

Monogenes: ‘only begotten’ or ‘one of a kind’?

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In more recent times some scholars have advanced the view that the Greek word μονογενῆς (monogenes) does not mean ‘only begotten’, as in the Authorised (King James) Version, but ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’ or something equivalent which omits the concept of ‘begotten’.¹ This article considers whether the concept of ‘begetting’ or ‘derivation by birth’ properly belongs to μονογενῆς, or whether the word simply means ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’. Both the etymology and usage of μονογενῆς are examined. It is concluded that the concept of ‘begetting’ or ‘derivation by birth’ does not properly belong to μονογενῆς, so that it is correctly translated ‘only begotten’, and that translations which omit the concept of ‘begotten’ are probably driven more by a theological motive than by impartial consideration of the evidence.

Which Etymology of Monogenes is Correct?

μονογενῆς is a Greek adjective consisting of the two parts, μονο (mono) and γενῆς (genes). There is no argument regarding the derivation of the first part of the word; it is from the Greek word μονον (monon), an adverb meaning ‘only’. The difference of opinion only arises in regard to the second part of the word, γενῆς. The traditional view is that γενῆς is to be derived from the Greek verb γεννάω (‘to beget’), so that μονογενῆς means ‘only begotten’. But the more recent view is that γενῆς is derived from γενος, meaning ‘class’, ‘sort’, ‘kind’, so that μονογενῆς must mean ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’. In support of this latter view, some point out that γενος has only a single ν (the Greek letter, pronounced ‘nu’), as does μονογενῆς, while γεννάω has two νs.² So which etymology is correct?

Firstly, the difference between the two etymologies is not as great as may at first appear. The difference is accentuated by choosing, from the range of possible meanings for γενος, only those meanings which do not explicitly include the concept of ‘begetting’, such as ‘class’, ‘sort’, ‘kind’. But in fact γενος may also mean ‘offspring’, ‘posternity’, ‘race’, ‘stock’, ‘kin’, where the concept of ‘begetting’ or ‘derivation by birth’ is quite evidently included.³ If such meanings were taken for γενος, then even if μονογενῆς is derived from γενος the meaning will still be ‘only offspring’, ‘only posternity’, etc., which are equivalent to ‘only begotten’.

Secondly, the claim that the γενῆς ending of μονογενῆς is to be derived from γενος, with the meaning ‘class’, ‘sort’, ‘kind’, may be tested by examining the meaning of the γενῆς ending in similar Greek adjectives which also have the same two-part structure.⁴ The following is a list of such adjectives:⁵

- **αγενης**: not of noble birth; low born
- **αγεννης**: low born
- **δυσγενης**: low born
- **δυσγενης**: well born, high born
- **ομογενης**: of the same race or family
- **παλιγενης**: born again, generated anew
- **πολυγενης**: of many families
- **προγενης**: born before
- **πρωτογενης**: first born
- **συγγενης**: related, akin

It may be observed that in all these words the concept of ‘begetting’ or ‘derivation by birth’ is clearly present. So how may it be confidently asserted that *μονογενης* does not contain the concept of ‘begetting’? The assertion does not appear to be confirmed by objective evidence. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that the concept of ‘begetting’ or ‘derivation by birth’ certainly can be conveyed by the *γενης* ending. It is therefore entirely possible that *μονογενης* means ‘only begotten’.

It may be also asked whether those who insist that the *γενης* ending in *μονογενης* is to be derived from *γενος*, with the meaning ‘class’, ‘sort’, ‘kind’, are as eager to insist on the same etymology for the words in the above list. Will it be insisted that *ευγενης*, for example, must mean ‘of a good sort’ rather than ‘well born’? In general, such will not be insisted upon. This is not only because it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to do so—the concept of ‘begotten’ being so clearly present in each of the words—but also because the words do not have the same theological significance that *μονογενης* has.⁶ So here is an evident inconsistency, and an inconsistency that indicates that the etymology is neither impartial nor scientific.

It may be observed from this list of words ending in *γενης* that the similar meanings of *αγενης* and *αγεννης* indicates that no particular significance should be attached to the single v as opposed to the doubled v. There are numerous other Greek words from which the same inference may be drawn. For example, *γενετης* and *γεννετης*, both mean ‘begetter’, ‘parent’, though one has a single v and in the other the v is doubled. Also, it may be noted that *γενε τη* means ‘birth’, although it has only one v. Hence, the argument that *μονογενης* is to be derived from *γενος*, meaning ‘class’, ‘sort’, ‘kind’, because both words have only a single v, and could not be derived from *γεννω* meaning to ‘beget’ because it has two vs, is a facile argument, incapable of being substantiated by the linguistic evidence.

From this examination of the two etymologies for *μονογενης*, it may be concluded that the meaning ‘only begotten’ is entirely possible. Certainly there are no grounds for summarily dismissing that meaning as is often done. On the other hand, the etymology of *μονογενης* which insists on deriving the *γενης* ending from *γενος* and then arbitrarily restricts the possible meanings of *γενος* within a narrow range, though those same meanings are not applied to other similar Greek words, cannot be considered an impartial or scientific etymology.

One final point may be made on the etymological question. Some have argued that the correct Greek word for ‘only begotten’ should be μονογεννετος, and not μονογενης.⁷ But perhaps no argument in this debate over etymology more undermines the position it was advanced to defend. This is due to the simple fact that μονογεννετος never actually occurs either in the New Testament or anywhere else in ancient Greek literature. There are only two possible explanations for this non-occurrence. The first is that the Greeks never had a concept of ‘only begotten’. This seems unlikely since they certainly have a concept of ‘begetting’: so why would they not have a concept of ‘only begotten’?⁸ The second is that, assuming the Greeks did have a word for ‘only begotten’, the reason μονογεννετος never appears is simply because μονογενης was the Greek word used with that meaning. There are no other reasonable alternatives. Ironically, then, the insistence that the correct word for ‘only begotten’ must be μονογεννετος and not μονογενης actually lends support to μονογενης being the correct word.

Survey of the Use of μονογενης in the New Testament

But the etymology of a word is only the first step in determining its meaning. While etymology serves as a guide, it is the actual usage of the word that is decisive of its meaning. In the following examination of every verse in the New Testament where μονογενης appears, the two possible meanings—‘only begotten’ and ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’—will be compared to see which best fits the context.

Luke 7.12–13: Now when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only [μονογενης] son of his mother, and she was a widow ... And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not.

He is his mother’s ‘only’ son; and ‘only’, in the context of mother and son, will mean ‘only begotten’. This well fits with the Lord having ‘compassion on her’ and saying to her ‘weep not’, for she has no means of support, being a widow and now having also lost her only (begotten) son. Her weeping is the peculiarly bitter weeping of a parent for an ‘only (begotten) son’ elsewhere mentioned in Scripture (Jeremiah 6.26, Amos 8.10, Zechariah 12.10). But does it make equally good sense to call this deceased son the ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’ son of his mother? That might imply that he was not her only son, but simply a special son to his mother, though she had other sons. This loss would not then leave her completely without support, so there would not be as much cause for the Lord’s compassion toward her. Thus, ‘only begotten’ fits the context better than ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’.

Luke 8.41–42: And, behold, there came a man named Jairus, and he was a ruler of the synagogue: and he fell down at Jesus’ feet, and besought him that he would come into his house: for he had one only [μονογενης] daughter, about twelve years of age, and she lay a dying.

Verse 42 explains the earnestness of Jairus’s appeal to Jesus for the life of his daughter. His earnestness is founded upon the daughter being his ‘one only’; and since the context is a father and daughter, the meaning will be ‘only begotten’. It is the tenderness of a parent toward an ‘only begotten’ child that explains the earnestness of the appeal. But does the meaning of ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’ explain Jairus’s earnestness so well? It does not. If Jairus’s daughter

were only his 'one of a kind' or 'unique' daughter, that could imply that he had other daughters, so that the loss of this particular one would not be so keenly felt as the loss of an only (begotten) daughter. Thus, 'only begotten' gives a better sense in the context than 'one of a kind' or 'unique'.

Luke 9.38: And, behold, a man of the company cried out, saying, Master, I beseech thee, look upon my son: for he is my only child [μονογενῆς].

Again, the context is a father and son, and the earnestness of the father's appeal arises from the fact that this son is his μονογενῆς. If the meaning is 'only begotten', then this son is the one upon whom the father would place his hopes for the future of the family and his own support in old age. If this son should die, all the hopes of the father would be extinguished. So the translation of μονογενῆς as 'only', in the sense of 'only begotten', very well suits the earnestness of the father's appeal. But if the son was his 'one of a kind' or 'unique' son, so that he might have other sons on whom he could depend, how does that equally well explain the earnestness of the father's appeal? It clearly does not. Again, in a comparison of the two possible meanings, 'only begotten' gives the better sense in the context.

Before passing on from these verses in Luke, it is worth pausing briefly to note that the context in each of these verses is a parent pleading for a child, the child being either already deceased or on the point of death, and the parent gripped by the deep emotion which that death or near approach of death naturally excites. In every case, the meaning 'only begotten' for μονογενῆς is undeniably the most suitable in the context. Thus, the usage of μονογενῆς in these verses in Luke clearly confirms 'only begotten' as the correct meaning of the word.

Moreover, by taking μονογενῆς in these verses in Luke to mean 'only begotten', there is a parallel with similar verses in the Old Testament which speak of mourning for an 'only' son: Jeremiah 6.26, Amos 8.10, Zechariah 12.10. But if the parent's grief in each of these verses in Luke was instead for a 'one of a kind' or 'unique' son, the parallel with the Old Testament verses is lost.

John 1.14: And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten [μονογενῆς] of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

Who better than the 'only begotten of the Father' to reflect the glory of the Father? Who but the 'only begotten of the Father' would be so 'full of grace and truth'? John speaks here of Christ in relation to the Father. What more natural than that the concept of 'begotten' should be present in such a context? But if the meaning is 'one of a kind' or 'unique' son, how does that give so clear a ground for His having the same glory as the Father? Precisely what is the relation of this 'one of a kind' or 'unique' Son to the Father? It is certainly clear how the 'only begotten of the Father' should have the same glory as the Father, but not quite so clear in the case of a 'one of a kind' or 'unique' Son.

Again, the comparison of the two possible meanings shows that 'only begotten' suits the context better.

John 1.18: No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten [μονογενῆς] Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared *him*.

Who but the ‘only begotten Son’ would be ‘in the bosom of the Father’; and who but the ‘only begotten Son’ would faithfully and authoritatively ‘declare’ the Father? What is spoken here of the Son is precisely what one would expect of an ‘only begotten Son’. But would the ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’ son suit the context as well? It is certainly vaguer and does not give so clear a ground as to why this son is ‘in the bosom of the Father’ or what authority he might have to ‘declare’ him. The comparison of the two possible meanings again shows that ‘only begotten’ gives the better sense in the context.

John 3.16: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten [μονογενῆς] Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Here the greatness of the love of God is expressed in the giving of his ‘only begotten Son’. This is a singular love that spares not what is nearest and dearest, even to the point of giving the ‘only begotten Son’. So ‘only begotten Son’ certainly fits this context well.

But would ‘his one of a kind Son’ or ‘his unique Son’ fit the context equally as well?

The giving of a ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’ Son might be an expression of peculiar love, but it could not match the love expressed in the giving of an ‘only begotten Son’. Hence, ‘only begotten Son’ suits the context better, expressing the profoundest depth of the love of God.

John 3.17–18: For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten [μονογενῆς] Son of God.

Here the culpability of unbelief is heightened by the fact that the unbelief is directed to the ‘only begotten Son of God’, as one preeminently worthy of belief, because He so nearly represents the Father, so that the refusal to believe on Him is a great offence in the eyes of the Father.⁹ Thus, ‘only begotten Son’ fits this context very well. But would the ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’ Son fit the context equally as well? It would not. The heinousness of the unbelief directed to a ‘one of a kind Son’ or a ‘unique Son’ can never quite match that which is directed to ‘the only begotten Son’. The ‘only begotten Son’ represents the Father as none other can. So again, ‘only begotten’ fits the context better than ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’.

Hebrews 11.17: By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten [μονογενῆς] son,

Those who deny μονογενῆς mean ‘only begotten’ make much of this verse, claiming that μονογενῆς here clearly cannot have the meaning ‘only begotten’. They point out that Isaac was not Abraham’s ‘only begotten son’, because when God commanded him to offer up Isaac, Abraham had another son, Ishmael. Further, they claim that to insist on the translation ‘only begotten’ here would be to introduce a contradiction into the Scripture and that the correct translation of μονογενῆς must therefore be ‘unique’, since Isaac was the ‘unique’ son of

Abraham, being the son through whom God had made His promises to Abraham. Having confidently established from this verse that the meaning of μονογενῆς must be ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’, they then apply that meaning to every other verse in Scripture where μονογενῆς occurs.

But this is strange reasoning. If we do not immediately understand how ‘only begotten’ can be the meaning at Hebrews 11.17, must we hence conclude that that cannot be the meaning of μονογενῆς here or anywhere else in Scripture, despite plain evidence to the contrary? How can it be reasonable to overturn the evidence that μονογενῆς means ‘only begotten’ from other parts of Scripture merely upon the evidence of this one verse? It would be more reasonable to try to understand how ‘only begotten’ might in fact be the correct meaning of the word in Hebrews 11.17.

After all, the problem is not just in Hebrews 11.17, but also in the Old Testament account of Abraham offering up Isaac to which Hebrews 11.17 refers. In Genesis 22.2,12,16, God calls Isaac Abraham’s ‘only son’, though Ishmael was born before him. Will the translation ‘only son’ at Genesis 22.2,12,16 also be objected to on the ground that it introduces a contradiction into the Scriptures? Or should it not rather be enquired in what sense Isaac might be called Abraham’s ‘only son’ in Genesis 22.2,12,16, just as he might also be called his ‘only begotten son’ in Hebrews 11.17?

Isaac was the son through whom God’s promises to Abraham would be fulfilled and by whom his descendants would be known. Abraham’s seed was to be reckoned through Isaac alone (Genesis 21.12, Hebrews 11.18). Thus, it was as if Abraham had no other offspring, at least none that were reckoned to him as sons. Probably for this reason, Isaac is called Abraham’s ‘only son’ in Genesis 22.2,12,16 and his ‘only begotten son’ in Hebrews 11.17.¹⁰ Isaac was not Abraham’s ‘only begotten

son’ in an absolute sense, but he was his ‘only begotten son’ in the very important sense of the one through whom God’s promises to Abraham would be fulfilled.¹¹ Since a principal focus of Scripture is the history of redemption from promise to fulfilment, and since the promises to Abraham are an important part of that history, it is quite natural that this sense should take precedence over any other.

1 John 4.9: In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.

Similar comments apply to this verse as to John 3.16. God’s sending his ‘only begotten’ Son into the world is a manifestation of His love toward us. The ‘only begotten’ Son is a cherished son, not just any son. The sending of Him is an evidence of singular love. When a father sends his ‘only begotten’ son, he sends himself, he sends all that he has. Would the sending of a ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’ son manifest the same love? It might manifest a great love, but it could never manifest quite the same depth of love as sending an ‘only begotten’ son. In sending a ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’ son, a father is not sending himself and he is not necessarily sending all that he has. Thus, the translation ‘only begotten Son’ gives a greater poignancy to the statement and hence fits the context better.

In every instance of μονογενῆς in the New Testament, the meaning ‘only begotten’ fits the context better than ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’. Thus it may be concluded from an examination of the usage of μονογενῆς that there is clear warrant for retaining the meaning ‘only begotten’.

One final point may be made regarding the usage of μονογενῆς. If μονογενῆς truly does mean ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’, without any reference to ‘begetting’, then one might expect that μονογενῆς could be used of a brother or a sister or even of a father. Thus, we might expect to find: μονογενῆς Αδελφος meaning ‘one of a kind/unique brother’, or μονογενῆς αδελφη meaning ‘one of a kind/unique sister’, or μονογενῆς πατηρ meaning ‘one of a kind/unique father’. It is significant that such expressions never occur throughout the whole of Greek literature. Whenever μονογενῆς is used in the context of personal relationship, the relationship is always that of offspring to parent.¹² This strongly suggests that the concept of ‘begotten’ is indeed present in μονογενῆς.

The Theological Motive

If an impartial consideration of the etymology and usage indicates that the concept of ‘begotten’ is indeed present in μονογενῆς, how are we to account for some scholars confidently affirming the contrary? It can only be accounted for by the influence of a motive beyond the objective evidence. Such a motive would be an overriding theological one.

If the Son is ‘begotten’ of the Father, then he is of the same substance or essence as the Father (homoousios). But the doctrine of the Son being of the same substance as the Father is the very doctrine which anti-Trinitarians (Arians, Socinians, Unitarians, etc.) are eager to deny. They hold the erroneous view that the Son is a creature created by God, and therefore not of the same substance as the Father.¹³ But ‘creating’ and ‘begetting’ are two very different things. A man may ‘create’ something, such as a work of art, which will bear the stamp of his character upon it as his creation, but it does not partake of the same nature as the man. But if a man ‘begets’ a son, the son does partake of the same nature as the father.

Thus the language of Scripture that Christ is ‘begotten’ of the Father is very deliberate in communicating an important truth, that is, that the Son and the Father are of the same essence or substance.

Some today who would not rank themselves amongst those that deny the Scriptural doctrine of the Trinity nevertheless support the meaning of μονογενῆς as ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’. They think that by denying the concept of ‘begotten’ to the word they avoid the heretical notion that Christ was begotten at some distinct point in time—an idea held by some anti-Trinitarians.¹⁴ But we are not at liberty to adjust a doctrine plainly taught in Scripture because of the perceived adverse consequences of holding that doctrine. If the Scripture clearly teaches that the Son is the ‘only begotten’ of the Father, then that doctrine must be embraced. But the doctrine must not be pressed beyond its proper Scriptural bounds. For at the same time that the Scripture declares the Son to be the ‘only begotten’ of the Father, it nowhere indicates that such ‘begetting’ occurred in time or that there was a time when the Father was without the Son.

Thus, the Nicene Creed (AD 381),¹⁵ which was drawn up to combat the Arian heresy, speaks of the Son as ‘begotten of the Father before all ages’:

Begotten of the Father before all ages,
Light of Light,
Very God of Very God,
Begotten, not made;
of one essence [*homoousios*] with the Father.¹⁶

Similarly, the Confessions of the Reformation era represent the Son as ‘eternally begotten’ or ‘begotten from everlasting’ of the Father:

- **Belgic Confession (1561), Article 10:** ‘eternally begotten, not made or created’
- **Thirty-Nine Articles (1563), Article II:** ‘The Son...begotten from everlasting of the Father’
- **Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), II.3:** ‘the Son is eternally begotten of the Father’
- **London Baptist Confession (1689), II.3:** ‘the Son is eternally begotten of the Father’¹⁷

It is an indication of the lamentable spiritual decay of these times that there are modern translations of the Scripture (e.g. NIV, ESV) in circulation which, by an erroneous translation of *μονογενῆς* that omits the concept of ‘begotten’, effectively wipe out the exegetically well-founded theology found in the Nicene Creed and historic Reformed Confessions.

Modern translations of *μονογενῆς* as ‘one and only Son’ (NIV) or ‘only Son’ (ESV) at John 3.16,18 and 1 John 4.9 actually introduce a contradiction into Scripture. There are other ‘sons of God’ mentioned in the Scripture (Genesis 6.2,4; Job 1.6, 2.1, 38.7; Hosea 1.10; Matthew 5.9; Ephesians 1.5, etc.), so how is Christ the ‘only Son’? The simple answer is that all these other ‘sons’ are ‘created’ and none are ‘begotten’. So if ‘begotten’ is omitted from *μονογενῆς*, this crucial difference between these other ‘sons of God’ and Christ is also omitted and a contradiction introduced into the Scripture. But if ‘begotten’ is faithfully retained in rendering the Greek word *μονογενῆς* then the contradiction disappears. Christ differs from the other ‘sons of God’ in this crucial way, that He is the ‘only begotten’ Son of God. All others are not begotten but created.

Conclusion

Having considered the question of the etymology of *μονογενῆς* and the evidence of the usage of that word in the New Testament, there is clearly no solid reason for adopting the meaning ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’ in place of ‘only begotten’. The only reason that could explain ‘only begotten’ being displaced by ‘one of a kind’ or ‘unique’ or some similar meaning is a reason remote from the actual evidence: an overriding theological reason.

For some, the meaning ‘only begotten’ may have been perceived as undermining the doctrine of the Trinity. But the case is far otherwise, for ‘only begotten’ is in fact essential to the maintaining of the historic and Scriptural doctrine of the Trinity, conveying as it does the

important truth that the Son is of the same substance as the Father. This is a truth embodied in the faithful Creeds and Confessions of the church, from which she has no warrant to depart.

It is an astonishing fact that a large part of the church today, by adopting modern Bible versions which omit the concept of 'begotten' in the translation of μονογενῆς, are being silently and unwittingly infiltrated with anti-Trinitarianism.

Among the many good reasons for retaining the Authorised (King James) Bible as the standard version of the English-speaking church, this one should rank among the foremost: that by its faithful translation of μονογενῆς as 'only begotten' it preserves the historic and Scriptural doctrine of the Trinity. It is a great mercy of the Lord to the English-speaking church that the AV has been, and still is, the means of preserving that church from serious error, a mercy perhaps lightly esteemed by some but nevertheless highly prized by others.

► Endnotes

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