

AGES

AS DISTINGUISHED FROM "DISPENSATIONS"

By Arlen L. Chirwood

The Greek New Testament uses the word for "age" (*aion*) one hundred twenty-six times. And an indiscriminate translation of *aion* has resulted in a major problem surrounding a proper understanding of "ages." The word has, numerous times, been translated either "world" or "forever" (e.g., Matt. 12:32; 13:22, 39, 40, 49; 21:19; Mark 4:19; 10:30; 11:14; Heb. 1:2; 5:6; 6:5, 20 [KJV]).

Actually, in the KJV there are only two instances in the entire New Testament where *aion* has been translated "age" (Eph. 2:7; Col. 1:26). Other versions (e.g., NASB, NIV) have, on the other hand, rendered the word as "age" in many instances, though still frequently remaining with the KJV translations, "world" and "forever."

Then, to further complicate the issue in the KJV, the Greek word *genea* (appearing in a plural form and meaning "generations") has been translated "ages" twice (Eph. 3:5, 21), and the former mistranslation has resulted in a very misleading thought pertaining to ages.

In Eph. 3:21 both *aion* and *genea* appear together, and both have been mistranslated in the KJV. *Genea*, appearing in a plural form, has been translated "ages"; and *aion*, appearing twice and meaning, within its structured usage, "of the age of the ages" (referring to the climactic age in a sequence of ages, i.e., to the Messianic Era [which is the subject matter leading into this verse — vv. 1-11]), has been translated "world without end."

(*Aion* and *genea* also appear together in Col. 1:26; and, unlike Eph. 3:21, both words have been translated correctly in the KJV — "...hid from ages and from generations...")

To translate *genea* as "ages" in Eph. 3:5 sets forth an issue concerning ages which is not at all in accord with the overall teaching of Scripture. Scripture sets forth the thought that a series of ages began at the time of the creation of the heavens and the earth (1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:9; Heb. 1:2), which move toward and reach a climax with the Messianic Era. That is, the 1000-year Messianic Era is the climactic age in a series of ages — ages in relation to the present heavens and earth — which began with the creation of the heavens and the earth and the placing of Satan over the earth as the earth's first provincial ruler.

The basic problem though with understanding the word meaning "generations" as *ages* in Eph. 3:5, limiting the time to Man's Day, has to do with the thought that generations come and go during Man's Day, but this would not be true relative to ages. The whole of Man's Day — 6,000 years — actually covers only *one* age, not many ages as Eph. 3:5 in the KJV would lead one to believe.

Scripture makes it quite clear that only two ages exist within the framework of the 7,000 years referred to by the seven days in Gen. 1:1-2:3. One age covers the first 6,000 years, and the other age (the climactic age) covers the last 1,000 years.

To understand this within its Scriptural framework, note Matt. 12:31, 32. In these verses, reference is made to two ages, connected with what is called "the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit [attributing to Christ an exercise of supernatural power emanating from Satan rather than from the Holy Spirit]." And the sin of committing this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit by the religious leaders in Israel was such that it would not be forgiven them, "neither in this world ['age'], neither in the world ['age' (not in the Greek text, but implied)] to come" (v. 32).

That is, there would be no forgiveness during either the age in which they lived or in the age which would follow. And, the action by the religious leaders in Israel (looked upon in a larger sense as action by the entire nation), followed by Christ's announcement to them, forms the major turning point in Matthew's gospel.

It was on "the same day" in which this occurred that "Jesus went out of the house [alluding to *the*

house of Israel], and sat by the seaside [alluding to *the Gentiles*]" (Matt. 13:1; cf. Dan. 7:2, 3; Matt. 23:38; Rev. 13:1). It was also on this same day that Christ began to teach extensively through the use of parables.

Then it was shortly after these things occurred that the Church was first mentioned and the ministry of Christ moved more toward the thought of the Cross rather than the Crown (cf. Matt. 16:17-23; 17:22, 23; 20:17-19). And then, anticipated by all the preceding, the announcement was finally made by Christ in Matt. 21:43 that the kingdom (the proffered heavenly sphere of the kingdom which had been rejected) would be taken from Israel and would be given "to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

The two ages referred to in Matt. 12:32 cover 7,000 years of time — the age covering Man's Day, and the age covering the Messianic Era. And this is quite easy to illustrate.

Looking Forward in Time

Note the account of the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-30. This ruler approached Christ with the question, "Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" (v. 17). And Christ told him exactly what he must do (vv. 19-21). Christ's answer had to do with obedience to that which God had commanded, *denying self, taking up one's cross, and following Christ* (cf. Matt. 16:24-27).

Contextually, the words "eternal life" in verse seventeen could be better translated, "life for the age." The word "eternal" in the English text is a translation of the Greek word *aionios* (the adjective form of the noun *aion*, meaning "age").

Confusion can only result when a person attempts to read into this passage that which is not there, while ignoring that which is there. The subject is *entrance into the kingdom during the coming age*, not eternal life which exists during the present age and extends throughout all the following ages (the present age, the Messianic Era, and all the ages beyond).

And, verse thirty clearly shows that "age" has to be the correct understanding of *aionios* in verse seventeen. In verse thirty, following the translation in most English versions, Christ refers to "eternal life" in

the “world to come [some versions translate, ‘age to come’]” (cf. KJV, NASB, NIV). The overall thought set forth in the various translations of this verse though is not what the Greek text states at all. In the Greek text, *aion* and *aionios* both appear together, referring to the same period of time. *Aion* has been translated “world” (or correctly, “age,” in some versions); and *aionios* has invariably been translated “eternal” (as in v. 17).

The latter part of Mark 10:30, climaxing Christ’s dealings with the rich young ruler, should literally read, “...and in the age to come age-lasting life,” or, “...and in the age to come life for that age.” “Eternal life,” as previously stated, is not even in view. There is no such thing as *inheriting* “eternal life” in the “age to come [or ‘world to come’ as some translations erroneously read].”

Eternal life is not inherited; it is a free gift, and it is a present possession rather than a future hope. The possession of eternal life (present) and coming into possession of an inheritance (future) — both spoken of numerous times in Scripture — *are two different things entirely*. That which is in view in Mark 10:17-30 is an inheritance with Christ as co-heir in the 1000-year kingdom during the coming age.

But that which needs to be seen here is the fact that there is a reference to the same two ages referred to in Matt. 12:32. The coming age, in Mark 10:30, is specifically identified as the Messianic Era; and the present age, in existence at a time preceding Calvary in Matt. 12:32, lasts until the Messianic Era.

Looking Back in Time

Now, with that in mind, note several Scriptures which show that the age in existence at a time prior to Calvary — an age which extends forward to the Messianic Era (extends forward to the end of Man’s Day, to the Lord’s Day) — also extends back to the very beginning of Man’s Day. That is, comparing several other references with Matt. 12:32 and Mark 10:17, 30, it can unquestionably be shown that *one age* covers the whole of Man’s Day.

“As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world [‘the age’] began” (Luke 1:70).

“Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world [‘the age’]” (Acts 15:18).

The word “prophet” (Luke 1:70; cf. Acts 3:21) is used in Scripture in a somewhat broader sense than it is usually thought of today. The word appears quite often (about 150 times in the N. T.) and is used as a title given to the person whom the Lord had chosen to communicate — “announce,” “declare” — His message to the people.

And the message need not necessarily be prophetic per se for the title “prophet” to be used of the messenger. This title is used referring to those chosen at different times to declare the will and purpose of God through either a written revelation or a verbal expression. It is used of individuals preceding the existence of the nation of Israel (Jude 14), of individuals in Israel (Matt. 23:37; Luke 24:27), of individuals in the first century Church prior to the completion of the canon of Scripture (I Cor. 12:28; 13:9, 10; Eph. 4:11), and of individuals in Israel once again yet future (Joel 2:27, 28; Rev. 11:3, 10).

In this respect, all of those chosen to write portions of the Word of God, beginning with Moses and ending with John, could be called “prophets.” And others, such as Enoch or Noah who communicated the message of God to the people of their day — though they were not chosen to write particular sections of Scripture — could also be looked upon after this same fashion (cf. II Peter 2:5; Jude 14). In fact, this word, in its strict Scriptural usage, could be used referring to certain individuals all the way back to and including Adam himself.

The age in which Jesus lived at the time of His earthly ministry is, thus, not only seen in Scripture extending forward to the beginning of the Messianic Era but it is also seen extending back to the beginning of man’s existence on the earth. Understanding the way *aion* (age) is used in Luke 1:70 and Acts 15:18 (cf. John 9:32; Acts 3:21), a person can arrive at only one conclusion. The present age, looking back in time, covers the entire period of the “prophets,” which, of necessity, would have to include not only Enoch (who “prophesied” over 1,500 years prior to the appearance of Moses [Jude 14]), but also Adam.

The Complete Picture

God knew all of His works which would transpire within the framework of the ages at the time of man’s creation (Acts 15:18). And this was something known at a prior time when He designed and made the ages with the thought in mind that His Son would, in the climactic age of the sequence of ages in view, *inherit* “all things” (Heb. 1:2). And God — being both Omniscient and the Architect of the ages — in order to make His will known and reveal events transpiring during the ages, simply “spake by the mouth of his holy prophets [revealing His plans and purposes],” *beginning with Adam*.

Accordingly, at least three ages in relation to the present heavens and earth can be seen in Scripture. At least one age (and there may have been more than one) existed between the creation of the heavens and the earth in Gen. 1:1 and the beginning of the restoration of the ruined creation in Gen. 1:2b. Then another age began at that point, which covers the next 6,000 years. And, to bring the first sequence of ages to a close, the climactic age of the ages will be ushered in at the completion of the 6,000 years, an age which will cover the next 1,000 years.

Then, at the end of the 1,000-year Messianic Era, the present heavens and earth (heavens associated with the earth, not the universe as a whole) will be destroyed and be replaced with a new heavens and a new earth; and a new age will begin (which will be the first in an apparent new sequence of ages).

How long that new age will last is unrevealed. But it will have a beginning point and an ending point. And following that age will be another age, and then another, and then another, forming an unending God-designed and arranged sequence of ages, comprising eternity.

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