

THE PROBLEMS OF ETERNITY

Understanding the multi-dimensional nature of the Hebrew concept of eternity and the implications for our lives

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Was the universe created by God? Atheists, of course, say no. But they are no different than anyone else by having to confront the question regarding the origin of the universe. For if God did not create the universe, then where did it come from? How could something so immense simply come into existence *ex nihilo*—out of nothing, without an infinitely powerful first cause?

The universe truly is incredible in terms of scope. Recent estimates, based on data collected by the Hubble Space Telescope, show that there are two trillion galaxies in the universe, each one containing an average of 400 billion stars.

Astronomers have observed cosmic microwave background radiation 13.8 billion light years away in every direction. That represents the furthest distance of the universe that is measurable. In other words, the observable universe is nearly 28 billion light years across. But according to the NASA website, “the universe is much larger than the volume we can directly observe.” How much further the universe actually goes, we cannot presently know, but scientists estimate that it is 93 billion light years in diameter. And since the speed of light is 186,000 miles per second, that means the universe is 5.5 sextillion miles across, a truly astronomical number.

As a result, the potential for traveling within that expanse is greatly limited. Science has demonstrated that anything with mass is incapable of traveling faster than the speed of light. So even if you were able to travel at that maximum speed, it would still take you 124 million lifetimes to get to the other side of the universe. In the end, because we cannot travel sufficiently fast or live sufficiently long, it is physically impossible for any created being to come close to visiting not just the entire universe, but even a tiny slice of it.

That scientific reality has not stopped fanciful speculation. In the 1960’s, Hollywood gave us *Star Trek*, which discarded the scientifically-proven limitation on speed and promoted the imaginary idea of warp speed that allowed the starship Enterprise to exceed the speed of light and to zoom right up to a particular destination. Later, *Star Wars* and other science fiction stories continued this fantasy of traveling faster than the speed of light to other stars and galaxies.

Recent motion pictures have taken a different approach. Movies like *Interstellar* and *Contact* turn to a theoretical concept of wormholes that claim to connect two points in space that might be vast distances apart in reality, but when you enter them, you can bridge the distance instantly. That works really well for a two-hour movie. But there is no evidence that such things exist. And even if they did, the theory requires super massive black holes that couldn’t be treated like a subway system where you hop on a line that takes you to a stop that happens to be right next to the final destination of your choice in the universe, like we see in the movies. The scientific reality is that you would be drawn into the black hole by gravity, annihilated by radiation and never come out.

In spite of the dreams and speculations of artistic creativity, there is no reason to believe

that intergalactic space travel is possible. Human beings may have to be content with visiting Mars one day.

Nevertheless, we have the opportunity to gain an understanding about something that even exceeds the vastness of the galaxies. It is the concept of time without boundaries—eternity, as revealed in the eternal book—the Word of God. And when we consider what it has to say, we encounter three particular problems when it comes to eternity—one that is linguistic in nature, one that is theological, and one that is spiritual.

The linguistic problem of interpreting *olam*

The Hebrew word עולם (*olam*) can be translated a number of ways:

- ***Olam* can be used to describe the unending nature of the universe**, as described above. That is the message of the 148th Psalm. For that reason, traditional Hebrew blessings often begin with the words:
“*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech ha’olam*—Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe.”
- ***Olam* can express the notion of ancient time: *y’mei olam*—“the days of old.”** Ancient time can extend infinitely into the past. For example, one of the Messianic prophecies is Micah 5:2. It reads:
“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, *mi-mei olam*—from the days of eternity.”
- ***Olam* can express the notion of future time—“forever.”** Many verses use *olam* to describe the nature of God, including:
“Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, *u’me olam ad olam*—even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God” (Ps 90:2).
“Do you not know? Have you not heard? *Elohei Olam Adonai*—the Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired” (Isa 40:28).

Clearly *olam* can be used to bring out the concept of eternity—unending time extending to the past and the future.

- **Sometimes *olam* only conveys the meaning of continuity within a fixed period of time without eternity.** For example, when the Law was given, the priesthood was limited to the sons of Aaron “*le-huqqat olam*—as a perpetual statute” (Ex 29:9). But later, as Peter writes, the priesthood was expanded to all believers (1 Pet 2:9). In another context, slaves in Israel working off debts could choose to stay with their masters at the end of their six-year period of service and become bondservants, “*va-avado l’olam*—and he shall serve him permanently” (Ex 21:6). Clearly this servitude would not extend eternally into life after death. It was merely permanence throughout the rest of a person’s lifetime.

So we can see how *olam* is a diverse word that may or may not communicate the concept of eternity. And that presents a challenge when interpreting Scripture. How can we know when

olam means “forever” in a passage, and when it just means “a long time?” The implications are significant, because the way you answer that question will have a major impact on the conclusions you make regarding many important biblical subjects.

The theological problem applying *olam*

It may be helpful to realize that we also employ flexibility in English when it comes to words like “forever.” There are times when we certainly intend to refer to things of an everlasting nature, like God or life after death. But we also use the word merely to communicate a long period of time, such as saying to someone, “I haven’t seen you in what seems like forever.” It is context that enables us to understand the way the word is being used at any given time. That is also true in Scripture.

But the Bible further clarifies the way *olam* is being used by enhancing it with additional terms when the subject has an everlasting character. These indicators in Scripture include

- Coupling עולם (*olam*) with עַד (*ad*)—a preposition meaning “until.” These couplets are עַד-עוֹלָם (*ad olam*)—translated as “forever” but literally meaning “until ever,” and וְעַד לְעוֹלָם (*l’olam va-ed*)—“forever and ever.” Thus when *olam* is coupled with *ad*, it refers to something that endures until you reach forever, which is impossible. It just continues on and on.
- Coupling עולם (*olam*) with בְּרִית (*b’rit*)—“covenant.” Why is this significant? In the Ancient Near East, participants in a covenant were bound to it as long as specified conditions existed. So in God’s case, when He makes a covenant based on His name, and He is incapable of breaking His Word, that covenant will never cease. It becomes *b’rit olam*—an everlasting covenant.
- Adding descriptive phrases that reinforce unending time. These phrases are primarily זְרַעְךָ אַחֲרַיִךְ (*zaraka ahareyka*)—“your descendants after you,” and לְדוֹרֹתֶיכֶם (*l’doro-techem*)—“throughout your generations.” Whenever these indicators are included in a passage where *olam* is used, the text conveys the meaning of time without end, typically translated as “forever, everlasting or eternal.”

These indicators serve as a guide for translating the original language into modern terms. But failure to use these guidelines in a disciplined manner will lead to theological error. Consider, for example, the land promise that is part of the Abrahamic Covenant. Some people claim that since *olam* can just mean a long time, there is an endpoint of the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant, and now all of the promises have been fulfilled in Jesus. Therefore, the land of Israel no longer belongs to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by divine decree. Their conclusion is based solely on the *possibility* that *olam* can just mean a long time. But that interpretation can only be true, as we have seen, if *olam* is used in isolation without any additional indicators in the original language. What, then, do we actually encounter in Scripture?

The first passage that deals with the land is found in Genesis 13:15. It reads: “God said to Abram, ‘for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants *ad olam*—forever.’” So here we have one of the indicators of something that is not limited in

time, but endures indefinitely.¹

The next use of *olam* in the context of the land is found in Genesis 17:7-8. This promise from God employs six indicators of unending duration:

“I will establish My covenant between Me and you
and your descendants after you
throughout their generations
for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you
and to your descendants after you.
I will give to you and to your descendants after you,
the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan,
for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

Again in Genesis 35:12, when God repeated the same promise to Abraham’s grandson Jacob, He declared: “The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you.”

And so it is for each of the passages associated with the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant. There are always indicators in these passages showing unending permanence, not just possession over a long period of time.

So if you want to be consistent and maintain integrity in the way that you interpret Scripture, you have a real problem if you deny the unbroken and permanent nature of God’s promise of the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The structure of the Hebrew language shows that it is an everlasting promise based on an everlasting covenant made by God.

What about the feasts that God gave as memorial observances? Do we see a parallel in the way *olam* is used in that context? Typically readers just overlook the terms “forever” and “everlasting” when it comes to the feasts, assuming that the text no longer applies.

Regarding Passover, God declared: “Now this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it *as* a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it as a permanent ordinance (Ex 12:14). So once again we have the indication of unending duration. The same is true regarding *Sukkot*—the Feast of Tabernacles: “You shall thus celebrate it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations” (Lev 23:41).

Passages addressing the rest of the feasts share similar linguistic indicators demonstrating God’s intent for them to retain unending duration. Only now we are able to observe them as commemorations of His great redemptive acts in this world, both in the past and yet to come.²

Altogether, a disciplined approach to exegesis, or what the Bible calls “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15, KJV), will enable us to understand fully what God is doing in this world as part of His plan. But there is an even greater problem for everyone who walks this earth. It is...

¹ The same phrasing is used to describe God, who is undeniably eternal: “The LORD shall reign *l’olam va’ed*—forever and ever” (Ex 15:18). In fact, the phrase *מִן-עוֹלָם וְעַד-עוֹלָם* (*min olam ve-ad olam*) – “forever and ever” is only used regarding two subjects in Scripture—God Himself and His promises of the land to the descendants of Israel.

² Significant events are associated with each of the seven feasts: Yeshua (Jesus) was crucified on Passover and was in the grave on Unleavened Bread, He rose on First Fruits and the Holy Spirit was given on the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost). The three remaining feasts have themes that apply to the great aspects of God’s plan yet to come: the return of Yeshua (Feast of Trumpets), judgment of humanity (Day of Atonement), and dwelling with God in an everlasting manner (Tabernacles).

The spiritual problem of entering eternity without believing in Yeshua (Jesus)

The Bible reveals that God created humanity with the intent of living forever. We are the pinnacle of His creation in the entire universe because we alone share His image and likeness (Gen 1:26). He placed the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden so that Adam and Eve could live there in perpetuity because of its ability to sustain life in a way that is beyond our comprehension.

This was all well and good until they sinned by disobeying His command not to eat from the other great tree—the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. From that time onward their relationship with God was broken, and their natures were corrupted or changed for the worse, which disrupted God’s holiness, meaning separation from all things that are impure. God’s response was understandably resolute:

Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, *va-chai l’olam*—and live forever” (Gen 3:22).

So Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden and the plan for them to live eternally was damaged. The history that followed has shown how dreadfully sinful mankind can become. The point is that God has made it possible for humans to live forever in His presence, just not in a sinful state.

But in His love for His most precious created beings, God has provided a way for that problem to be overcome. He has revealed His plan throughout Scripture. When God used the plural word, “us” to describe Himself in Genesis 3:22, as the Son of God, Yeshua was one of the “Us.” Yeshua was also the one, as we read earlier from the prophet Micah, who would be both born in Bethlehem, yet was “from the days of eternity.” And just as the prophet Isaiah foretold (Isa 53:5), Yeshua was the one who paid the penalty for our sin, thus providing us with the pardon and the righteousness we need so that our relationship to our Creator might be healed and God’s original intent restored for us to life forever.

The plan is gracious and perfect in every way. But in spite of God doing all the great acts that were necessary for this to come about, we still have to do one simple thing. We have to accept this gift of everlasting life for ourselves.

As Yeshua declared: “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life” (Jn 3:36). This is the blessing that Yeshua describes as being “prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mat 25:34). But failure to do so leads to a very serious problem. For as Yeshua shows in His parable of the sheep and goats, a day is coming when God will separate the unrighteous “into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Mat 25:46).

You may be tempted to think that separation of this sort is not a Jewish concept. But the prophet Daniel talked about a future day of judgment for humanity in which this kind of separation will occur. Using the word *olam* once again, he informs us:

“There will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, some to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt (Dan 12:1-2).

Everlasting contempt literally refers to something that is abhorrent or detestable, which accurately describes being separated from God and His redeemed persons throughout eternity. So Daniel and Yeshua were in agreement about this coming separation in the world to come. Spending eternity apart from God means going through all of the dreadful things this world has

to offer, yet never being able to overcome them and never being freed from them. The only way to be victorious over sin and to be freed from its harmful effects on our lives, is to believe in the plan that God has established for us.

Whether we like it or not, there is an abundance of evidence that there is more to our existence than just a few years on earth. “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps 19:1), so the universe is a testimony of the Creator who is all-powerful and not limited by time and space. The Word of God is a testimony of the flaws we have as humans, plus the plan that God has already carried out as a solution to those flaws. And Yeshua is a testimony of God’s love for everyone, as well as the promise that believers in Him will live in God’s presence throughout eternity.

The Lord has done His part in a plan that was set in motion back at the very beginning of Creation. Now it is up to us whether we will receive it as His great gift to all who believe.