‘ETERNITY REVISITED
A Study of the Greek Word αἰῶν

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The Greek word αἰῶν (αἰῶν) has a wide-ranging meaning as well as a wide-ranging history: it is most commonly translated as ‘eternity’ but has as its first meaning ‘life’ or ‘lifetime’; it has its place in Greek literature and philosophy, but also in the Greek Bible, where it represents the Hebrew word ‘olêm. In this article I intend to sketch the history of the meaning and interpretation of αἰῶν from the word’s first attestation in Homer up until the beginning of the Christian era. The expanded version of this study was defended as a doctoral dissertation, entitled Life Time Entity: A Study of ΑΙΩΝ in Greek Literature and Philosophy, the Septuagint and Philo, on 7 September 1999 at the University of Amsterdam.1

In what follows, I will first give a survey of the ‘history of αἰῶν’ as it emerges from the texts in which the word occurs (§1). Then I will single out a number of passages — from Plato, Aristotle, the Septuagint, and Philo of Alexandria — in which αἰῶν has a philosophical meaning or philosophical (and theological) implications: passages which lead us into reflections on what is usually called ‘eternity’ (§2). At the end (§3) I will gather some fruits of insight this study may offer in the field of reflection on ‘eternity’ and time, a field in which also the tradition of reformational philosophy has made its contributions.

1. ΑΙΩΝ in Greek Literature and Philosophy, the Septuagint and Philo

Let me start with the remark that my approach is primarily of a philological nature. I have examined (and discussed in my book) a large number of passages, each time establishing the meaning of αἰῶν on the basis of the context. I describe the history of the meanings of a word, and do not give a historical or systematic exposition of a concept (such as, for example, the concept of eternity).2 My work covers the literary or general, the philosophical, the ‘Septuagintal’, and Philo of Alexandria’s exegetical usage of αἰῶν. Thus, it does not include the usage of the word in the New Testament and the interpretation by the Church Fathers, nor its philosophical and religious meaning in the Greco-Roman period and the Gnostic usage. This later — and decisive — part of the history of αἰῶν is the subject matter of my ongoing research.

1 I am grateful to the editorial board of Philosophia Reformata for the opportunity given to me to present a summary of my research in its pages. The book is not for sale in the bookstore, but can be obtained from the author.

2 A word, in contradistinction to what I call a concept, normally has several meanings (connected to various usages); a concept in my definition conveys a single (univocal) idea, which sometimes cannot even be described by just one word.
Mine is certainly not the first study, nor the first dissertation, devoted to aiôn.\(^3\) Studies so far, however, have concentrated either on the ‘Greek’ or on the biblical meaning of the word, but have not made a balanced assessment of both side by side. With regard to the research done on either side, let me mention the following points of criticism. Expositions of ‘Greek’ aiôn either jump from the word’s first attested meaning, ‘life (time)’, to the (philosophical) concept of ‘eternity’ which then, without further explanation, is taken as a new meaning, or they limit themselves to the philosophical usage. Students of the biblical word aiôn pay little attention to the Septuagint usage of the word in its own right. Moreover, they tend to explain one of the usages (viz. the plural) and meanings (viz. ‘age’) of the word in both the Old and the New Testament with unwarranted appeal to extra-biblical usage of aiôn. With regard to Philo, the extent to which he takes into account the biblical meaning of aiôn (= ‘olâm) is not sufficiently recognized. Although my study indubitably will turn out to have its own limitations, what I have tried is to approach aiôn in a more consistent and comprehensive way.

The following survey presents my conclusions regarding the meaning of the word aiôn as it is used (a) in Greek literature in a non-philosophical way, (b) in Greek philosophy, (c) in the Septuagint, and (d) in Philo of Alexandria.

1a. Greek literature

The history of aiôn starts with aiôn being a word for ‘life’; indeed, in Homer aiôn is far from being a word for ‘time’ but rather has the connotation of ‘force of life’.\(^4\) A word with which aiôn in Homer is combined, is ἑστία. The Greek language has yet two other words to designate life: there is ζῶé, indicating the state of being alive (not yet in Homer), and ὑπόστασις, indicating the ways and means of maintaining that state. Thus while ζῶé refers to the life ‘bred’ and ὑπόστασις to the life ‘led’, aiôn can well be characterized as designating the life ‘had’.\(^5\) My


\(^4\) As regards etymology, the noun aiôn appears to be derived from the Indo-European root *ₐzw-, to which etymologists have attributed the meaning ‘force of life’ or ‘duration (of life)’ or both. The Latin word aevus/aevum has the same root, as does, e.g., English age and Dutch eeuw (age; century).

\(^5\) Two thirds of this formulation I owe to C.S. Lewis, Studies in Words (Cambridge, 1967) 218 (here not talking about aiôn): “life’, taken not as the life ‘led’ but as the life ‘had’, so that it is almost synonymous with lot or future.”
investigation of 

\[ \text{aiôn} \]

in Greek literature from Homer to Hellenism has shown me a coherent complex of meaning of the word, which turned out to be built up from the following three notions: 'life', 'time', and what I call 'completeness', 'wholeness', or 'entirety'. \( \text{aiôn} \) refers to 'life' as a 'whole' of 'time' — hence, besides 'lifetime' it can also designate life's 'lot'. Highly illustrative of the meaning of \( \text{aiôn} \) is a passage in Euripides' \textit{Supplices} (line 1084). Here one of the personages heaves the sigh that something done wrong in daily life ('at home') can easily be rectified, "but \( \text{aiôn} \) it is not possible to rectify". \( \text{aiôn} \) is 'complete' or 'completed' life. From the tragedians onwards, the word is frequently used also to designate '(all) time' without the notion of 'life' playing a discernible part; the notion of 'completeness' or 'whole', however, remains attached to it in that usage. It is remarkable that only very rarely we find the word in the plural, viz. twice in Empedocles (5th cent. BC) and once in the Hellenistic poet Theocritus (3rd cent. BC; the next time is in Flavius Josephus, 1st cent. AD): in all of these three cases it conveys the meaning of '(successive) generations'. Especially this last meaning may make one expect to find \( \text{aiôn} \) used in the sense of a historical 'age' named after someone living (e.g. the 'Augustan age') — as alleged by C. Lackeit (1916) and also by G. Zuntz (1992). I have not, however, found this borne out in the texts. The same holds for the interpretation of \( \text{aiôn} \) as 'period of time': I conclude that insofar as 'period' designates for us a 'part' of time, it is not an adequate interpretation. \( \text{aiôn} \) denotes 'time' always in the sense of 'all time'; it denotes a 'part' of time only in the sense of either (all time of) the future, or (all time of) the past. According to the presentation of Lackeit, the meaning of \( \text{aiôn} \) developed from relatively small ('life') to bigger ('period'), big ('long time'), and biggest ('eternity'). This is a logical line of argument, but the purported development of meaning is not supported by the actual texts. My investigation suggests that 'period' is, so to speak, an 'anachronistic' meaning — and that the same holds true for 'eternity'.\footnote{The interpretation in terms of 'period' or definable 'age' feeds on the biblical usage: notably the biblical use of \( \text{aiôn} \) in the plural (but see my remark in §1c) and, more importantly still, on the New Testament speaking of 'the present \( \text{aiôn} \) (\(< \text{'olâm}>\)) and 'the \( \text{aiôn} \) (\(< \text{'olâm}>\) to come' (although here too the two \( \text{aiôn} \)s are not just two successive 'ages'). For 'eternity' as an anachronistic meaning see §3.} So far, we have been offered an understanding of \( \text{aiôn} \) comprising the notions of life, time, and whole (entirety). For the meaning of \( \text{aiôn} \) in terms of eternity we will have to turn to philosophical texts.

1b. Greek philosophy

Gathering my conclusions about the role allotted to \( \text{aiôn} \) successively in the philosophy of Empedocles, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoa and Epicurus, I observe that this role is a cosmological one. In Empedocles (fragment B16 Diels-Kranz) we seem to meet \( \text{aiôn} \) for the first time on a cosmic scale as the 'life' of the cosmos, coinciding with the whole of time. For Plato (discussed in more detail in §2a), \( \text{aiôn} \) — usually translated 'eternity' — is the unitary whole of
‘life (time)’ on the intelligible level, which *chronos* (time) displays or ‘counts out’ on the sensible level. In Plato for the first time we find *aiônios* as the adjective form of *aiôn* (‘aiônic’). Aristotle (more about him in §2b) defines *aiôn* as that which encompasses the infinite time of the cosmos, in analogy of *aiôn* as that which encompasses the time of an individual person’s life; the particular term Aristotle uses here is *telos* (‘the telos encompassing the time...’). In Plato’s system, *aiôn* is reserved for the intelligible, transcendent world; in Aristotle, *aiôn* (called divine, and as *telos* touching upon the first, transcendent, principle) is the comprising sum of the immanent, sensible world of time itself. Plato and Aristotle in their various ways position *aiôn* on a superior level from which it gives ‘meaning’ to time.7 The Hellenistic philosophies of the Stoa and Epicurus, by contrast, do not assume distinct levels of reality, hence *aiôn* in their thought does not have a (transcendent) position above (immanent) time; to the extent that they use the word in a philosophical sense or context, *aiôn* is time on the cosmic scale, time which manifests itself to the eyes of man as infinite.

My examination of the expression ‘from *aiôn* for/to *aiôn*’ as found in pseudo-Philolaus, Marcus Aurelius8 and the treatise *On the cosmos* (transmitted under the name of Aristotle but of much-disputed authorship and date; the Latin title is *De mundo*) led me to the conclusion that this expression means ‘since all (infinite) time and for all (infinite) time’.9 This in spite of the resemblance to expressions like ‘from age to age’ or ‘age after age’. In Greek philosophical reflection we find neither the plural of *aiôn* nor the suggestion of a possible plural. Accordingly, we do not find *aiôn* in the sense of ‘age’ or ‘world-period’. *Aiôn* is the entirety of the time that is concurrent with the universe.

There are no indications that the term *aiôn* in Greek sources dating from the period I have considered was charged with ‘oriental’ notions — as was certainly the case later on, when the term came to be used in the syncretistic environment of the Greco-Roman world. Regarding Greek sources, however, I have so far left out of account an important body of Greek texts: texts which do have *aiôn* with an ‘oriental’ meaning, since the word is used to represent the Hebrew word *olâm*. I am speaking of the Septuagint, which must now be discussed.

1c. The Septuagint

The Greek Old Testament or ‘Septuagint’ consists in the first place of the Pentateuch (the five Mosaic books), which was translated by Jewish translators in Alexandria in the first half of the third century BC.10 In the second place the

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7 Thus I would like to say, taking an anachronistic stance, that the Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of *aiôn* refer to what in Dutch can be called ‘de *zin van de tijd*’.
8 Marcus Aurelius (AD 121-180) is of a much later period than the one I have considered in this study, but he is relevant for reasons of comparison.
9 As holds true also for the parallel expression in the Septuagint, for which see §2c.
10 Latin *septuaginta* = ‘seventy’ (also indicated by LXX), after the seventy translators as tradition has it.
Septuagint corpus comprises the Prophets and the other canonical books; these were translated after the Pentateuch, in the third and second centuries BC. It also includes translations of non-canonical Hebrew or Aramaic books (e.g., Tobit, Sirach), and, finally, some books not translated but originally composed in Greek (e.g., Wisdom). All books that are translations of Hebrew (or Aramaic) originals show, notwithstanding their diversity in translation techniques, an invariable pattern: they use the Greek words αἰôν and αἰôνιος as standard equivalent of the Hebrew word ḍôtám (and Aramaic ḫâlûm). In the Septuagint αἰôν thus is a ‘stereotyped’ rendering of ḍôtám — ‘stereotyping’ being a common phenomenon in Septuagint translation. In order, then, to understand the meaning of αἰôν in the Septuagint I have first investigated the meaning of ḍôtám.12

In the Hebrew Bible, the word ḍôtâm (and ḫâlûm) is used either adverbially or adnominally,13 but never as a subject or object of a sentence — with one notable exception: namely, the famous passage of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes 3:11, where ḍôtâm is the direct object in a sentence (and has the definite article). There we find something which comes closest to an explicit reflection on ḍôtâm: God has given the ḍôtâm in the hearts of men. Having investigated the meaning of ḍôtâm in all of the Hebrew Bible, I have come to the following definition: ḍôtâm is time constituting the temporal horizon of created life (men) in the created world. This horizon can be far (e.g., the remote past, Genesis 6:4) and rather near (e.g. the end of one’s life, Exodus 21:6), purposed-but-postponed (“life for-Ḥôtâm”, Genesis 3:22) as well as decided-but-diminished (“until ḍôtâm ... until ...,”, Isaiah 32:14-15). In its widest sense ḍôtâm describes all time, i.e., time as given with creation (e.g. Psalm 90:2; see also §2c). To say the same in other words: ḍôtâm designates time of which the limit is not known, in the sense either that the limit, though sure, cannot be fixed (Exodus 21:6, Isaiah 32:14-15), or that a limit is not to be envisaged (e.g. Psalm 89). In practice, we may render ḍôtâm most often by ‘all time’, ‘always’,14 ‘ever’. The plural, ḣâlûmîm, has a dividing-and-multiplying, that is, intensifying import. God is called the Rock of ḣâlûmîm (Isaiah 26:4), but also God of ḍôtâm (Isaiah 40:28). His kingdom is a kingdom of all ḣâlûmîm (Psalm 145:13). We do not find in the contexts in which the plural occurs any indication that it implies a restricted meaning of the singular, i.e., that ḣâlûmîm denotes a plurality of distinct ‘ages’. Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is any distinct ḍôtâm set against another distinct one — as will happen later, notably in the New Testament.

11 The Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible has 439 instances (in 430 phrases) of the noun ḍôtâm and 29 instances (in 17 phrases) of ḫâlûm. In only 17 cases the Septuagint does not have αἰôν or αἰôνιος as translation of ḍôtâm. An appendix to my dissertation lists all instances of ḍôtâm (and ḫâlûm) and αἰôνιος in the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint.

12 Ṣôtâm and ḫâlûm may etymologically be related to the Hebrew root ‘lm, ‘to be concealed’.

13 I.e., either in an adverbial phrase such as l’Ḥôtâm (“for ḍôtâm” — this most frequently) or as a genitive with the function more of less of an adjective (e.g. “covenant of ḍôtâm” > “everlasting covenant”, Gen.9:16).

14 The Dutch equivalent of ‘always’ is nicely altijd: literally ‘all-time’.
To say that 'olām is something like a horizon does justice to the fact that the word is always used in an adverbial or adjectival (i.e., so to say, 'surrounding') way. The term ‘horizon’ as such denotes the outermost limit of our view.\(^\text{15}\) The definition of ‘olām as ‘time that constitutes the horizon’ is meant to be taken to include all time which is contained within or reaches up to that horizon: ‘olām includes what is inside the — always receding — borderline. The definition is perfectly in line with Qohelet 3:11 (“the ‘olām given in their hearts”) and its context. That context brings out that the ‘olām is the maximum of what is given to the human view. Human beings are aware that there is also a ‘beyond’, but this indeed is beyond their view: it is God’s domain (“the work of God from beginning to end”, as Qohelet 3:11 calls it).

Comparing at this point the meaning of ‘olām in the Hebrew Bible with the meaning of aiōn in Greek literature, we observe that aiōn has several connotations without parallel in ‘olām. The meaning of aiōn is constituted by the notions of ‘life’, ‘time’, and ‘whole’; an ensuing connotation was that of a defined life’s ‘lot’. The word ‘olām by itself does not convey a notion of ‘life’. Moreover, although both ‘olām and aiōn denote time which bears relation to life, the implied ‘views’ of time (and life) are different. E. Jenni (1976) called ‘olām an Extrembegriff. I suggest that aiōn, then, might rather be called a Totalbegriff. In aiōn, life and time is seen as a whole (total, complete), which implies a view ‘from outside’. ‘Olām too refers to all of time, but seen as constituting the temporal and human horizon, which implies a view ‘from inside’. While aiōn can stand for a determined life’s ‘lot’, ‘olām is the ‘scope’ for life to be full.

The Septuagint, as noted, consistently renders ‘olām (and ‘ēlam) by either aiōn or aiōnios. But not only ‘olām itself, also the embedding phrases or syntactic constructions in the Hebrew are consistently reflected in the Greek version. Some Greek renderings reproduce the original in such a way that we must call them Hebraisms. For example, also the use of aiōn in the plural, reflecting the plural of ‘olām/‘ēlam in the original, can be considered a Hebraism, since in the Septuagint corpus it is far more frequent than in the contemporary, non-biblical Greek language. When the Greek renderings of ‘olām-verbs diverge from the Hebrew constructions (e.g. in the use of the definite article where the Hebrew does not have one)\(^\text{16}\), this is usually due to the rules of the Greek language and does not interfere in the conveyed sense of aiōn = ‘olām. Sometimes, however, the divergence is due to the conscious choice of translators and is intended to bring out an aspect of aiōn which either may or may not also apply to ‘olām. An example of the prior is the strange phrase eis to aiōna chronon (literally “for/into the aiōn time”, e.g. Isaiah 9:7); a significant example of the latter will be discussed in §2c: aiōn used in a way which goes beyond the usage of ‘olām.

\(^{15}\) Greek horizon [kuklos] = ‘delimiting [circle]’.

\(^{16}\) As in eis to aiōna = le‘olām. The phrase eis to aiōna does not occur in earlier Greek literature and is probably coined by the Septuagint translators. In the Septuagint it is the most frequently occurring aiōn-phrase.
An important expression in the Septuagint is *theos aiônios* (‘aiônic God’), which is a translation of “God of ‘olâm” (Genesis 21:33, Isaiah 40:28). Whereas the Greek expression easily elicits an interpretation in terms of eternity as a property of God, it is worthwhile to notice that the Septuagint renders the same title also as “God of the aiôn” (LXX-version of Daniel 5:4, Sinaiticus-version of Tobit 14:6), even “God of the aiôn” (Sirach 36:17[22]). The Bible, I observe, does not speak in terms of the ‘eternity of God’, only about the God of eternity — if indeed we choose to use the latter term to represent ‘olâm/ aiôn. Inasmuch as there are biblical passages which refer to what we may call the ‘eternity of God’, they describe with the terms aiôn and aiônios God’s presence and power in all time (Isaiah 40:28, Psalm 90[58]:2). Psalm 90[89]:4 refers to God’s superiority over time, but without using ‘olâm/ aiôn. Aiôn is bound up with creation; ‘God Eternal’ is He who is God above and in all time, He who never at any time lets down his creation. Instead of ‘eternity’, we may call the ‘olâm/aiôn the ‘entirety’ of time. With regard to the notion of infinity the following can be said. The first ‘olâm/aiôn-text in the Old Testament, Genesis 3:22, shows life (Hebr. *chái*, which is life in full force and well-being) as having the implied purpose of being without death and hence of being “for ‘olâm/aiôn”. Thus, when ‘olâm/aiôn represents ‘world without end’ this is due not to the very nature and definition of ‘olâm/aiôn but to the prospect of the extinction of death.

1d. Philo of Alexandria

In Philo of Alexandria (ca. 15 BC – AD 50) we meet a Jewish exegete and philosopher whose native tongue was Greek (he probably did not know Hebrew) and whose project was to interpret the Holy Scriptures (which for him was the Septuagint, and primarily the Pentateuch) in such terms as were communicable in the Hellenistic intellectual milieu to which he belonged. Philo is a valuable source for a study of the meaning and the early interpretation of the words aiôn and aiônios as they are used both in the Scriptures and in Greek philosophy. Since Philo is an exegete, a first distinction suggests itself: namely, between Philo’s own usage of aiôn/aiônios and his exegesis of these words when he finds them in the biblical text. Hence the question may be raised: is there a difference between the meaning of aiôn and aiônios when Philo uses these words on his own account and the meaning which he ascribes to them when they occur in a biblical passage which he is exegeting? I did indeed find a difference inasmuch as Philo himself uses aiôn in a philosophical sense. I label as philosophical a usage of aiôn which explicitly places the term in a particular relationship with chronos; a specific form of this philosophical usage is the Platonizing usage, in which aiôn is attributed to the intelligible and chronos to the material world. The interesting thing is, that Philo in my view was sensitive to and respected the difference between the philosophical and

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17 In Philo’s extensive extant Greek oeuvre we find 76 instances of aiôn (4 of which in biblical quotations) and 29 of aiônios (6 in biblical quotations). An appendix to my dissertation lists and categorizes them all.
bibal meaning of aion. I infer his sensitivity from the fact that he himself never introduces the word in a philosophical sense when dealing with a biblical text containing aion or aiônios, but only when dealing with particular biblical expressions of time which lack these words. Biblical texts containing aiôn(tios) certainly do occasion him to speak of aion, but not in a philosophical, let alone Platonic, sense (see §2d).

When Philo uses aion on his own account, the word has as a rule the meaning of ‘(all) time’; in four (or even eight) cases the right translation is ‘(all) life’ or ‘lifet ime’. Normally, aion in this usage is unthematized and has a non-technical meaning, though less so when Philo in three passages evaluates ‘life’ and ‘day’ alongside aion. These three passages show once more that the notions constituting the meaning of aion are life, time, and a certain wholeness (represented by ‘day’). 18

Biblical aiôn(tios) is understood by Philo as denoting time which has an intrinsic relation to man and to the created world as a whole; this holds true also where aiônios pertains to God. As is apparent from his paraphrases and exegeses, the noun aion in the Greek Bible for Philo means: ‘all (continuous) time’. 19 The biblical adjective aiônios for him generally means: ‘all time enduring’, also ‘immortal’; 20 applied to God, it is explained by Philo as referring to God’s incessant care for his creation; 21 and applied to God’s name as designating that this name pertains to ‘the aion related to us (men)’. 22

As we noted, it is not the occurrence of aiôn(tios) in a biblical text that moves Philo to start speaking of aion in a philosophical way, but other temporal expressions in Scripture, such as ‘today’, ‘three days’, and ‘three years’, do. Philo interprets these expressions in an allegorical way as referring to ‘the aion’ or ‘the whole aion’. In its turn, the aion is equated with ‘all time (chronos)’ or ‘the whole of time’, which is also ‘tripartite time’ (past, present and future). More specifically, the aion is explained as time seen in its oneness, viz. represented by the sun (and by ‘today’). 23 Another temporal expression, viz. ‘the other year’, instigates Philo to speak of aion in an unmistakably Platonicizing way. Distinguishing between the material and the higher, invisible world, he locates chronos in the former and elevates aion to the latter. 24 The most philosophical and Platonic treatment of aion, finally, is found in Philo’s treatise

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18 Jos. 24: “even the longest-lived is short-lived when measured against aion”; Spec. 1.170: “the seventh day ... the birthday of the whole cosmos [is] of equal value to aion”; Qf 2.20 “each day of a wise man is of equal value to aion”.
19 Gig. 19-20 (discussing Gen.6:3, which contains the phrase eis ton aionan); LA 3.198-199 (Exod.21:5-6, eis ton eionan); Plant. 51 and 53 (Exod.15:18, ton aionan kai ep’ aionan kai eti).
20 LA 3.199; Fug. 78.
21 Plant. 89 (discussing Gen.21:33, theon aiônous).
22 ABL 4:16; Mut. 12 (for this text see §2d). Both passages discuss Exod.3:15.
23 LA 3.25 (discussing Gen.35:4, which contains the word ‘today’); Fug. 57 (Deut.4:4, ‘today’: ‘the truthful name of aion is ‘today’. For the sun does not change but is always the same, going now above now below the earth; and through it day and night, the measures of aion, are distinguished’); Socr. 47 (Gen.50:36, ‘three days’); Plant. 116 (Lev.19:23, ‘three years’); Her.165 (Gen.1:3-13, the two times three days of creation). In the last-mentioned passage Philo hints already at a Platonic distinction between aion and chronos.
24 Mut. 267 (discussing Gen.17:21, ‘the other year’): “Aion is the description of the life (bios) of the intelligible cosmos, as time (chronos) is of the perceptible.”
On the unchangeableness of God, Philo asserts here that the intelligible world, including ‘the archetype and paradigm of time’ = αἰῶν, stays in the presence of God as his ‘elder son’. He continues: “in αἰῶν nothing is past nor will be future, but it is only in a present state”. This statement is quoted by some scholars as evidence of Philo’s familiarity with the conception of ‘non-durational eternity’. It is indicative of the elusiveness of the subject, however, that another scholar takes αἰῶν, where Philo relates it to the intelligible realm, precisely to mean ‘duration’. In my view, Philo’s point in this passage — the treatise centers on the concept of the unchangeableness of God — is not to develop a notion of ‘non-durational’ or ‘atemporal eternity’ but to stress that ‘in αἰῶν’ there is no change: all the more, so Philo argues, must God, who is above αἰῶν, be free from change. Aί翁 thus represents the unchanging aspect of time. It is located here in the intelligible world, and for Philo, the intelligible world no less than the perceptible is created by God. Aί翁 is not, therefore, the life of God, as a double text emendation in this passage has led scholars to believe. I conclude that in whatever way Philo uses or interprets αἰῶν or αἰῶνιος, the words refer to what belongs to the created realm.

2. Philosophical and biblical αἰῶν

The preceding survey of the history of the word αἰῶν up to and including Philo was necessarily concise and inevitably unsatisfactory; it offers the reader more statements than arguments. The present section is meant to make up for this deficiency, although here too the exposition will be succinct and, as far as the Greek is concerned, restricted. For this section I have selected those passages from Plato and Aristotle which have been decisive for the philosophical meaning of αἰῶν, as well as such passages from the Septuagint and Philo as to give an exciting example of the biblical usage of the word (making discernable Hebrew and Greek aspects).

2a. Aί翁 in Plato’s Timaeus

The Timaeus, one of Plato’s most famous dialogues, offers an account of the nature and ‘genesis’ of the universe and of man. This account is set in the broader context of a discussion about what might be the ideal society. The dialogue ends by exhorting us to lift up our heads towards the heavens, in order to contemplate and absorb the heavens’ perfect, harmonious revolutions and thereby to “attain to that end (telos) of life which is set before men by the gods as the best both for the present and for the time to come” (Tim. 90d5-7). According to Plato, the universe, especially in its wonderful aspect of the starry

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25 Deus 32.
26 Together with Fug. 57, quoted in n. 23.
27 Cf. Whittaker (see n. 3) 12 and 386. (non-durational) with E. Starobinski-Safran, De fuga et inventione, Les oeuvres de Philon d’Alexandrie (Paris, 1970) 77 n. 1 (duration).
28 The manuscript reading di’ hōn ho bios estin autōn in Deus 32 has been emended to αἰῶν ho bios estin autōn and interpreted as “αἰῶν is His [God’s] life”.

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heavens, tells us how we are to live, individually as well as in society. It is in this setting that Timaeus (the main speaker in the dialogue) offers his creation account, including his discussion of time (chronos) and aión. According to the most common interpretation, in the Timaeus Plato made aión mean ‘eternity’ as opposed to ‘time’. But what Plato meant by this ‘eternity’ is a matter of dispute. Our current notion of ‘eternity’, generally suggesting something like endlessness or timelessness, came about through the development after Plato up to our own time, and it may well be that it does little justice to what Plato really meant. I have attempted to come to a fresh understanding of philosophical aión in the Timaeus by taking as my starting-point aión’s basic, non-philosophical meaning ‘life (time)’ — which meaning is present also in Plato.29

The following passage from the Timaeus is the crucial one as far as aión is concerned. Timaeus is speaking of the ‘demiurge’ (artificer) who is making the material cosmos, also called the All, after a perfect immaterial, intelligible model. The model belongs to the realm of ‘being’ which has no ‘becoming’ (genesis) — a basic distinction in Plato’s thought. It is from this passage that almost all scholars start translating aión by ‘eternity’. Timaeus 37d:

As this [model] now is in fact an everlasting (aìdion) Living Being, he set out to finish also the All around us so far as possible like that. Now the nature of the Living Being happened to be aιònic (aïónic), and it was not possible to bestow that completely on what is generated; but he thought to make an image in motion of aión, and in the very act of setting the heavens in order, he made of aión, which remains at one, an aïónic image which proceeds according to number: that which we have named time (chronos).

The context in which the term aión is introduced here points out two aspects of the universe, namely an aspect of ‘life’ and one of ‘completeness’: this may help us understand the term. Greek literature has shown us aión to designate ‘life’ in a ‘complete’ sense. Timaeus declares both the model and the copy universe to be a living being (consisting of body and soul), and at issue is the finishing touch which will make the created universe complete or perfect (on the level, that is, of the copy, which never attains to the level of the model). This finishing touch should bestow an ‘aïonic’ aspect on creation, resulting in what we call time.

It is worthwhile to note that Plato in this passage, far from treating time as a negative aspect of the material world, sees it as adding to the completeness of this world as a successful copy of the immaterial one. This attitude towards the role of time, maintained in Timaeus’ subsequent discourse, is in contrast to evaluations of time as a principle of decay and futility.

Also remarkable in our passage is, that of the two instances of the adjective aïónios the first applies to the model and the second to the copy. This has troubled commentators who considered aïonic as a property of the model qua model, and interpreted it as ‘eternal’ in the sense of ‘supra-temporal’ (which practically amounts to non-temporal), while the corresponding property of the copy would precisely be its temporality. Along this line of thought, aión and chronos tend to be contraries: something, however, which is hard to reconcile

29 Prot. 345c, Gorg. 448c, and Leg. III 701c.
with their relationship as model and copy. As it is, in the context of Plato’s doctrine of Ideas it need not be a problem that model and copy are both called *aiônīc*, since according to this doctrine both the Idea in the intelligible realm and its representation in the material world bear the same name: Good and good, Horse and horse, etc. This point is made explicit in *Timaeus* 52a5, where the copy is said to be ‘homonymous’ with the model. Thus, when the model is called *aiônīc*, the copy can be predicated accordingly. But we may note that although the copy is called *aiônīc* (the derived adjective), we never find it called *aiôn* (the noun).

The demiurge makes an image of *aiôn*, let us say: of ‘lifetime’. This lifetime is qualified as ‘remaining at one’ — a qualification in ready agreement with *aiôn*’s connotation of completeness or wholeness. By contrast, the image/copy (time) is said to be ‘in motion’ and ‘proceeding according to number’. Further on in the dialogue the difference between the copy and the model is once more explained as one between movement and immovability: something ‘proceeding in time’ and involved with ‘motions’ is opposed to something ‘unmovingly staying the same’ (37e5–38a8). Thus, while time and the heavens imply motion, *aiôn* according to Plato implies rest. Motion involves plurality of (places and hence of) number, but rest represents the unity of the One. That which is counted out in the orderly movement of time remains a resting ‘whole of life’ in the invisible world.

Two scholars, G. Böhme (1974) and R. Brague (1982), have already emphasized the importance of the notion of ‘life’ for our understanding of *aiôn* in Plato. As Böhme asserts, *aiôn* (*Lebenskraft, Leben, Lebenszeit*) is not at all a fitting term to express what is outside time (das *Ausszeitliche*); we should understand *aiôn* in the *Timaeus* as temporality *par excellence*. Time is the ‘unfolding’ of *aiôn*.

We have seen that in the Greek word *aiôn* the notion of life, in which time is implied, is linked with that of wholeness or completeness. The *Timaeus* applies *aiôn* and *aiônios* exclusively and systematically on the scale of the cosmos (the model as well as the copy) as a whole. Wholeness/completeness includes here perfection. When we look at the wonderful starry image above our heads and see the heavens’ rational order, movement and numbers, which is what we call time, Plato wants us to see this as the representation of *aiôn*. Interpreted in this way, time may be regarded as setting out fullness or completeness rather than duration or infinity. It is certainly ‘according to’ duration, succession and even infinity that time fulfills its role, but this role consists in displaying ‘life/time-completeness’.

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30 The question of Böhme (see n. 3) 73 is to the point: “Wäre es nicht absurd innerhalb des Kosmos ausgerechnet in der Zeit die Darstellung der Überzeitlichkeit suchen zu wollen?”.
31 Böhme (see n. 3) 74.
32 Böhme (see n. 3) 95.
33 *Tim.* 39d: the material universe “as like as possible to the perfect (*teles*) and intelligible Living Being.” Cf. in 57d, quoted in the text, *apotelein* (‘to complete’) and *pantelôs* (‘complete-ly’), words of the same root. Aristotle will speak of *telos* (see below, §2b).
34 Our passage, 37d, speaks of ‘proceeding’ and ‘according to (kata) number’.
35 The 5th cent. AD neoplatonist Damascius in his commentary in *Platonis Parmenidem c.* 139 equates Platonic *aiôn* with *holôs kai zôe*, ‘wholeness/totality and life’.
Earlier in the dialogue, Timaeus has stated that the universe lives forever without end. We find this in 36c, when Timaeus has narrated the compounding of the body and soul of the material cosmos, which thus became a living being. He then declares that this compounding accounted for the "divine start of an unceasing and intelligent life (bios) for all time (chronos)". Subsequently, in 37d which I have discussed here, time is credited with a relationship with aiôn. This suggests that we should not so much interpret Plato's aiôn in terms of chronos (supra-temporal, durational or non-durational, etc.), but rather chronos in terms of aiôn.

The visible cosmos is regarded by Plato as a living being (zôion) with a body, a soul (psuchê) and a life (bios) for all time (chronos), and considered to be a copy of the everlasting (aiôn) Living Being. We have here a complete list of Greek words which together constitute the semantic field of aiôn. Greek language and thought knows of every human being's psuchê, zôi, bios and aiôn. For Plato, psuchê, zôi and bios pertain also to the cosmic being — and so should aiôn. Only then is the picture complete. The aiôn of the (ideal) cosmos is lifetime as a completeness and this is what gives the time of our (material) world its form.

2b. Aiôn in Aristotle’s De caelo

In the first book of De caelo, chapter 9, Aristotle offers an almost lexicographic description of what the word aiôn in his view conveys. De caelo, in Greek Peri ouranou, is a work on physics, dealing with cosmology: Aristotle uses the word ouranos (Lat. caelum) not only to designate the heavens but also the cosmos, or universe. The universe, Aristotle argues in I 9, is made of the totality of matter, and so ‘outside the universe’ there is neither matter nor what is associated with matter, viz. space and time. When Aristotle subsequently talks about the things or beings ‘over there’, De caelo as a work on physics touches upon the divine: it appears to refer to the prime, unmoved Mover, also elaborated as a plurality of unmoved Movers, which is the divine transcendent principle discussed by Aristotle in book XII, chapters 6-8, of his Metaphysics. I now quote De caelo I 9 279a18-30:

> Therefore, those-over-there are not such as to be in place, nor does time cause them to age, nor does change work in any way upon any of those that are arrayed beyond the outermost motion: unalterable and impassive, in having the best and most self-sufficient life (zôê) they continue (throughout) the whole aiôn.

Indeed, that name [sc. aiôn] has been divinely uttered by the ancients.

. For the completion (telos) which encompasses the time of everyone’s life (zôê), which cannot in nature be exceeded, has been named everyone’s aiôn.

. Along the same line of thought also the completion of the whole universe, the completion which encompasses time as a whole and infinity, is aiôn, having taken the name from aei einai [to be always], being immortal and divine.

From there depends for all other things, for some more directly, for others more obscurely, being and life (zôê).
Directing our attention to the digression on the word *aiôn* (a22-28), we observe that it is elicited by the statement that those outside the universe “continue (diatela) in having the best and most self-sufficient life (zôê) throughout the whole *aiôn*” (a21). The expression ‘throughout the whole *aiôn*’ (*ton hapanta aiôna*) is in itself not philosophical or technical; we find it in Greek literature alternating with ‘throughout the whole of time’ (*ton hapanta chronon*). Indeed, the verb *diatela* occurs in Aristotle also construed with the latter expression and with other phrases carrying the word *chronos*. Using now the variant expression ‘throughout the whole *aiôn*’, Aristotle finds almost 'by surprise' an occasion to reflect on *aiôn* in a philosophical way: a way which distinguishes it from *chronos*. In the immediately following digression *aiôn* is defined in terms of time and life. The focus of the definition, moreover, is the notion of *telos* just as it is absent from zôê (and bios).

Aristotle’s first definition of *aiôn*, “the *telos* which encompasses the time of everyone’s life”, fits in perfectly with what I have indicated above as characterizing *aiôn* in earlier writers (‘the ancients’), viz. that the word refers to a person’s life as a complete (d) whole with the inherent aspect of time. Aristotle subsequently points out that *aiôn*, thus defined, applies to the entire cosmos as well — in doing so he implicitly follows Plato.

That *telos* in the present discourse is something like ‘completion’ is brought out by its being qualified as ‘encompassing’ (*periechon*) in the above passage (and again in *De caelo* I 1 283b30). The word *telos* is of the same root as *teleos*, ‘complete’ or ‘perfect’. In Aristotle’s (teleological) philosophy *telos* is also the term for the final ‘end’ to which everything in the universe strives: the ‘end’ which in the ultimate sense is the Prime Mover itself.

At the start of the second book of *De caelo*, Aristotle summarizes what he has demonstrated in the first book. I quote *De caelo* I 1 283b26-30:

> the universe as a whole neither has come into being nor admits of destruction, as some assert that it does, but is one and everlasting (*aiôdios*) with no beginning or end (*teleutê* of the (/its) whole *aiôn*, but containing and encompassing in itself the infinite time (*chronos*).

From this passage it is unambiguously clear that *aiôn* applies to the universe itself. The earlier quoted passage, by contrast, is ambiguous: *aiôn* in its capacity of *telos* can be considered also as belonging to the level of the transcendent,

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57 It is, moreover, defined here as ‘which cannot in nature be exceeded’: in *De caelo* II 4 286b18 this is the definition of *teleson*, i.e. the ‘complete’ or ‘perfect’. See also *Met.* V 16 and X 4.531 1055a14-17.

58 Aristotle speaks of *telos* (the *causa finalis* or to *hê monos*) also elsewhere in *De caelo*, notably II 12 292b1-19 in relation to the movements of the heavenly bodies. The Prime Mover as *telos* is discussed in *Met.* XII 7.4 994b9 and cf. 8.17 1074a30.
Prime Mover from which "depends for all other things being and life" (a28). The digression on aion in the first text opened with the remark that the name aion "has been divinely uttered by the ancients" (a22). 'Divinely' is here to be understood as 'under divine inspiration' but pertains also to the subject matter of the utterance, i.e., aion, which at the end of the digression is called "immortal and divine" (a27). Aristotle argues that aion is an apt word since it means aeì ôn, i.e., 'always being', and therefore refers to something immortal and divine (a27). But 'divine' too is a predicate that Aristotle applies to both the sphere of the stars in the universe and the transcendent Prime Mover. Likewise, the telos of an action — in this context we should think of the actions of the celestial bodies — can be external (transcendent) to the action as well as being the action itself.41

We can conclude that Aristotle, unlike Plato, does not reserve aion for the transcendent. Aion pertains to the entirety of time that is bound up with the (everlasting) life of the universe. Time (chronos) exclusively belongs to and is immanent in the universe; it is inextricably connected with movement, notably of the celestial bodies, and change. But this movement has also an unchanging aspect. Aristotle in the sequel to our first-quoted passage speaks of the 'outermost' cosmic sphere of fixed stars which moves unchangingly and unceasingly in a circle, so that "the place it begins from and ends at are the same" (De caelo 279a30-b3). The sphere of fixed stars 'borders' upon what is transcendent, and so, we can say, does aion. Time according to Aristotle is infinite but, due to the, not incomplete: it is endless but not without 'end', since its 'end', or 'completion', or 'fulfillment', i.e., telos, is aion.

2c. Psalms and Proverbs in the Septuagint

In this section I will discuss a number of passages from the Septuagint which, in my view, are the most significant for establishing the connotations peculiar to the Greek word aion as distinct from the Hebrew word it translates, i.e., olâm. In these passages, which are from the books of the Psalms and Proverbs, the Greek translation turns out to put things differently in comparison to the Hebrew usage of olâm. I start with the opening of Psalm 89 (nr. 90 in the Hebrew Bible). The subsequent quotation is from Proverbs 8, the famous chapter about Wisdom's role and position in creation. I give an English translation of the Greek version; the Hebrew of both passages contains the same olâm-phrase.

39 The relationship between aion and the transcendent principle is made explicit in Mst. XII 7.9 1072b26-31: "life (zôê) belongs to god. For the actuality of thought is life, and he is that actuality; and the essential actuality of him is life most good and everlasting (aïdios). We hold, then, that god is a living being, everlasting, most good; and therefore life (zôê) and aion continuous and everlasting belong to god; for that is what god is."

40 Aristotle uses this etymology to prove that aion properly describes a divine life, since 'always being' is a divine property.

41 Cf. De caelo II 12 292b1-19 and Leggatt’s commentary.
Psalm 89(90):1b-2:
1b Lord, you have been our refuge in generation and generation.
2a Before the mountains were born and the earth was formed and the (inhabited) world and from the aiôn (mê’olâm) until the aiôn (‘ad-olâm) you are.

Proverbs 8:22-24a [Wisdom says:]
22 The Lord created me as the beginning of his ways towards his works,
23 before the aiôn (mê’olâm) he founded me
in the beginning,
24 before he made the earth ...

Psalm 89 (90):2b has the standard rendering of the Hebrew expression mê’olâm, viz. aiôn governed by the preposition apo (‘from, since’). Verse 2a expresses that God is prior to his creation; verse 2b indicates moreover — note the word ‘and’ — that He is present throughout all time (concurrent with the created world): ‘from/since the aiôn until/so long as the aiôn’. By pointing backwards and forwards this compounded expression implies a position of the speaker inside, surrounded by, the aiôn.

Proverbs 8:23 too translates mê’olâm, but instead of apo it has the preposition pro. From a grammatical point of view this rendering can be deemed incorrect;32 on the point of interpretation it is revealing. Mê’olâm in the Hebrew Bible stands for ‘since ever’, ‘from all time’. The Hebrew text of Proverbs 8:23 says that Wisdom is founded:
from ‘olâm, from the beginning, from the old times of the earth.43
According to the Greek translation, however, Wisdom is founded:
before the aiôn, in the beginning, before the Lord made the earth.
So, while the Hebrew expresses that Wisdom was there since ever, the Greek translation pronounces that she was there before the aiôn (v. 23), i.e., before the created world (v. 24). Thus the Greek translator of Proverbs synchronizes (the start of) the aiôn with (the start of) creation, and envisages also something preceding the aiôn.

Now one may well hold that not only according to the Greek, but also according to the Hebrew text of Proverbs 8 the Lord, in virtue of his being the Creator, is pre-existent to his creation (and hence to the ‘olâm). However, this pre-existence remains implicit in the Hebrew. The Greek translation by contrast introduces the notion of ‘before the aiôn’, with the result that the Creator’s ‘pre-existence’ is made explicit, and not only his, but also that of Wisdom.44 The application of pro aiônos in Proverbs 8:23 cannot be explained from a common usage of this phrase in Greek, since the phrase is not found in

32 The preposition min/mê never means ‘before’. The Hebrew word translated pro/‘before’ in Ps.89(90):2 is beteem, literally ‘at the beginning of’.
33 Three times the same Hebrew preposition min/mê.
43 The idea that Wisdom (Sophia) precedes the whole of creation, can well be placed in a context of philosophical, Middle Platonist reflection. Cf. the role of Wisdom as God’s agent in creation in the Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-26; 8:4; 9:1-2, and in Philo (who identifies Wisdom with the Logos): Heb. 190; Dei. 54. For Philo see also §2d. I note that the sequence in Greek Prov.8:23 ‘before the aiôn, in the beginning, before ... the earth’ bears the implication that in the beginning (archê) also refers to something prior to creation. Such an interpretation of the term archê (used also in Gen.1:1) can be found in Philo and the Church Fathers.
earlier texts; hence it appears to be consciously employed in this context. The preposition *pro* compels us to conclude that ‘the *aiôn*’ coincides with the created world.\(^{45}\)

There are two other canonical instances of *aiôn* governed by *pro*. Psalm 54(55):20 speaks of God "existent before the *aiôns*", and Psalm 75(74):12 says: "God is our king before *aiôn*. The Hebrew in both texts has the word *qedem*, which denotes ‘bygone days, olden times’. The Greek text in Psalm 54(55):20 is very clear in expressing that God is ‘pre-existent’ with regard to the *aiôns* (now in plural), which cannot but mean, again, to (the times of) the created world. From the use of *pro aiônos* in Psalm 75(74):12 we get the impression that this phrase has now almost become a standard *aiôn*-phrase in relation to God;\(^{46}\) taken literally it yields a paradox since God is called ‘our king’ before ‘we’ were there.

‘Before’ in the temporal sense has the implication of ‘outside’: something taking place before a certain stretch of time is ‘outside’ that time. Whereas *’olâm*, as the ‘temporal horizon of creation’, represents time as seen only ‘from inside’, *aiôn* can convey the concept of time as seen ‘from outside’. Unlike the Hebrew, which never says "before ‘*olâm*”, the Septuaginta a number of times says “before *aiôn*. Thus translators have exploited connotations of *aiôn* (‘whole of time’, and ‘surveyable from outside’) which are peculiar to the Greek word but absent from the Hebrew *’olâm*. They have made explicit that *aiôn* designates (created) time as it accompanies the (created) world. The temporal indication ‘before (the) *aiôns*’ is applied and applicable only to God or his Wisdom. ‘Before the *aiôns*’ recurs in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 2:7): there indeed it is again applied to the wisdom of God.

2d. Philo’s exegesis

Above (§1d) I have elaborated somewhat on the philosophical meaning of *aiôn* in Philo, indicating only briefly Philo’s exegesis of biblical *aiôn*. The present section, by contrast, will demonstrate Philo’s biblical exegesis. We will see that the definitely ‘Greek’, even philosophical, approach of this exegesis employs and confirms the biblical meaning of *aiôn* we have found in the Septuagint.

In his treatise *On the change of names* Philo quotes Exodus 3:14, where God in the Greek version says: "I am He Who Is (*ho ôn*)". According to Philo, this is God’s most authentic, but properly ‘unnamable’ name. In the subsequent verse, Exodus 3:15, God reveals himself as “God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob” and adds: "This is my *aiôn*ic name and a memorial to generations". Philo in *On the change of names* 12 gives the following word-to-word commentary:

> For “this”, he says, "is my *aiôn*ic name": being examined as it were in the *aiôn* related to us, not in that (which is) before *aiôn*;
> “and a memorial”: not set beyond memory or apprehension;

\(^{45}\) Exactly the same observations hold true for the two parallels of Prov.8:23 found in the Greek of Sirach 1:4 and Sirach 24:9.

\(^{46}\) See also below, §2d.
and again "to generations": not to ungenerated beings.
For those who have come to mortal birth (genesis) are in need of some substitute for the divine name...

We observe that Pilos, inspired by the biblical adjective aiônicos, in his explanation uses the substantive aiôn. ‘Aiônic’ as a biblical predicate of God’s name is interpreted by him as: "being examined in the aiôn related to us",47 i.e., having its relevance in time (and life) as we, generated human beings, know it. This ‘human-relatedness’ of the aiônic name is elaborated by the sequel of the biblical quotation and Philo’s comments on it: the aiônic name, Philo explains, is within human comprehension ("memorial") and designed to be used by generated, i.e., created [human] beings ("generations").

In his interpreting remark, Philo opposes ‘in the aiôn related to us’ to ‘in that before aiôn’. The structure of the sentence enticed J. Whittaker (1971) to read the latter expression as ‘in the aiôn before aiôn’48 — a reading, however, which taken literally and logically amounts to an internal contradiction. The Greek language allows for substantivizing of prepositional phrases, and, in my view, the prepositional phrase pro aiônos is best understood as derived from the Septuagint. It can be understood as an indication of the ‘time’ that belongs to God, as in Psalm 73(74): “God is our king before aiôn”. We have seen above that ‘before (the) aiôn’ in the Septuagint means ‘before the time of the world’, i.e., before God created the cosmos.

Philo thus explains the biblical predicate aiônic as referring to the aiôn, i.e., to something ‘related to us’, and he contrasts it with the biblical locution pro aiônos, which is an indication of the domain of God. Aiônic qualifies the name “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”. Whereas God himself is undoubtly ‘before aiôn’, his aiônic name precisely describes his relation to man, i.e., to the aiôn. This contrast between aiônic and ‘that which is pro aiônos’ reflects Philo’s interpretation of Exodus 3, verses 14 and 15, developed in the wider context of our passage.49 According to Philo, God in Exodus 3:14 is speaking of Himself as He truly is, i.e., in and for himself; in Exodus 3:15, by contrast, he names himself with his ‘aiônic name’ in a relational and accommodating way. This distinction made by Philo between God as he is in himself and God as he stands in relation to his people, is inspired by Greek philosophy and the ontologizing Greek translation of Exodus 3:14. It cannot be sustained in the light of the biblical context itself (be it the Hebrew or the Greek), which says precisely that ‘He Who Is has sent Moses to his people’.50 Notwithstanding this fact, Philo’s usage and interpretation of aiôn and aiônicos here is completely in line with what we have found regarding the biblical meaning of these words.

47 ‘Related to us’, Gr. kath hémas, means both ‘concerning us (humans)’ and ‘with which we are concerned’.
48 Whittaker (see n. 3) 35 en tô pro aiônos aiôn. According to Whittaker, “ho kath hémas aiôn corresponds to the life-period of the universe and ho pro aiônos to that of God.” Whittaker - incorrectly — speaks of ‘the aiôn of God’ on account of both this text and Deus 32 (cf. n. 28).
50 Runia (see n. 49) 216, also quoted by A. P. Bos, Geboord door Plato. Het christelijk geloof behoord door het gewreven pantser van de Grieke filosofie (Kampen, 1996) 97.
Philo’s concise comment on Proverbs 8:22-23 which he gives in On drunkenness 31 will corroborate this agreement:

“God acquired me as the very first of his works, and before the aiôn he founded me” [says Wisdom]; for it was necessary that all that has come to birth (genesis) is younger than the mother and nurse of the All.

To say that Wisdom was founded ‘before the aiôn’ according to Philo is the same as saying that ‘the mother and nurse of the All’ was before ‘all that has come to genesis’. Hence the latter, i.e., the created world we live in, for Philo concurs with the aiôn. Philo’s interpretation runs parallel with his comments on aiôn given in the earlier quoted passage, as well as with our inference from the Septuagint translation of Proverbs 8:23 that ‘the aiôn’ correlates with the created world.

3. Eternity and entirety

Discerning as I do in the (extra-biblical) meaning of aiôn three notions, I have described the first as ‘life’, the second as ‘time’, and the third variously as ‘whole’, ‘completeness’, ‘totality’, or ‘entirety’. The third notion distinguishes aiôn when used as a word for ‘life’ from the other words zôê and bios, and when aiôn is used as a word for ‘time’ this notion adheres to its meaning no less. Aiôn is the ‘entirety’ of time; ‘eternity’ is too much an ‘anachronistic’, misleading or unclear rendering.

The noun ‘eternity’, that is, aeternitas, by its very form witnesses to a development of language and thought. From the simple Latin noun aevum was derived the adjective aev(i)ernus, from which then was formed the abstract noun aeternitas (first attested in Cicero, 1st cent. BC). An analogous development took place in Greek, where aiôn produced the adjective aiônios and ultimately also the (rare) abstract noun aiôniotês (first attested in Didymus the Blind, 4th cent. AD). Seen in this light, the word aiôn has its counterpart in aevum (as is also true etymologically), so that the interpretation of aiôn as aeternitas/‘eternity’ entails a sort of asymmetry already from a historical-linguistic point of view. Additionally, the term ‘eternity’ conveys meanings which have developed later (notably in Christian and Medieval context) than the period in which the meanings of aiôn originated. Thus we should recognize all the more that aiôn cannot be explained as ‘eternity’ without qualification.

My study has led to the conclusion that infinity is not an intrinsic or necessary connotation of aiôn, either in the Greek or in the biblical usage (< ‘olâm). The word’s primary meaning in Greek is ‘lifetime’, with the connotation of completeness. It is in the secondary sense of ‘all time’ that aiôn takes on an implication of being infinite. In the biblical usage, the temporal horizon described by aiôn (‘olâm) is for its being finite or infinite wholly dependent on the One decreeing it.

Where in Aristotle aiôn is said to encompass all (infinite) time of the universe, it is called ‘divine’ and regarded as bordering on the transcendent; aiôn, moreover, is also applied by Aristotle to the transcendent divine principle itself. The biblical aiôn, as noted, is created. Neither Philo, nor later the
Church Fathers use the word to refer to the ‘eternity’ of God: this in contrast to the Latin term *aeternitas*, which in Medieval philosophy is reserved for God’s ‘eternity’. Greek *aiôn* and biblical *aiôn* (‘olâm) fit together in the meaning of ‘entirety of time’, each bringing in its own perspective. *Aiôn*, ‘entirety of time’, is more than just time going on: it is time made into a meaningful whole.

In conclusion, let me pluck and name four fruits from the investigated fields. The first fruit is the conclusion (pertinent to reflections on ‘eternity’) that the word *aiôn* refers to *time*, that is, time seen in a special way, viz. as an *entirety* (analogous to a lifetime). The second fruit is an outcome of theological relevance: that in the biblical usage *aiôn* refers to something belonging to *creation*, not to God in himself. The third fruit consists of the observation that a perspective characteristic of Greek thought and language (time — like the cosmos — viewed as a whole, from ‘outside’) has received its place in the biblical world of thought (viz. through the expression ‘before the *aiôn*’). The final fruit may be formulated as follows: that *aiôn* in conveying both a *Totalbegriff* (in Greek thought) and a *Extrembegriff* (‘horizon’, in the biblical context) instructs us about the position and condition of us, humans, and our knowledge.