

Eternity in the Scriptures

CONTRIBUTIONS under the above heading are made to, the *Morning Star* for September, October, and November, 1934 (to be continued), by Basil F. C. Atkinson, M. A., Ph. D. The articles have been considered by a Sheffield class of believers of the *whole* of the Sacred Scriptures. They submitted the following against the position taken up by the article. Details are given only for the word which Dr. Atkinson terms the "most important basic word of our study."

In his article Dr. Atkinson has mistaken the use of "olam" for its meaning; thus he construes the simple expression of duration (the use of *oulm*) to mean perpetuity. In itself the word "olam" does not even contain the idea of *duration*, though a conspectus of the more than 400 occurrences of the word will show that it is used to express *duration*; the idea in the word is OBSCURE, and it is used to indicate that the extent of the duration is obscure, the length is unobservable. The contexts of some few particular occurrences enable some approximation, as for example, when the word is applied to the lifetime of a person, but even so it is actually obscure.

Hebrew words group themselves around "roots;" the root" is usually the radical letter, varied in form by serviles; together these constitute a Hebrew word family. One definite idea pervades the Hebrew word family; this central idea maintains itself, however varied may be the uses to which the word is put. Of the word under discussion the radical letters or "root" are *olm*. The meaning is OBSCURE. The Authorized Version uses the words "secret" and "hidden" amongst its renderings.

The whole family may be set out thus:

verb: *olm*, obscure

noun: *olm* (m), stripling

olme (f), damsel

olumim (m pl), adolescence

tholme (f), obscurity

oulm (m), obscured

oilum (m) obscured (one occurrence only)

"*Oulm*" is the particular form with which we are concerned, and it is necessary to note the following details around its use; it occurs in the singular and plural; also with the particles, *l* (TO), *m* (FROM), and *od* (FURTHER). These give the word particular nuances.

l oulm, m oulm, l oulmim (pl), *od oulm, l oulm v od*

The word also occurs twice in a phrase, thus: *m oulm v od oulm*. Note Daniel 7:18 (Chaldee): *od olma v od olm olmia*. The explanation which is to be considered satisfactory must take notice of all these features. Dr. Atkinson seems to dismiss them by saying that the word is used with prepositions. To say the least, this will not do.

When seeking to maintain that *olm* signifies "eternity" Dr. Adkinson largely ignores the foregoing facts about the use of the word, and at the same time seeks to make "eternity" a comprehensible matter. It should be evident that when we have to do this, then there is something wrong. If we have discovered the central significance of a word, then we may be sure it will fit all cases; it will not be necessary to adjust into "senses" as Dr. Atkinson does with "eternity."

The confusion born in the mental processes of theologians leads them to talk of "absolute" and "relative"

eternity; also of "past" and "future" eternity; then that kindred and subtle "all" eternity, with the occasional variation to "throughout" eternity. To clear and candid thinking it is fully evident that "eternity" is a notion which men do not and cannot understand. It is a notion of which God does not speak in His revelation. Moreover, God could not expect us to comprehend it. Here then we see the wisdom of the God Who breathed the Scriptures, and therein He reveals His ways and His ultimate. A "relative" eternity is twin to the immortality which is unable to keep humanity alive. "Absolute" eternity is akin to "eternal" purpose, being a jumble of terms, and hence can be nothing but an absurdity. "All" eternity is a creation of deranged thought; there is no "all" in eternity. When we preface "all" to eternity we make it to have a beginning and an end, and thus it loses the meaning which it has *per se*. In fact, by adding the words "all," "past," or "future" to the term eternity, we imply that eternity is not an absolute but a relative; thus we make it to fit the possibilities of our understanding; we make it a comprehensible thing, and incidentally we have lost our way in our quest for knowledge of what God says in His revelation.

Using Wigram's Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance the following emerges regarding the "for ever" and "forever and ever" texts of the Authorized Version. *Oulm* is translated ancient, from of old, always, long, old time, world, the beginning of the world, continually, ancient time, never, ever, eternal, everlasting, perpetual etc., etc. It is perfectly plain that one idea does not control this array of renderings; thus the concordance makes apparent that the Authorized Version translators had not seized the central significance of the word. The following considerations are submitted as giving ample evidence for the force of *oulm* in God's usage; it is maintained that He uses it to express obscure duration as intimated when dealing with the Hebrew word family.

The Hebrew servant whose ear was dug became a bondman "for ever," i.e., for life (Ex.21:6; Deut. 15:17). A similar instance is found in Deuteronomy 23:6 where "for ever" is equal to "all thy days."

"For ever" in 1 Chronicles 22:10 covers the forty years of Solomon's reign, and in 1 Kings 8:13 and 9:3 it equals the time when the temple was in existence.

In Nehemiah 13:1 the Ammonite and Moabite should not enter God's assembly "for ever." Deuteronomy 23:3-5 limits this "eternity" to the lifetime of ten generations.

Ecclesiastes 1:4; Psalm 78:69; 104:5: "one generation cometh and another generation goeth, and the earth abideth for ever." Yet other scriptures foretell the passing away of the present heaven and earth to make room for a new heaven and earth (Matt.5:18; 24:35; 2 Peter.3:7-10; Rev.21:1; Psa.102:25,26; Isa.51:6; 61:17; 66:22). The "for ever" means from its making in Genesis 1:3-31 to its dissolution, in Revelation 21:1.

The sand is placed for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree. Yet in Revelation 21:1 the "sea is no more."

In Isaiah 32:13-17, verse 15 limits the "for ever" of verse 14; it is only "until the spirit be poured upon us from on high," and in limiting the "for ever" of verse 14, it makes way for another "for ever" mentioned in verse 17. Luke 21:24 corroborates.

Israel's "everlasting reproach" (Jer.23:39,40; 24:6; Isa.25:8) is shown by Romans 11:25,26 not to be interminable.

Jerusalem is spoken of as remaining "for ever" (Psa.48:8; Isa.65:18; 60:15; Jer.17:25). But Revelation 3:12 and 21:2 speak of a New Jerusalem.

God's sanctuary will be set in Israel for ever (Ezek.37:26). But Revelation 21:22 says "no sanctuary there."

The Sinai Covenant was to be "everlasting" (Lev.24:8). Exodus 19:5,6 shows it to be contingent upon Israel's

obedience, whilst Jeremiah 31:31 shows it is to be superseded by a new covenant. Hebrews 8:1,13 says the old is nigh unto vanishing.

"Everlasting Priesthood" (Ex.40:15; Lev.6:18; Num.25:13). Yet the Old Testament foresaw a change to the order of Melchizedek (Heb.7:11-17).

Sacrifices and Sabbaths were "for ever" (Ex.31:16,17; 2 Chron.2:4; Lev.16:31). But Hebrews 9:10 says they were carnal ordinances imposed until a time of reformation.

It is submitted that the foregoing is sufficient evidence to show that *oulm* is not a term used to denote endless duration.

Further proof is afforded by the phrase "for ever and ever;" the second "ever" is not the same Hebrew word, but it represents another word, *od*; it is linked to the first *oulm* by the Hebrew *v*, which is "and." *Od* signifies FURTHER. The whole phrase in the Hebrew reads *l oulm v od*, and is literally TO OBSCURED and FURTHER. The word *od* indicates something beyond the limit of the duration expressed by *oulm*. See all the occurrences, and note the omission in some instances of the *l* (TO) (Ex.15:18; Psa.9:5; 10:16; 21:4; 45:6,17; 48:14; 52:8; Psa.104:5; 119:44; 145:1,2,21; Dan.12:3; Micah 4:5).

Isaiah 45:17 contains an interesting phrase, *od oulmi od*. The Authorized Version translates this by "world without end." This it cannot be. *Oulmi* is plural construct, that is, it is plural number, and requires "of" attaching to it because it depends on the word in close connection with it; it is in construction with it. Literally it reads FURTHER OBSCUREDs-Of FURTHER, which should be rendered thus: for eons of the future.

Daniel 7:18, referred to previously, should be rendered *for the eon and for the eon of the eons*. Literally it is FURTHER OBSCURED AND FURTHER OBSCURED-of OBSCUREDs.

These variations of form and preposition must be dealt with; they agree with the expression of obscure duration, but they do not give any intelligible result when *oulm* is taken as "eternity." In the Greek Scriptures we have three definite phrases:

the eons of the eons
the eon of the eons
the eon of the eon

Each one has its own special force and intention. These are ignored by the Authorized Version; they are hidden from the student of Scripture unless he goes behind the Authorized Version. And the ordinary believer of the Scriptures can know nothing about the matter unless he is told by those who should teach him.

The emphasis which is often given to the texts speaking of God living "for ever" is very misplaced. It is a trite matter to say that the Deity lives "for ever;" the fact that He is Deity contains the thought. But to a people, or to nations, who have become steeped in idolatry, who have been trusting in other "gods," who have had another "rock" in which they trusted, to such it is very pointed to say (Deut.32:40,41),

See now that I, I am He!
And there are no gods with Me!
I am putting to death and preserving alive,
I stab and I will heal.
And there is no rescuing from My hand!
For I am lifting up to the heavens My hand,
And I say, 'Living am I for the eon!'

In the Hebrew the word "living" is really adjectival, and it is describing the pronoun "I;" it is not the verb which completes the subject. He is a "living" I, and that to the eon; it is not simply "I live," but is stating He is a "living" Deity in contrast to the "dead" gods they have been following. Thus the words "live" and "olm" take special cogency, for they are not expressing what would be a commonplace matter.

The divine names used in the Scriptures are the characters which the Deity assumes in His various relations and activities in the universe. They express His glories amidst the presence of sin in the universe. El speaks of Him as the Disposer; Elohim as the Arbiter, creating and making; Eloyon is the Supreme; Eloah is the One Who is Invoked; Adonai is the Adjudger; Jehovah is the One Who has Become for Israel, He is the Holy One of Israel, Jehovah is the One set apart for Israel.

Take the divine name Adonai; this is the Adjudger, and we find it used in Psalm 90:1. In the second verse of this Psalm we have the name El, the Supreme, the Deity. The verses read:

Adonai, Thou became our habitation in generation and
generation.
Ere mountains are born
And the earth and the habitation are travailing
And from eon until eon *Thou* art the Deity.

In the last line we have "*m oulm od oulm*," FROM OBSCURED FURTHER OBSCURED. It is evident that the verses are referring to the protection afforded to His people; the titles are in keeping, viz.: Adonai and the Deity; they refer to His judging for them.

Thus we see that a circumscribed period—from eon to eon—is in contemplation, when ruling and judging were the expression of Deity. It should be evident that rule did not exist before sin invaded the universe, nor will it be a necessity when sin makes its exit; therefore such a divine name as Adonai will no longer be in point; it is thus evident why the term *oulm* can be used with a title expressing this divine activity. It does not denote the "eternity" of God, but is concerned with that expression of Deity dealing with sin and evil during the eons.

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