

“UNTO THE AGES OF AGES”:
ONE GREEK PHRASE AND THE ETERNAL
DURATION OF ESCHATOLOGICAL TORMENT

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And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. (Rev 20:10)

Rev 20:10 describes the fate awaiting those (specifically the dragon, beast, and false prophet) who descend into “the lake of fire and sulfur,” elsewhere referred to as “the second death” (Rev 20:14). To define the duration of their torment, John uses an emphatic Greek phrase translated “forever and ever” (“εις τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων”). Commenting on Rev 20:10, Alan Gomes notes,

In the most emphatic language possible, we are told that the torment is unending. When we considered Matthew 25:46 above, we noted that *aionos* can, in some contexts, qualify nouns of limited duration... But here, we find the emphatic forms *eis aionas aionon* and *eis tous aionas ton aionon* (“unto the ages of the ages”). This construction is only used to describe unending duration. As Sasse points out, the “twofold use of the term [*aionios*]” is designed “to emphasize the concept of eternity.” The fact that the forms used are plural in number further reinforces the idea of never-ending duration. Speaking of the Greek construction in this verse, the great biblical commentator R. C. H. Lenski observes: “The strongest expression for our ‘forever’ is *eis tous aionan ton aionon*, ‘for the eons of eons’; many aeons, each of vast duration, are multiplied by many more, which we imitate by ‘forever and ever.’ Human language is able to use only temporal terms to express what is altogether beyond time and timeless. The Greek takes its greatest term for time, the eon, pluralizes this, and then multiplies it by its own plural, even using articles which make these eons the definite ones.” (Gomes 18)

The Biblical evidence aptly supports Gomes’ conclusion. Vine’s Expository Dictionary lists sixteen times instances of the phrase in the Greek New Testament, most of which appear in Revelation. In all these texts, the phrase only denotes an eternal (unending) duration. Accordingly,

Biblical writers most often apply the phrase to a divine subject, though John uses it of humans as well (when predicting eschatological destiny).

Most often, the phrase concludes doxologies, expressing the desire that the glory, honor, or dominion due God endure eternally (Gal 1:5; Phil 4:20; 1 Tim 1:17; 2 Tim 4:18; Heb 13:21; 1 Pet 4:11; 5:11; Rev 1:6; 5:13; 7:12). Other texts use the phrase descriptively, so that it defines the duration of either God's life (Rev 1:18; 4:10; 10:6; 15:7) or the kingdom He shares with the saints (Rev 11:15; 22:5). Concerning human destiny, the phrase describes the length of time smoke ascends from Babylon (Rev 19:3).

A few related phrases (appearing only once in the Biblical text) are also worthy of notice: “εις τοὺς αἰῶνας αἰῶνων” (Rev 14:11); “εις τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ αἰῶνος” (Heb 1:8); “εις πάσας τὰς γενεὰς τοῦ αἰῶνος τῶν αἰῶνων” (Eph 3:21); and “εις/ πρὸ πάντας τοὺς αἰῶνας” (Jude 1:25). Two appear in doxologies (Eph 3:21; Jude 1:25); one describes the duration of God's reign (Heb 1:8). Finally, John uses one formula to describe the length of time the smoke ascending from the torment of those “who worshipped the beast” endures (Rev 14:11).

Adventists have noted certain weaknesses in arguments drawn from those texts using the motif of ascending smoke (Rev 14:11 and 19:3). By contrast, the text of Rev 20:10 conclusively asserts the duration—not of the *results* of the eschatological punishment—but of the eschatological torment itself. A phrase used only to express unlimited duration qualifies the prophetic utterance: “they will be tormented.” Thus, the torment of the devil, beast, and false prophet (and all sinners: Rev 14:11) is unending: the force and precision of John's language is, as Gomes asserts, “unambiguous, emphatic, and conclusive” (Gomes 18).

Work Cited

Gomes, Alan W. “Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell, Part One,” *Christian Research Journal* 13, no 4, Spring 1991.