I make this preliminary *caveat*, as not caring whether the word *aeonios* does or does not occur in the Septuagint. Either way, the reader understands that I disown the authority of that Version as in any degree affecting

myself. The word which, forty years ago, moved my disgust by its servile misinterpretation, was a word proper to the *New Testament*; and any sense which it may have received from an Alexandrian Jew in the third century before Christ, is no more relevant to any criticism that I am now going to suggest, than is the classical use of the word *aeon* (*αιων*) familiar to the learned in Sophocles or Euripides.

The reason which gives to this word *aconian* what I do not scruple to call a *dreadful* importance, is the same reason, and no other, which prompted the dishonesty concerned in the ordinary interpretation of this word. The word happened to connect itself—but *that* was no practical concern of mine; me it had not biassed in the one direction, nor should it have biassed any just critic in the counter-direction—happened, I say, to connect itself with the ancient dispute upon the *duration* of future punishments. What was meant by the *aconian* punishments in the next world? Was the proper sense of the word *eternal*, or was it not? I, for my part, meddled not, nor upon any consideration could have been tempted to meddle, with a speculation repellent alike by the horror and by the hopeless mystery which invest it. Secrets of the prison-house, so afflicting to contemplate steadily, and so hopeless of solution, there could be no proper motive for investigating, unless the investigation promised a great deal more than it could ever accomplish; and my own feeling as to all such problems is that they vulgarize what, left to itself, would take its natural station amongst the freezing horrors that Shakespeare dismisses with so potent an expression of awe in a well-known scene of “Measure for Measure.” I reiterate

my protest against being in any way decoyed into the controversy. Perhaps I may have a strong opinion upon the subject. But, anticipating the coarse discussions into which the slightest entertainment of such a question would be every moment approaching, once for all, out of reverential regard for the dignity of human nature, I beg permission to decline the controversy altogether.

But does this declinature involve any countenance to a certain argument which I began by rejecting as abominable? Most certainly not. That argument runs thus—that the ordinary construction of the term *aeonian*, as equivalent to *everlasting*, could not possibly be given up when associated with penal misery, because in that case, and by the very same act, the idea of eternity must be abandoned as applicable to the counter-bliss of Paradise. Torment and blessedness, it was argued, punishment and beatification, stood upon the same level; the same word it was, the word *aeonian*, which qualified the duration of either; and if eternity in the most rigorous acceptation fell away from the one idea, it must equally fall away from the other. Well, be it so. But that would not settle the question. It might be very painful to renounce a long-cherished anticipation; but the necessity of doing so could not be received as a sufficient reason for adhering to the old unconditional use of the word *aeonian*. The argument is, that we must retain the old sense of *eternal*, because else we lose upon one scale what we had gained upon the other. But what then? would be the reasonable man's retort. We are not to accept or to reject a new construction (if otherwise the more colourable) of the word *aeonian*, simply

because the consequences might seem such as upon the whole to displease us. We may gain nothing, for by the new interpretation our loss may balance our gain; and we may prefer the old arrangement. But how monstrous is all this! We are not summoned as to a choice of two different arrangements that may suit different tastes, but to a grave question as to what *is* the sense and operation of the word *aeonian*. Let the limitation of the word disturb our previous estimate of Paradise, grant that it so disturbs that estimate, not the less all such consequences leave the dispute exactly where it was; and if a balance of reason can be found for limiting the extent of the word *aeonian*, it will not be the less true because it may happen to disturb a crotchet of our own.

Mean time, all this speculation, first and last, is pure nonsense. *Aeonian* does not mean *eternal*; neither does it mean of limited duration; nor would the unsettling of *aeonian* in its old use, as applied to punishment, to torment, to misery, &c., carry with it any necessary unsettling of the idea in its application to the beatitudes of Paradise. Pause, reader; and thou, my favoured and privileged reader, that boastest thyself to be unlearned, pause doubly whilst I communicate my views as to this remarkable word.

What is an *aeon*? In the use and acceptance of the Apocalypse, it is evidently this, viz., the duration or cycle of existence which belongs to any object, not individually for itself, but universally in right of its genus. Kant, for instance, in a little paper which I once translated, proposed and debated the question as to the age of our planet the Earth. What did he mean? Was he to be understood as asking whether

the Earth were half a million, two millions, or three millions of years old? Not at all. The probabilities certainly lean, one and all, to the assignment of an antiquity greater by many thousands of times than that which we have most idly supposed ourselves to extract from Scripture, which assuredly never meant to approach a question so profoundly irrelevant to the great purposes of Scripture as any geological speculation whatsoever. But this was not within the field of Kant's inquiry. What he wished to know was simply the exact stage in the whole course of her development which the Earth at present occupies. Is she still in her infancy, for example, or in a stage corresponding to middle age, or in a stage approaching to superannuation? The idea of Kant presupposed a certain average duration as belonging to a planet of our particular system; and supposing this known, or discoverable, and that a certain assignable development belonged to a planet so circumstanced as ours, then in what particular stage of that development may we, the tenants of this respectable little planet *Tellus*, reasonably be conceived to stand?

Man, again, has a certain *aeonian* life; possibly ranging somewhere about the period of seventy years assigned in the Psalms. That is, in a state as highly improved as human infirmity and the errors of the Earth herself, together with the diseases incident to our atmosphere, &c., could be supposed to allow, possibly the human race might average seventy years for each individual. This period would in that case represent the "*aeon*" of the *individual* Tellurian; but the "*aeon*" of the Tellurian RACE would probably amount to many millions of our earthly years; and if

would remain an unfathomable mystery, deriving no light at all from the septuagenarian "aeon" of the individual; though between the two aeons I have no doubt that some secret link of connection does and must subsist, however undiscoverable by human sagacity.

The crow, the deer, the eagle, &c., are all supposed to be long-lived. Some people have fancied that in their normal state they tended to a period of two¹ centuries. I myself know nothing certain for or against this belief; but, supposing the case to be as it is represented, then this would be the *aeonian* period of these animals, considered as individuals. Among trees, in like manner, the oak, the cedar, the yew, are notoriously of very slow growth, and their *aeonian* period is unusually long as regards the individual. What may be the *aeon* of the whole species is utterly unknown. Amongst birds, one species at least has become extinct in our own generation: its *aeon* was accomplished. So of all the fossil species in zoology, which palæontology has revealed. Nothing, in short, throughout universal nature, can for a moment be conceived to have been resigned to accident for its normal *aeon*. All periods and dates of this order belong to the certainties of nature, but also, at the same time, to the mysteries of Providence. Through-

¹ I have heard the same normal duration ascribed to the tortoise, and one case became imperfectly known to myself personally. Somewhere I may have mentioned the case in print. These, at any rate, are the facts of the case. A lady (by birth a Cowper, of the Whig family, and cousin to the poet Cowper, and, equally with him, related to Dr. Madan, bishop of Peterborough), in the early part of this century, mentioned to me that, in the palace at Peterborough, she had for years known as a pet of the household a venerable tortoise, who bore some inscription on his shell indicating that, from 1638 to 1643 he had belonged to Archbishop Laud, who (if I am not mistaken) held the bishopric of Peterborough before he was translated to London, and finally to Canterbury.

out the Prophets we are uniformly taught that nothing is more below the grandeur of Heaven than to assign earthly dates in fixing either the revolutions or the duration of great events such as prophecy would condescend to notice. A day has a prophetic meaning, but what sort of day? A mysterious expression for a time which has no resemblance to a natural day—sometimes comprehending long successions of centuries, and altering its meaning according to the object concerned. “A time,” and “times,” or “half a time”—“an aeon,” or “aeons of aeons”—and other variations of this prophetic language (so full of dreadful meaning, but also of doubt and perplexity), are all significant. The peculiar grandeur of such expressions lies partly in the dimness of the approximation to any attempt at settling their limits, and still more in this, that the conventional character, and consequent meanness of ordinary human dates, are abandoned in the celestial chronologies. Hours and days, or lunations and months, have no true or philosophic relation to the origin, or duration, or periods of return belonging to great events, or revolutionary agencies, or vast national crimes; but the normal period and duration of all acts whatever, the time of their emergence, of their agency, or their re-agency, fall into harmony with the secret proportions of a heavenly scale, when they belong by mere necessity of their own internal constitution to the vital though hidden motions that are at work in their own life and manifestation. Under the old and ordinary view of the apocalyptic *aeon*, which supposed it always to mean the same period of time—mysterious, indeed, and uncertain, as regards *our* knowledge, but fixed and rigorously certain in the secret counsels

of God—it was presumed that this period, if it lost its character of infinity when applied to evil, to criminality, or to punishment, must lose it by a corresponding necessity equally when applied to happiness and the golden aspects of hope. But, on the contrary, every object whatsoever, every mode of existence, has its own separate and independent *aeon*. The most thoughtless person must be satisfied, on reflection, even apart from the express commentary upon this idea furnished by the Apocalypse, that every life and mode of being must have hidden within itself the secret *why* of its duration. It is impossible to believe of *any* duration whatever that it is determined capriciously. Always it rests upon some ground, ancient as light and darkness, though undiscoverable by man. This only is discoverable, as a general tendency, that the *aeon*, or generic period of evil, is constantly towards a fugitive duration. The *aeon*, it is alleged, must always express the same idea, whatever *that* may be: if it is less than eternity for the evil cases, then it must be less for the good ones. Doubtless the idea of an *aeon* is in one sense always uniform, always the same, viz., as a tenth or a twelfth is always the same. Arithmetic could not exist if any caprice or variation affected these ideas—a tenth is always more than an eleventh, always less than a ninth. But this uniformity of ratio and proportion does not hinder but that a tenth may now represent a guinea, and next moment represent a thousand guineas. The exact amount of the duration expressed by an *aeon* depends altogether upon the particular subject which yields the *aeon*. It is, as I have said, a radix; and, like an algebraic square-root or cube-root, though governed by the most rigorous

laws of limitation, it must vary in obedience to the nature of the particular subject whose radix it forms.

Reader, I take my leave. I have been too loitering. I know it, and will make such efforts in future to cultivate the sternest brevity as nervous distress will allow. Mean time, as the upshot of my speculation, accept these three propositions:—

a. That man (which is in effect *every* man hitherto) who allows himself to infer the eternity of evil from the counter eternity of good, builds upon the mistake of assigning a stationary and mechanic value to the idea of an aeon; whereas the very purpose of Scripture in using this word was to evade such a value. The word is always varying, for the very purpose of keeping it faithful to a spiritual identity. The period or duration of every object *would* be an essentially variable quantity, were it not mysteriously commensurate to the inner nature of that object as laid open to the eyes of God. And thus it happens, that everything in this world, possibly without a solitary exception, has its own separate *aeon*: how many entities, so many *aeons*.

b. But if it be an excess of blindness which can overlook the aeonian differences amongst even neutral entities, much deeper is that blindness which overlooks the separate tendencies of things evil and things good. Naturally, all evil is fugitive and allied to death.

c. I separately, speaking for myself only, profoundly believe that the Scriptures ascribe absolute and metaphysical eternity to one sole Being, viz., to God; and derivatively to all others according to the interest which they can plead in God's favour. Having

anchorage in God, innumerable entities may possibly be admitted to a participation in the Divine aeon. But what interest in the favour of God can belong to falsehood, to malignity, to impurity? To invest *them* with aeonian privileges, is in effect, and by its results, to distrust and to insult the Deity. Evil would *not* be evil, if it had that power of self-subsistence which is imputed to it in supposing its aeonian life to be co-eternal with that which crowns and glorifies the good.

ST. ANDREW.

COMMENTATORS have often pointed out¹ that, in all the lists² of the Twelve Apostles given in the New Testament, they are divided into three groups of four each; and that each of these groups has some common, notable, and distinguishing characteristic. In the first group, or quaternion, we have the natural leaders, the born princes and rulers of the Apostolic Company; the men of largest make, and most conspicuous gifts, and most fervent devotion; men capable of guiding and inspiring their associates—Peter and Andrew, James and John, the sons of Jona and the sons of Zebedee. In the second group we have four reflective and naturally sceptical men, men who must see before they can believe, men who require proof, and at times both require too much proof and are a little hopeless of getting it—Philip and Thomas, Nathanael and Matthew. In the last group we have men of a practical and business turn, the ministers, managers, servants of the Company, men with a keen eye for seeing “where a nail

¹ Cf. THE EXPOSITOR, vol. i. pp. 29 *et seq.*

² St. Matt. x. 2-4; St. Mark iii. 16-19; St. Luke vi. 14-16; Acts i. 13.