

Exegetical Brief: עַד-עוֹלָם "Forever"

By John C. Jeske

A brother has asked for clarification of the term "forever" in passages such as God's promise to David: "Your house and your kingdom will endure *forever* before me; your throne will be established *forever*" (2 Sm 7:16). When does עַד-עוֹלָם mean "into all eternity," and when does it mean less than that?

The basic meaning of עַד-עוֹלָם is not "eternity." Brown, Driver, and Briggs (Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament) lists two meanings for the word. The first is "ancient time, antiquity." Israel is called God's עַם עוֹלָם, his ancient people (Is 44:7). This first meaning of the term is not under consideration here.

The second meaning of עוֹלָם is "indefinite futurity." After the flood God made a covenant with Noah. It's called בְּרִית עוֹלָם, and it was sealed with the sign of a rainbow. God himself defined the extent of עוֹלָם when he said that as long as the earth lasts, there will not be another flood. Indefinite futurity. Deuteronomy 15:17 records that an Israelite servant who had served his master for six years and was entitled to his freedom in the seventh year could choose to forfeit his freedom. In that case, the master would pierce the servant's ear, and "he will become עֶבֶד עוֹלָם, "his servant for life" (either the master's, or the servant's). When God restated his law he told Israel: "Be careful to obey all these regulations I am giving you, so that it may go well with you עַד-עוֹלָם, always" (Dt 12:28). Again, indefinite futurity. (By contrast, KJV translates: "that it may go well with thee forever.")

According to 1 Samuel 1:22, Hannah promised to take her son to the tabernacle at Shiloh after he was weaned, "and he will live there always" (עַד-עוֹלָם). Indefinite futurity. (Samuel later made his home at Ramah.) After Saul's disobedience at Gilgal (1 Sm 13:13), Samuel rebuked him. "If you had kept the command the LORD your God gave you, he would have established your kingdom over Israel עַד-עוֹלָם, "for all time." Again, indefinite futurity.

Further evidence that עוֹלָם is not always to be translated "forever" can be seen from the worship regulations God appointed for ancient Israel. God called the Sabbath "a sign between me and the Israelites לְעוֹלָם" (Ex 31:17). The twelve loaves of bread that were placed on a golden table in the Holy Place each week are designated as a בְּרִית עוֹלָם, "a lasting covenant" (Lv 24:8). According to 1 Chronicles 23:13, "Aaron was set apart, he and his descendants עַד-עוֹלָם . . . to offer sacrifices before the Lord, to minister before him and to pronounce blessings in his name עַד-עוֹלָם." The New Testament makes it clear that the Sabbath law, the Old Testament worship regulations, and the Aaronic priesthood were not part of God's immutable moral law, binding on all people for all time. They were in force for only a limited period of time. The predominant use of עוֹלָם in the Old Testament is to indicate such indefinite futurity.

This is, however, not the only sense in which that important term is used in the Old Testament. עוֹלָם is used to describe God's person. Genesis 21:33 calls him אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם, "the eternal God." Isaiah 40:28 calls Yahweh אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם, "the everlasting God." No indefinite futurity here. The same term is used to describe God's attributes. His love is אַהֲבַת-עוֹלָם (Jer 31:3). His strong arms that support and protect us are זְרוֹעוֹת-עוֹלָם (Dt 33:27). God's word is לְעוֹלָם (Ps 119:89). God's love, his power, and his truth reach back into eternity past and extend into eternity future.

Where God's Messianic promise is involved, there the significance of the term עוֹלָם takes on an added dimension. In one of the Messianic prophecies God gave Ezekiel (37:24-26) he announced: "My servant David will be king over them ... David my servant will be their prince forever (לְעוֹלָם). I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) . . . I will put my sanctuary among them forever"

(עֶדְ-עוֹלָם). The import and extent of this prophecy are clarified by a subsequent vision God granted Ezekiel (48:35), as well as by Revelation 21, which make it clear that the reference here is to the new Jerusalem. No "indefinite futurity" here; this is the most specific meaning of עֶדְ-עוֹלָם. When עוֹלָם is used to describe the activity of the promised Savior, it must be understood in its widest significance. "You are a priest forever" (Ps 110:4), and "Your throne will last forever" (Ps 45:7), predict the gracious activity of the Messiah that extends to all eternity.

How is the Bible student to know which of the various meanings of עוֹלָם is the correct one in a given context? Several things should be said.

Usually the passage itself will identify how עֶדְ-עוֹלָם is to be understood. When David said: "O Sovereign LORD, you have established your people Israel as your very own forever" (2 Sm 7:24), the phrase cannot mean "for all eternity." We know that, as a nation, Israel rejected the Lord, and her house was left to her desolate. On the other hand, when Moses says: "From everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps 90:2), it's immediately obvious that the initial עוֹלָם refers to eternity past, the second to eternity future. עֶדְ-עוֹלָם occurs twice in Daniel 12:2. "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake; some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt," and the reader senses immediately that the two references can only be to eternity.

But what if in a particular passage the meaning of עֶדְ-עוֹלָם is not immediately clear, and two different interpretations of the term seem possible, both of which are in harmony with the rest of the Scripture? Then one would do well to follow the hermeneutical rule: interpret the term in its *least specific* sense, rather than in its *most specific*. In other words, if you must make a choice, undertranslate rather than overtranslate.

Permit an analogy. The Hebrew *Sheol* and the Greek *Hades* generally mean "place of the dead" or "death" or "the grave." When either term is contrasted with "heaven," however, then it takes on the more specific meaning of "hell." But that is not the usual meaning of either *Sheol* or *Hades*. When translating Psalm 16:10, the King James translators opted for the most specific meaning of *Sheol*; the NIV translators chose the most common, the less specific meaning.

Back to God's promise to David: "Your throne will be established forever" (2 Sm 7:16). 1 Chronicles 22:9f makes it clear that Nathan's prophecy was partially fulfilled when David's royal dynasty continued into the indefinite future. God's promise to David, therefore, does not refer *only* to the eternal kingship of great David's greater Son.

1 Kings 9:5, e.g., records that on the occasion of his second theophany, God assured Solomon: "I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever (לְעוֹלָם)," and then clarified what he meant by adding: "You shall never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel." That was the intermediate fulfillment of the promise to David.

But Psalms 45 and 72 and Luke 1:32f make it clear that God's promise to David of a Descendant whose kingdom "will be established forever" would be fulfilled finally and fully only in Christ's eternal reign (Re 11:15).