

The Possible Meanings of 'Eternal' in the New Testament.

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The word 'eternal' and the phrase 'eternal life' are of frequent occurrence in the New Testament. The doctrine of heaven, in which the idea of eternity is involved, is of very practical significance for religion; and the relation of the Eternal God to the time-process of the world and to human progress in the appropriation of revealed truth and in ethical life, is of fundamental importance to the Christian Faith. The possible meanings of the term 'eternal' are therefore a matter of interest to all students of theology and teachers of religion; while the meaning or meanings which must be selected out of such as are possible, as those which are most probably intended by New Testament writers who use the term, will also be an object of inquiry which it is well worth while to pursue.

The Greek word, which is rendered by 'eternal' in our versions, literally expresses only a relation to some *æon*, age, or period of time. It is not, however, this primary meaning which is of religious interest; but rather the derived or secondary signification of the term: that is to say, it is the characteristics of the *æon* under contemplation when *αιώνιος* is used by a New Testament writer, which chiefly matter to us. The first possible secondary meaning of 'eternal'—secondary in the etymological sense, but primary for theological interest—will be that which doubtless most plain Christians associate with the word when they read the Scriptures or use the word in ordinary discourse: viz. everlasting. Whether the New Testament term ever bears this sense, or this sense was intended by New Testament writers, seems to be a question as to which commentators differ. But partly because the lexicons assign this sense, among others, to *αιώνιος* in classical Greek, and partly because it certainly seems to be borne in apocryphal books (Ec 18¹, Wis 5⁴⁵, etc.) and in Dn 12², where it is said of many that sleep in the dust of the earth that they shall awake, 'some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt,' this rendering would seem, at least in some cases, not to be excluded as impossible.

But, however this may be, it is certain that for popular Christian belief, eternity is synonymous with everlastingness, or life from everlasting to everlasting. Eternity, that is to say, is very commonly conceived as infinite or unending duration through time; and according to this interpretation, time would simply be a part of eternity. The well-known argument of Kant for human immortality, according to which immortality of the soul must be postulated as the necessary condition of the realization of the categorical imperative of conscience to attain the highest good, also seems to involve this interpretation of eternity. The chief difficulty besetting this notion of eternity as everlastingness is the difficulty, or rather the difficulties, involved in the idea of infinity as that which has no end. These are of a mathematical nature, and need not be dwelt on here. But it may be observed that these difficulties have been so acutely felt by most philosophical thinkers that the conception of eternity as quantitative, *i.e.* as an infinite number of successive instants, has been abandoned by them:

Accordingly, in the Middle Ages, the attempt was made to conceive of everlastingness as an eternal present, of duration as not involving succession of present on past, and future on present; and the favourite definition of eternity was, 'the whole and perfect simultaneous possession of interminable life.' This, however, affords no way out of the old difficulty; because duration is inconceivable without succession, and therefore it is impossible to speak of an everlasting now: the phrase 'eternal present' is but a metaphor, for 'present' is meaningless unless it involve relation to past and future. It is true that whenever we experience one perception—one single whole apprehension—of any object, the 'present' which the perception occupies is not a mathematical instant, but a very brief though measurable space of clock-time, in which the immediate past is retained in consciousness and the immediate future is anticipated. Here, therefore, we have a brief enduring present,

in which real past, present, and future are apprehended together in one, as simultaneous *for the percipient*. But though simultaneous for the percipient at the moment, really or objectively (or from the point of view of psychological reflexion and science), the past, present, and future are distinguishable in all such experiences; and the same is of course true of abnormal cases such as of rapt attention and trance, in which a lengthy period of time seems to the percipient but a moment or a present. Hence we cannot escape the implication of succession, and therefore of time, if, with Augustine, we credit God with a perceptual present like ours (in which past and future are also blended), though of indefinitely greater span, so that it embraces in one present the distant past and future. Eternity cannot be conceived, even on these lines, as an everlasting present in which there is no succession and therefore no infinite time.

Thus it appears that the common conception of the eternal as the everlasting is impossible to retain when we think out its implications. And we are therefore not surprised to find that many writers have abandoned this interpretation to embrace another.

This second possible meaning of 'eternity' is that of timelessness. The eternal has no relation at all to time. If all of reality that we know is in time, or perceived through the temporal form, there may well be real existence which is not subject to time; and indeed Spinoza and Hegel and other philosophers have regarded all reality as really timeless, and our sense of time as an illusion, or a subjective misreading of reality. This view of the eternal, and of the life of God, however, is of no use to Christian theology. If the temporal and the eternal are absolutely unrelated and unrelatable, God becomes of no interest to, and can have no dealings with, beings like us who perceive under the form of time, and to whom the time-process is of the utmost significance. God is resolved, on such a view, into a mere idea; He ceases to be a living Spirit. He can have no experience; for experience is change, and change implies time. He cannot be the ground and Creator and Controller of a temporal world; the immutable can have no relation to the changing. Thus the second possible sense which 'the eternal' might conceivably bear, though one which some philosophers have embraced and with which some

theologians have coquetted, is at least as hopeless as the first.

In the third place, the eternal has been conceived as not in, and confined to, the time-process (as, e.g., trees are in the course of Nature, or as the drops of water are in the stream), though as having relation to time and things in time. Time may be phenomenal, an appearance of the supra-temporal, without being a mere false illusion to which no reality corresponds. In this case the eternal will be regarded as the truly real, as distinguished from what appears to be; *i.e.* 'the noumenal' of philosophers. The phrase in 1 Ti 6¹⁹, which in the Authorized Version is translated 'eternal life,' and which in the Revised Version is correctly rendered 'the life that truly is,' suggests this view of eternity. So also do St. Paul's words (2 Co 4¹⁸): 'The things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.' And a similar meaning may perhaps be read into the Johannine phrase, 'life eternal,' which denotes increasing power to see things from the point of view of eternity—however that may be interpreted. In the Fourth Gospel, eternal life is represented as a present reality, a striving after growing knowledge rather than an already perfected knowledge, though a knowledge which is to be perfected in a future æon, when faith shall have passed into sight. Such knowledge would consist in apprehension of values and ideals which are timeless in the sense of being true for all time and apart from all relation to time—in which case the meaning of 'eternal' will include 'timeless' (in so far as apprehension of timeless truth is concerned), though it may also include the vision of God as He is, or 'face to face,' and insight into the things of God otherwise than as we now know them, 'darkly' or 'in a riddle.' Truths and values are different from things which *exist*; they are *valid* of what exists: and they can perfectly well be timeless, or unrelated to one time rather than another, and so 'out of' time. But existent things, such as God and the realities of the heavenly life, as we have seen, must rather be described as noumenal, *i.e.* as reality as it is in itself apart from our perception of it, than as timeless.

On this view of the eternal as the noumenal and supra-temporal, God can be conceived to have a functional relation to time and to beings in time, such as religion and theology require. The process of human development can be of interest to Him,

and He of intimate concern to us, which we could not conceive to be the case were He supposed to be 'out of' time, or timeless, in the sense of having no relation at all to time and the temporal. The temporal may then have eternal significance; the historical event (such as the Incarnation and the Death of our Lord), though occurring once alone and at particular moments in time, may nevertheless be charged with revelation-value and truth independent of all time and temporal circumstances. In fact, in this third possible sense of 'eternity' we have found a meaning to which New Testament language seems directly to point, and one which lends itself admirably to the exposition of the Christian revelation in theological doctrine.

But there is still another sense of 'eternal' to be considered, distinct from those of 'everlasting,' 'timeless,' and 'noumenal' or 'truly real,' respectively. 'Eternal' is also used as a term of *value*. Its meaning is then determined quite otherwise than by antithesis to time or phenomenality. According to some commentators on the writings of St. John, the best rendering, in popular language, of St. John's term 'eternal' is 'spiritual'—a term from which all reference to time is absent, and which suggests ideas of value rather than of existence. Similarly, we sometimes use the words 'enduring' and 'abiding' in a non-temporal sense. Indeed, there are passages in the

New Testament where 'eternal' and cognate words seem directly to refer to a contrast of values: *e.g.* 'The world passeth away, and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever (*εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα*)'—1 Jn 2¹⁷. The contrast here is between what is worthy, and consequently satisfying, on the one hand, and the disappointing, because unworthy, on the other. The eternal, in this sense, does not bespeak immutability or timelessness; it allows of a peace of God, and a Divine perfectness of life, which is compatible with active energizing—'My Father worketh hitherto . . .' Constancy and stability 'with no shadow of turning' may be marks of the Eternal, however; and it is not so much lapse of time, unending or otherwise, but the quality of the filling of time, and beatific absorption in the fulness of each successive present moment, that are the marks of the eternal.

Possibly at bottom, these last two meanings of 'eternity' meet and become one. For it may well be that what is of highest value is so because it most truly is, or is noumenal. But whether as ultimately one and the same, or as two distinct yet congruent conceptions, these last two meanings of the word 'eternal' are alone compatible with Christian theology, and are at the same time exegetically most probably the true interpretations of the scriptural term.

In the Study.

Rahab.

'By faith Rahab the harlot perished not with them that were disobedient, having received the spies with peace.'—Heb. 11³¹.

I.

Rahab's Hospitality.

1. Ancient Jericho stood in a beautiful, well-watered oasis between the pass up to Jerusalem on the south and the passes of Benjamin towards Bethel on the north. Surrounded by rocky ravines and desert, it was itself wooded with palms. And as it commanded the fords of the Jordan, it lay on a trade route in that busy and mercantile country, where merchants would constantly be travelling from Babylon and the other Mesopotamian cities

to the rich Phœnician cities on the coast, or to Uru-salim, and the Chabiri, and the great frontier towns on the way down to Egypt. It was a wealthy town (Jos 7²¹), splendid with the merchandise of the East and the West. From the mound of ruins which marks its site we cannot estimate its extent, and nothing in the narrative of Joshua gives us any indication. But the ruins of its immemorial walls quite justify the description that the Canaanite towns were built up to heaven, and enable us to understand how houses could stand upon the rampart broad as a street.

Upon the great wall of the city of Jericho, no doubt near to the eastern gate, there was what was called in Athens a thousand years later a *Hetera*. The harlot's name was Rahab. There has been