

## “FORGOTTEN AGES”: TIMES AND SPACE IN HEB 1.2

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The importance of the prologue of Hebrews (1.1-4) to the letter can hardly be overstated, elucidating as it does the distinct, dialectic modes of divine speaking: one, of old, mediated through the prophets (1.1), the other, the new, final, once for all declaration now made through the Son (1.2a). This definitive filial utterance established, the writer continues with a sevenfold declaration of the Son’s character and attributes (1.2c-3), qualities that will contribute to his ultimately being superior to angels (1.4-14). The second of these declarations—δι’ οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας (1.2c)—seems to appeal to some form of wisdom/creation tradition, ascribing a creative agency to the Son that is not accredited to any merely angelic being.

While the rhetorical or literary function of the clause is not especially complicated, and while the attribution of some form of creative capacity to the Son is not generally in dispute, the extent of *what* is being created through the filial agency remains somewhat uncertain or ambiguous. The object of ἐποίησεν—τοὺς αἰῶνας—is invariably translated in physical or tangible terms, bespeaking some form of spatial entity being created. A survey of recent translations concurs with this assessment:

NRSV: he also created the worlds.

TNIV: also he made the universe.

NIV: and through whom he made the universe

JB: through whom he made everything there is<sup>1</sup>

NASB: also He made the world.

KJV: also he made the worlds

REB: through him he created the universe

NEB: he created all orders of existence

Non-English translations reflect a similar tendency:

Lu1984: er auch die Welt gemacht hat

Hoffnung für Alle: Durch ihn schuf Gott Himmel und Erde

Sem: par lui qu’il a créé l’univers

NVI99: por medio de él hizo el universo

DHH: mediante el cual creó los mundos

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1 The Jerusalem Bible contains a footnote noting that the phrase is “a Hebraism for all creation.”

Commentaries on the epistle generally take the same approach. The referent of τῶν αἰώνων receives occasional discussion within the literature, but it is fair to say that the scholarly consensus generally regards “world” or “universe” as the appropriate translation of the given phrase, and to conjecture otherwise would therefore be going against a very strong tide.

Such a strong consensus should not, however, preclude ongoing discussion of the rendering of ἐποίησεν τῶν αἰώνων, for it is possible that a different translation may actually be more appropriate. It may be that the one who was made lower than angels (2.7), whose once for all revelation marked and inaugurated these last days (1.2; cf. 9.26), and whose actions therefore have temporal implications, is better conceived as creating “ages,” i.e., an entity that possesses a temporal, rather than spatial, designation. Not only is “ages” the more common translation of the word in the NT texts, it also befits other—though not all—instances of αἰών in the letter. The question may thus be posed in terms of the distinction between “spatial” and “temporal,” between a physical/conceptual entity (universe, world[s]) or an eschatological or apocalyptic one where ages are split by the Christ event. It is the thesis of this paper that the temporal dimension of “ages” should, at the very least, be retained alongside the spatial element, but is perhaps even the more significant/appropriate sense of the clause.

### Translating αἰών as “world”

It remains the case, however, that the tradition of translating αἰών as “world/universe” has a reasonably sound basis and can be justified on several grounds. On the one hand, “world” is a valid translation of the Greek word,<sup>2</sup> and its Vulgate rendering in Heb 1.2—“saecula”—tends in this more cosmological direction. With it being the customary Greek translation of the Hebrew עולם, originally conveying ideas of time/age/eternity, the semantic domain of the αἰών follows a similar trajectory as its Hebrew equivalent, expanding its meaning from “age(s)” to “world(s),” from a temporal to a more spatial designation. Indeed, the latter sense eventually becomes the more common sense in rabbinical writings,<sup>3</sup> and scholars have therefore concluded that “world” is a legitimate meaning of αἰών. The plural dimension of αἰώνων is not a significant feature; the plural rendering can imply a purely singular referent, and therefore does not necessitate a plural translation.<sup>4</sup> The specific appeal to the plural in Heb 1.2c may reflect the

2 Cf. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker; 3d ed. [= BDAG]; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Liddell & Scott, however, limit the semantic discussion of αἰών merely to temporal renderings of the word (H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon* [9th ed. with revised supplement; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996]). This would seem to confirm analysis elsewhere that the “world” sense is a later development.

3 H. Sasse, “αἰών;” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (= TDNT; ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; trans. G. W. Bromiley; 10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 1:197-209: “In the Rabbinic writings there is only sparse attention for עולם or עולמות in the sense of the spatial world prior to the 1st century A.D., but there are several examples later. Indeed, in the later Rabbis the ‘world’ in the spatial sense becomes the main meaning of עולמות” (204).

4 F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (= BDF; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), §141(1).

rabbinic belief that there were several worlds over which God exercised sovereignty, particularly if the “all” of the same verse is seen in parallel,<sup>5</sup> but there is no lexical need to seek out a reason for the plural usage. As Sasse surmises in respect of the semantic expansion of the (singular) αἰών, “The plural αἰῶνες shares the change of meaning. Hence the αἰῶνες of Heb 1.2 . . . and 11.3 . . . are to be understood spatially as ‘worlds’ or ‘spheres.’”<sup>6</sup>

For many commentators, however, the most compelling basis for the “world” translation is the similarity between Heb 1.2c and Heb 11.3. The same plural form (τοὺς αἰῶνας) is found in both verses, alongside (apparently) similar concepts of creation. Most translations, however they render 1.2, tend to use the same phrase for Heb 11.3 to reflect this similarity,<sup>7</sup> suggestive of the way in which 11.3 impacts upon 1.2. Further support for the spatial rendering may come from 1.2b, with κληρονόμον πάντων, perhaps an allusion to Ps 2.8 (the inheritance of τὰ πέρατα τῆς γῆς; note that Heb 1.5 will also cite Ps 2.7).<sup>8</sup> The Son would thus become both the creator of, and ultimate heir of, the earthly created order.

Hence if the translational argument were about consistency and equivalence across the letter then a case for similar treatment of 1.2 could be made. The question remains however, whether exactly the same creative act, or precisely the same referent, is understood here, or whether this is just a (happy) coincidence. After all, Heb 1.2c and 11.3 are not precise equivalents; the verbs in each verse differ, and the agency likewise is specified differently. Thus while 11.3 offers grounds to translate αἰῶνας as “world(s),” it need not *require* it to be so. This paper offers no objection to αἰών being used spatially elsewhere in the letter, with 11.3 being the obvious place, but rather questions whether it *always* ought to be so. Indeed, should not the immediate context of 1.2 dictate its translation rather than a separate discourse much later in the letter?<sup>9</sup>

### Translating αἰών as “ages”

If there are reasons to query the consensus translation of αἰῶνας, or at the very least question the assumptions that underpin it, there are conversely equally valid reasons for proposing an alternative rendering. First and foremost, αἰών is understood temporally at various other points of the letter (6.5, 9.26), and translated by most English versions with the more traditional sense of “age”; thus to necessarily require a spatial dimension to 1.2c is to limit the comparative evidence merely to 11.3, a problematic restriction however strong the apparent lexical similarity between the two verses. Moreover, translating αἰών as “world” potentially restricts its referent merely to spatial matters, and the temporal

5 George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews: Translation, Comment and Conclusions* (Anchor Bible 36; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), 5.

6 Sasse, *TDNT* 1:204.

7 NASB is a notable exception. It renders “world” for 1.2c and “worlds” for 11.3.

8 George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 47.

9 Though, at the risk of self-contradiction, it is notable that the use of οἰκουμένη in 2.5 is significant for interpreting its usage in 1.6; it becomes the heavenly arena rather than the earthly world. Cf. David M. Allen, *Deuteronomy and Exhortation in Hebrews: An Exercise in Narrative Re-Presentation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 54-55.

dimension of the word is somewhat lost in translation, in English at least. Aware of this implication, Craig Koester opines of 1.2c that “the interplay between temporal and spatial aspects elsewhere in Hebrews suggests that both be included.”<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere in the letter, the temporal dimension to αἰών is certainly present, and perhaps prevalent; in singular form, αἰών commonly refers to the (new) age under which Christ will rule as a priest in the order of Melchizedek (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα—5.6; 6.20; 7.24, 28). This is invariably drawn from the lemma of LXX Ps 109.4, and is normally understood as “forever,” picking up the eschatological dimension of לעולם. It also does not follow that only αἰών in the singular should have a temporal dimension (“forever”), with the plural retaining the more spatial sense. In Heb 13.8, αἰών is used in its plural form in a similar sense of “forever”—the previously singular form is not present. The distinction, therefore, between the plural and singular rendering is likely not a helpful one for informing translational decisions, and may amount merely to stylistic variation.

It is true to say that most scholars orientate towards the spatial rendering of the verse,<sup>11</sup> but there are exceptions. Westcott, though still cautious about the wording of the clause, nonetheless summarizes 1.2c as “(t)hrough him, God called into being the temporal order of things.”<sup>12</sup> An even stronger articulation for the temporal rendering comes from David deSilva, who summarizes the verse as “it was ‘through him’ that God ‘made the ages.’”<sup>13</sup> But perhaps the most ardent proponent of the temporal reading comes from George Buchanan, whose commentary at “sundry times and in divers manners” departs from commonly accepted interpretative norms.<sup>14</sup> Buchanan argues strongly for the temporal sense to αἰών; just as the creation of the world could be construed temporally, so also could the creation of the ages—God, so to speak, was formulating the times and seasons.<sup>15</sup> He notes that even the creation account has some temporality to it—the cycle of days, for example—and “the author here chose to emphasize the temporal sequence, the periods or ages ranging from Adam to Christ. It was ‘through a Son’ that he ‘made the ages’, putting them in order.”<sup>16</sup> Not all aspects of Buchanan’s

10 Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 36; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 178. Marie E. Isaacs offers a similar perspective: “Given that elsewhere in Hebrews the language of time and space happily jostle together, it is best understood here as referring to both” (*Reading Hebrews and James: A Literary and Theological Commentary* [Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2002], 21). So also F. F. Bruce: “The whole created universe of space and time is meant” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [rev. ed.; New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 47). NJB also seems to reflect this sense, changing JB’s “everything there is” to the more straightforward “the ages.”

11 It seems particularly acute, for example, in Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 41.

12 B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 7.

13 David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “To the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 87.

14 Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 5-6. One thinks, for example, of his conception of Heb 13 as a separate, later addition (246) or his sense that physical Canaan remains part of the κατάπαυσις expectation (61-75).

15 Note that Buchanan also renders 11.3 as “we consider the ages to have been put in order by [the] word of God” (*Hebrews*, 247), and therefore retains the close association/pairing with 1.2c.

16 Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 6.

proposal are compelling, but one might develop his argument further by suggesting three reasons why a temporal understanding of αἰών should be retained and even prioritized.

### Immediate context

Perhaps the most persuasive reason to retain the “ages” translation is the immediate context of the clause. It is, of course, an old adage that context dictates meaning, and there is no reason why such wisdom might not continue to function here. Hebrews 1.1-2a has established a high-level, two-age eschatological grid, and this sets the context against which the status and achievements of the Son are articulated and therefore should be understood. Lincoln’s summary of the pericope’s credentials is apposite: “The exordium of 1.1-4 is imbued with an eschatological perspective and it is one that conforms fully to what would be expected of an early Christian adaptation of Jewish hopes.”<sup>17</sup> An eschatologically-gearred pericope, one ventures, should lead to, or at the very least open up the possibility of, an eschatological translation of key terms. Indeed, if the prologue sets an eschatological framework or context of two eras divided by the speaking of the Son, it would seem appropriate to continue that thought by attributing the creation of those αἰῶνας (namely “ages”) to filial agency. Interestingly, William Lane, while still translating αἰῶνας (1.2c) as “world,” nonetheless acknowledges the key eschatological division of 1.1-2, consequently rendering ἐπ’ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν (1.2a) as “in this final age.”<sup>18</sup> The temporal dimension, therefore, of 1.2c continues the thought language of 1.2a, rather than disrupting or removing it.

The subsequent material and development of the prologue would also seem to endorse this suggestion. While the sevenfold description of the Son’s status does imply that there is a deliberate unity to that discourse (1.2b-3), and that it be consequently considered as some form of “whole,” the syntax of 1.2b-3 equally suggests that the first two accreditations (i.e., 1.2b-2c) also link back to 1.1-2a and its given context. The pronoun ὃς (1.3) potentially starts a new clause, thereby linking 1.2bc to the eschatological discourse of 1.2a. This would contribute to the sense of ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας paralleling ἐπ’ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν, thereby inscribing some form of temporal sense on αἰών.

The relative flow of the Son’s qualities may further support this observation. The order is, of course, reversed in 1.2b-2c; the first attribute of the Son appears to reflect some (future) inheritance of all things, whereas the second attribute would be generally construed as looking backwards, to a creation event. This apparent oddity is recognized by some modern common language versions (GNB, CEV), which invert the two clauses, placing the creative element first. If, however, the creative

17 Andrew T. Lincoln, *Hebrews: A Guide* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 92. Lincoln offers a helpful summary of the issues in the translation of αἰών, and he gives particular emphasis to the eschatological dimension of 1.2c, seeking to, in some fashion, uphold the “ages” translation.

18 William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8; Hebrews 9-13* (2 vols.; Word Biblical Commentary 47A-47B; Dallas: Word, 1991), 1:4-5. He continues: “The temporal idioms qualify the central affirmation that God has spoken” (10). Barnabas Lindars also appeals strongly to the “ages” dialectic of 1.1-2 (*The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 30-31).

act pertains to something temporal as much as spatial, if, as the immediate context dictated, αἰών pertains to the creation of the ages, then there is less of an oddity in the epistolary flow. The future aspect of the inheritance does not detract from the Son's status, because he is the very one who is supra-temporal—he created the division between the eras. This seems to accord with Johnson's assertion regarding the clause: "If God is eternal, and Jesus is God's Son in an ontological and not simply honorific sense, then no temporal considerations block such a conclusion. The one who 'creates the ages' is scarcely to be defined by them!"<sup>19</sup>

### Broader context

If the context of 1.1-4 is eschatological, and if it may likewise be said to be programmatic for the letter as a whole,<sup>20</sup> then, at the risk of circular reasoning, the context of the whole epistle may be said to bespeak the division of the ages demarked by the Christ event. This proposition is borne out at several instances in the epistle where αἰών language is utilized. The rendering "age to come" is almost universally attested for 6.5, and espouses Hebrews' interest in a two-age perspective; the audience have tasted of the coming age, even if it is still to arrive (fully). A related sense may also be found in 8.8, where, quoting Jer 31.31 (= LXX Jer 38.31), Hebrews speaks of a new covenant coming forth in ἡμέραι ἔρχονται (8.8); there will be a *temporal* distinction that is marked by a (new) covenant identity. But perhaps the key text is 9.26, notable because—like 1.2—it adopts the plural form of αἰών in relation to Christ's appearance or incarnation, ἐπὶ συντελείᾳ τῶν αἰώνων. The latter phrase is slightly ambiguous; because, as we have seen, the singular and plural forms of αἰών are generally interchangeable, the precise referent of 9.26 could go in one of two directions. It could be the end or climax of the (old) age (NRSV), or, alternatively, the end/climax/coming together of both ages<sup>21</sup> (NIV).<sup>22</sup> The latter option is probably the preferable one, but in either case, the emphasis is on the temporal aspect, Attridge noting that the phrase (or its equivalents) "is common in Jewish apocalypses."<sup>23</sup> It is also the case here that Christ is associated with the division or culmination of the ages, a sense hardly distant from that conveyed by 1.2.

Hebrews 9.26 is of further interest in that it also contains the phrase ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου, normally translated as "from the creation/foundation of the world," and seemingly placed in apposition to συντελείᾳ τῶν αἰώνων. Such apposition might suggest that the writer wants to differentiate between αἰών and κόσμος, something that will be commented on further below. Moreover,

19 Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006), 68.

20 This is recognized and affirmed by a number of commentators. See, for example, Lane, *Hebrews*, 17-18.

21 Koester, *Hebrews*, 422; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 484; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 234. Johnson notes that this phrase corresponds with "the last of these days" (1.2a), which we have already suggested is a parallel to 1.2c (244).

22 Once more, the capacity for the plural form to take a singular meaning is manifest.

23 Attridge, *Epistle*, 264. He calls this time "the decisive final moment of history." See also Lane, *Hebrews*, 233, n.

Ellingworth articulates a lexical association between 9.26 and 1.2, as the “creative” element is similarly present. His assessment of 9.26 might be extended back to 1.2c: “both meanings [i.e., temporal and spatial] are present, with the temporal one predominating.”<sup>24</sup> On such grounds, one wonders, then, whether 9.26 is a better candidate than 11.3 for interpreting the sense of 1.2. Bruce’s summary of the verse leans in that direction: “It is not that Christ happened to come at the time of fulfillment but that his coming made that time the time of fulfillment.”<sup>25</sup> One might extend Bruce’s thought by saying that the one who created the ages now brings them to fulfillment—he is there at their beginning and their end.

### Linguistic reasons

As acknowledged above, it is true that both “world” or “universe” are legitimate readings of αἰών, and it is similarly evident that other NT texts broadly support that semantic domain. There is some form of parallelism in, for example, 1 Cor 1.20 where αἰών and κόσμος appear to be paralleled or even treated as equivalent terms.<sup>26</sup> But the “world” sense appears to be the exception rather than the rule for αἰών in the New Testament; beyond Heb 1.2 and 11.3, BDAG suggests only a couple of instances where the spatial dimension is conceived of as primary and neither of the suggestions seems particularly conclusive. First Timothy 1.17 (βασιλεῖ τῶν αἰώνων) is still rendered by NRSV as “king of the ages,” while Rev 15.3 is actually a variant reading of βασιλεὺς τῶν ἐθνῶν, the accepted reading of both UBS<sup>4</sup> and NA<sup>27</sup>. There are other examples of αἰών being rendered as “world” in modern translations (cf. 2 Cor 4.4 NRSV), but it remains the case that the temporal dimension to αἰών is the most common—maybe even the default—sense of αἰών in the NT corpus. One might say, therefore, that “world” or “universe” is the harder reading or translation of 1.2c, the one that really is premised mainly on the apparent similarity to 11.3.

Likewise, Hebrews knows of other words that could be used, if something akin to the created “world” was intended to be in view. The author can speak of Christ entering into the κόσμος (10.5) and similarly of the creation, or foundation, of the world (κόσμος—4.3; 9.26). Indeed, bearing in mind that it is κόσμος used in 4.3 (and neither 1.2c nor 11.3), one wonders whether a translation different from “world” should be used in those two verses to reflect the difference. Hebrews similarly seems to distinguish κόσμος from the heavenly realm, for which οἰκουμένη tends to be the preferred lexical term (1.6; 2.5).<sup>27</sup> On this line of thinking, κόσμος is used when the physicality of the created world is to be understood. Consequently, it would seem wise to take account of the choice of αἰών (as opposed to κόσμος) in 1.2c, and retain, in some way, the particular temporal dimension it carries.

24 Ellingworth, *Epistle*, 485.

25 Bruce, *Epistle*, 231.

26 Cf. Sasse, *TDNT* 1:203: “The sense of ‘time or course of the world’ can easily pass over into that of the ‘world’ itself so that αἰών approximates closely to κόσμος.”

27 See further Albert Vanhoye, “L’οἰκουμένη dans l’épître aux Hébreux,” 45 (1964): 248-53.

## Conclusion

It has been suggested that the temporal rather than the spatial perspective is the primary sense of αἰών in 1.2c, because of the contextual reasons specified above. It remains the case, however, that the scholarly consensus currently finds the spatial rendering more persuasive. There may, however, be a way through this impasse. If both “world” and “age” are legitimate renderings of αἰών, and if a good case could be made for either possibility, perhaps the real problem with translating 1.2c lies with the modern, or receiving language, rather than with the specific Greek word. Again, if, as Lincoln suggests, αἰών is “pressed into double service,”<sup>28</sup> it may be that this is a translational question as much as an exegetical one. Therefore, one suggests there is some common ground to be sought, to find a word or phrase in the receiving language—in this case English—that carries both senses of the Greek, an English term that can likewise do “double service.”<sup>29</sup> Neither “universe” nor “world” fully achieves that (though “universe” comes closer), as they remain primarily spatial designations, lacking an obvious temporal element.

What options are there? An English word that captures both senses is difficult to find, hence the problem arises in the first place; because of what has been hitherto argued, “ages” remains a preferred option, but it would clearly fail to satisfy those who seek to replicate the spatial dimension. Other possibilities include “through whom he created *history*” or “through whom he created *everything*” (cf. κληρονόμον πάντων—1.2b), but neither are particularly satisfactory on several accounts. A more effective rendering, however, albeit one verging towards paraphrase, would be something akin to “through whom he also created all times and space.” Fluid it might be, but it would at least carry the double meaning that αἰών distinctively conveys.

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<sup>28</sup> Lincoln, *Hebrews*, 92.

<sup>29</sup> Westcott seems to head in this direction, opining that αἰών embraces “the sum of the periods of time including all that is manifested in and through them” (*Hebrews*, 8).