

It seems that there would be no need for a second recovery of the Israeli people from amongst the Arab nations if they were indeed dwelling "safely" following the initial regathering that was seen last century. Those "who are left" suggests a dreadful death toll in the events prior to this recovery.

Isaiah 11:15,16 then goes on to describe the dividing up of "the river" (Euphrates) into seven streams so that men can cross dry-shod. This is a literal drying up. A "highway" thereby opens between Assyria and Israel (and on into Egypt according to Isaiah 19:23) for "the remnant who are left" (ominous words), the Israeli captives who return to Israel from Assyria (Iraq).

Jerusalem's Temple Mount remains under Gentile (PLO) control today, and the daily violence in the Land begs the question of how the Israeli people can realistically be dwelling in safety. I suggest therefore that Ezekiel 38, 39 can only be fulfilled after the coming captivity has ended and the recovery of all exiles has been completed. In Zechariah 14:3-11 our glorious Lord Jesus Christ (termed "the LORD" because he is the Name-bearer) ends this exile and removes the threat posed by Israel's militant neighbours. At last the "times of the Gentiles [that is, Gentile dominion over Old Jerusalem] are fulfilled" (Lk. 21:24).

Whether the above is a correct interpretation or not (time will tell), we all need reminding that those disciples closest to our Lord Jesus Christ during his ministry could not grasp the meaning of the simplest of all New Testament prophecies, Jesus foretelling his approaching death and resurrection. Is there not a powerful lesson for us in their failure to discern his warning? Jesus was available to answer their questions, but perhaps they were too embarrassed to ask and so reveal their lack of understanding.

At least Jesus's mother Mary was wise enough to keep the unusual things that she heard about, and from, her Son, and to ponder them in her heart (Lk. 2:19,51). And Jacob "kept" Joseph's dreams in his mind too (Gen. 37:11), not understanding them until he went to meet Joseph, who had become lord of all Egypt.

In closing, Brother White's observation that Israel's punishment is a progressive one is very well made. A double portion of punishment (two exiles?) is due to apostate Jerusalem (Isa. 40:2), and to Babylon double destruction for her sins (Rev. 18:6). We should ponder this lest we become as hard of hearing as the people of Israel

have been for generations. Many Israelites continue faithfully to observe their traditions, but their studies of the Tanach (Old Testament) are confined almost exclusively to the Torah (Law). They mostly ignore the Writings and the Prophets, and thereby miss the gospel.

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Eternal life

I would like to make a few comments on the article by Brother Tony Benson, "In hope of eternal life" (May 2000, p. 220), in particular regarding the Greek word *aiōn*, commonly translated 'ever'.

Brother Thomas, under the heading "For ever and ever", comments in *Eureka* (Vol. 1, p. 125) on the erroneous translation of "*aiōns* of the *aiōns*" as "for ever and ever". When I first read *Eureka*, nearly sixty years ago, I did not appreciate the significance of his words and how basic they were for the understanding of God's purpose as revealed in the Scriptures.

Over the years my own studies and the disquisitions of others have led me to realise that the Bible tells us nothing of the Divine programme during the eternity that preceded Genesis 1, nor of the eternity that succeeds the close of the Millennium, and that it is a revelation of God's purpose during the course of the ages (*aiōns*) from the Creation recorded in Genesis 1 to the consummation of the *aiōns* at the close of the Millennium.

An *aiōn* is a period of time, whether long or short, but with a beginning and an end, so to translate it as 'ever' is totally misleading. If the noun *aiōn* has a meaning of limited duration then the adjective *aiōnos* cannot have a stronger meaning, so to render it 'eternal' or 'everlasting' is quite intolerable. I can understand a word having a different shade of meaning according to the context, but to translate the same word with a finite meaning in one verse and an infinite meaning in another is surely wrong.

Does this have any practical bearing on our understanding of the purpose of God? I believe so. In "From the Editor's postbag" in the August 2000 issue, Brother Tony Benson mentions the attempt of Saddam Hussein to rebuild Babylon, and says he thinks it will be in vain, obviously believing that people will never live there ("Babylon rebuilt?", p. 319). I would not be so bold. The

future may be quite different. When the sanctions against Iraq are lifted, Babylon restored could become a big tourist attraction.

When we read in Ezekiel's prophecy of the doom of Tyre we could be excused from thinking that the desolation would last literally for ever. And it did last until quite recently when, in the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, it became an important port for supplies. The causeway that Alexander built has now become, by marine accretion, almost as wide as the island. Recently I saw a television programme about Alexander's conquests, and it showed a film of the area taken from a helicopter coming in from the sea. I was amazed to see that the whole of the island, the causeway and the mainland for some distance up and down the coast were all covered with buildings, and evidently had a large population.

So what becomes of the words of the prophet, "thou shalt be a place to spread nets upon; thou shalt be built no more" (26:14)? Egypt likewise was to be "desolate in the midst of the countries that are desolate" (29:12), but is now thickly populated.

All these countries in the Middle East area were desolate for century after century, but are no longer so. Thompson, writing over 150 years ago in *The Land and the Book*, said of Palestine that there was not a single road that could take a wheeled vehicle. Now look at it! I believe the explanation for the change that has occurred is to be found in Luke 21:29-31: "Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; when they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand". The building of the Suez Canal, the demand for Arab oil, the rebirth of the State of Israel, etc. have led to economic prosperity and political awakening for all the nations of the area.

Scripture predicts that the desolation of these ancient lands was not to be for eternity, but for the duration of an 'age', the Hebrew word *olahm* carrying the same meaning as the Greek *aiōn*.

In Hebrews 1:2 Paul uses the phrase, "by whom also He made the worlds", or, as the *Diaglott* renders it, "on account of whom also He constituted the ages". One of the most exciting factors in Bible study is to delineate the various dispensations in God's plan of redemption for mankind, dealing with people in different and

sometimes apparently contradictory ways, but always with Jesus in focus. It is very important for us to be clear on the dispensational background to what we are reading, otherwise we can get a distorted view of the meaning of the teaching or events we are reading about, leading to a warped understanding of the Scriptures.

For example, Paul says: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law" (Gal. 3:13). Yet Jesus in his ministry never gave the slightest indication that there is a curse from which we needed to be redeemed. The most important happening in his life was, paradoxically, his death. This was accompanied by a most significant event, the rending of the veil of the temple, thus exposing the way into the most holy place, and bringing in a new '*aiōn*', or age, in which the Law no longer needed to be kept. Yet Galatians 2:11-14 shows the difficulty that some, including Peter and Barnabas, had in accepting this. How careful we must be to understand the significance of the *aiōn* in which we are living.

The following phrases, which all use words derived from *aiōn*, show that the *aiōns* had a beginning: "from the beginning of the world" (Eph. 3:9); "before the world began" (2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 1:2); "before the world" (1 Cor. 2:7). The phrase, "end[s] of the world" (Heb. 9:26; 1 Cor. 10:11), shows that they have an end. There have been *aiōns* past (Col. 1:26) and there are *aiōns* to come (Eph. 2:7). These verses are about dispensations that come and go, succeeding each other, sometimes overlapping, but eventually coming to an end when the work of redemption has been consummated and God is "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

In his article Brother Benson says that *aiōnios* "means an undefined period of time which may be endless but is not necessarily so". I do not see how endlessness can be an ingredient of *aiōnios*. The endlessness of the life of the redeemed is catered for in the 'mighty negatives', terms such as 'immortal', 'incorruptible', 'fadeth not away', 'never any more', etc. The fact that immortality (*aphtharsia*) and eternal (*aiōnios*) do not have the same meaning is shown by the use of both in Roman 2:7. I agree with Brother Benson that the phrase *aiōnios zōē*, eternal life, refers to a quality of life, a quality that Jesus exemplified to perfection while still a mortal man, and which we imitate with varying degrees of success.

I found the statement in the article, "The gospel message primarily provides hope for the fu-

ture rather than the prospect of blessings in this life”, puzzling. I would think that the first step in our conversion is a conviction of sin, of our unworthiness, and that living a righteous life should be the way we ought to live whether there is a reward or not. The psalmist speaks of the blessedness of those whose sins are forgiven and in whose spirit there is no guile (32:1,2). Surely this is the “life eternal [aiōnios zōē]” that Jesus speaks about in John 17:3.

This “life eternal” is thus not just about the future but about the here and now, it is the joy of knowing God and His Son, of knowing that we are not alone but are intimately associated with God’s plan of redemption. When we read Ephesians 1 and ponder each verse it is almost intoxicating in its impact. This is about the quality of life beyond mortality which we can experience in measure now if we have faith to grasp it. Even

now we can “sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6).

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I think Brother Karst may have misunderstood my use of the word ‘primarily’ in the passage quoted above from my article. I used it in the sense of most important rather than of first in time. Whilst we do have to first believe the gospel, repent and be forgiven our sins, these are not ends in themselves but rather the first steps towards immortality. Also, though what he says about the significance of ‘ever’ in Scripture has much to commend it, I think he overstates his case when he says that the original never carries the meaning of eternity. Vine in Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words says that aiōnios “describes duration, either undefined but not endless . . . or undefined because endless”.—T.B.



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The scrolls and the Book

3. The Dead Sea Scrolls

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THE BEGINNING of the modern history of the Dead Sea Scrolls has often been told: how they were found in a cave near the Dead Sea supposedly by a Bedouin boy herding his flock. Their later involved and frustrating history is the subject of many, often confusing, books. We can discuss only a few important aspects here.

The first discoveries

The first scrolls, found in 1947 by the Bedouin, soon came into the hands of a Christian Arab dealer in Bethlehem, nicknamed Kando. As the barbed wire was being erected between Arab and Israeli-controlled areas of Jerusalem by the British army in the preliminary skirmishes of the 1948 War of Independence, an Israeli archaeologist, Dr. Eleazar Sukenik, managed to buy three scrolls from Kando, and was told there were more.

Those three scrolls, which were the basis for Israel’s collection for many years, were:

- **A scroll of Isaiah.** This was not the beautiful scroll, which was acquired later, but one in bad condition. Only the next to last sheet is whole. There are parts of thirty-eight chapters, enough to show that there are some differences in spelling and in the text from the later scroll. It may have been an unauthorised copy.
- **Thanksgiving hymns.** This consisted of part or whole of thirty-five hymns similar in general style to the Biblical psalms, but they are written as the expressions of one unnamed person. They all begin, “I thank thee O God”.
- **War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness.** This consists of five sheets containing nineteen columns, gathering together texts based on Biblical passages for a holy war by the Sons of Levi, Judah and Benjamin