

An Inductive Study of the Use of *Monogenēs* in the New Testament

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Abstract

This article, an inductive study of the use of monogenēs in the New Testament, argues that the term is one that completely excludes any notion of “begetting” or “begotten” with regard to Jesus and instead conveys the meaning of “unique” and “dear” when referring to the Son of God.

Introduction

Greek lexicons and dictionaries of the New Testament are at their most basic nothing other than the systematic classification of word usage. The “authority” of such lexicons (though rarely considered by most users) is dependent on the knowledge, judgment, accuracy, and precision of the lexicographer. With sufficient effort and training, the individual student can personally construct his own systematic classification of word usage, and thereby provide a “check” on standard lexical pronouncements. This is done (properly) by locating all uses in the New Testament of a given word, examining closely each contextual usage, comparing these with usage outside the literary corpus under investigation, then classifying usages in a systematic fashion. Some attention to etymology (important for word history though having no necessary connection to word meaning) as well as synonyms and antonyms are also of value.

***Monogenēs* in the New Testament**

It is the purpose of this paper to make such an inductive study of the use of the adjective *monogenēs* in the New Testament. This word is found nine times in the New Testament: Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38; John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; Hebrews 11:17; I John 4:9.

From this simple listing, it is first of all evident that the word is conspicuously absent from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, and though used by Luke in his Gospel, it does not occur in Acts; neither, Paul, Peter, James or Jude ever employs the word, and though John

makes more frequent use of the word than all other New Testament authors combined, it is absent from the Apocalypse. Some explanation for the absence of *monogenēs* in the Synoptic Gospels with reference to Jesus, and in Paul's writings will be offered.

Luke 7:12⁸⁵

This verse may be literally translated as: "And when he drew near to the gate of the city, and behold, a dead [man] was being carried out, a *monogenēs* in relation to his mother, and she [was] a widow, and many people of the city [were] with her."⁸⁶

Jesus is here (in an account unique to Luke) dealing with the son of a widowed woman in the village of Nain. The context is sufficiently clear that *monogenēs* is used to describe the special relationship this man had with his mother, a widowed woman who apparently is destitute of other family.

Luke 8:42 (for sake of context, we quote also v. 41):

"And behold, [there was] a man who was named Jairus, and he was ruler of the synagogue. And he, having fallen at the feet of Jesus, was exhorting him to enter into his house, because he had a *monogenēs* daughter about twelve years [old], and she was dying."

As with the previous use, here *monogenēs* is used to describe the relationship of a child to a parent. The parallel verses in Matthew (9:18) and Mark (5:22, 23) do not include *monogenēs* nor do they use any potentially synonymous terms which might illuminate its usage in Luke.

Luke 9:38

"And behold, a man from the crowd called out, saying, 'Teacher, I am begging you to look at my son, because he is *monogenēs* to me.'"

As with the two other examples in Luke, the relationship of a parent and child is at the center of the usage of *monogenēs*. And, as in the previous example, the parallel passages in Matthew (17:14, 15) and Mark (9:17) lack *monogenēs* or any other descriptive adjective applied to the boy.

⁸⁵ All quotations from the Greek New Testament are from *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text*, edited by Zane Hodges, and Arthur L. Farstad.

⁸⁶ All English translations of Bible quotations are my own. Words in brackets have been supplied *ad sensum* though having no corresponding word in the Greek original.

John 1:14, 18

“And the word became flesh and sojournd us and we saw his glory, glory as of a *monogenous* beside a father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God. The *monogenēs* Son,⁸⁷ who is in the bosom of the Father, that one explained [him].”

Here, as in all of John’s five uses of *monogenēs*, the person so described is the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. Here, the relationship of Father and Son is expressly spelled out, though clearly not the ordinary human relationship between parent and child, as in Luke’s three usages.

John 3:16, 18

“For God loved the world this way that he gave his *monogenē* Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. . . . The one who believes in him is not judged, but the one who does not believe in him already has been judged, because he has not believed in the name of the *monogenous* Son of God.”

Picking up on the usage of *monogenēs* as found in chapter 1, John repeats it here with reference to the relationship of the First and Second Persons of the Trinity.

1 John 4:9

“In this appeared the love of in us, that God has sent his *monogenē* Son into the world so that we may live through him.”

Consistent with his four other uses John employs *monogenēs* solely as an ascriptive term for Christ, and uses it in a context in which the Father-Son relationship is explicit.

Hebrews 11:17, 18

“In faith, Abraham, when he was tested offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up the *monogenē* [he] to whom it was said that, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called.’”

As with all other New Testament usages, here *monogenēs* is descriptive of a personal relationship, in this case that of father and son, and in common with all references outside the writings of John, it relates

⁸⁷ The variant reading *theos* is strongly supported by early witnesses to the text, including manuscripts p66, p75, Aleph*, B, and C* as well as the Coptic (Boharic) and Syriac (Peshitta) versions, along with a significant number of early patristic quotes, numerous later manuscripts and some other versions. If genuine, it constitutes an important additional “proof-text” of the Deity of the Logos, i.e., Christ. See Barbara Aland *et al.*, eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 314.

to a biological relationship of parent and child. However, here it is notable that Isaac was *not* the only son that Abraham had fathered (“begotten”), that is, contrary to the common English version’s translation, Isaac was *not* Abraham’s “only-begotten son,” in as much as Abraham had an older son named Ishmael, thirteen years Isaac’s senior. On this basis, one suspects that there is something decidedly erroneous in the use, here at least, of “only begotten” as the English translation of *monogenēs*.

Etymology of *Monogenēs*

But sorting this out, what sense, what meaning should be ascribed to *monogenēs* in the New Testament? First, we will consider the etymology of the word, not as a sure-fire guide to meaning, but as a starting place in tracing the development of the word.

The translation of *monogenēs* by “only-begotten” in the KJV and other English versions in six of the nine New Testament occurrences (all except those in Luke) would suggest a presumed etymology from *monos* “only” and *gennaō* “to beget, father, procreate.” This presumed etymology is certainly erroneous. The lexicographers are united in this. Moulton and Milligan state that “*monogenēs* is literally ‘one of a kind,’ ‘only,’ ‘unique’ (*unicus*), not ‘only begotten,’ which would be *monogennētos* (*unigenitus*).”⁸⁸ Thayer gives as the roots of the word *monos* and *genos* the latter word meaning “kind, sort, class”),⁸⁹ as does Abbott-Smith.⁹⁰

“Only-begotten,” then, as the English translation of *monogenēs* is apparently based on the word’s supposed etymology. It is a mistake to base the understanding of a word’s meaning on its etymology (rather than its usage), *especially so if you have the wrong etymology*, as is the case of the translation “only-begotten”! This is not what *monogenēs* means, either in etymology or usage.

Ancient Versions

Next a check of ancient Bible translations will be helpful. How bilingual near-contemporaries of the New Testament understood words is likely to be a valuable guide to the meaning of such words. Consultation of multiple diverse versions will serve as a cross-check on interpretation and understanding. If unrelated versions in unrelated languages agree on

⁸⁸ *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, 416-17.

⁸⁹ *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1889), 417.

⁹⁰ *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (3rd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), 296.

the meaning of a word, the likelihood of that being the correct understanding is strengthened. First, the Latin versions will be considered, then the Syriac.

Latin Versions

In the Old Latin, there was apparently a uniform rendering of *monogenēs* by *unicus*⁹¹ which means, “only, sole; singular, unparalleled, unique”⁹² and from which, most obviously, comes our English word “unique.” The Old Latin part of manuscript D (Codex Bezae) has *unicus* (in various cases) for *monogenēs* at Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38; and John 3:16, 18 (it is defective in the Old Latin part at John 1:14, 18; I John 4:9). The manuscript never contained the book of Hebrews.⁹³ The meaning “unique” fits nicely in every New Testament example: the son of the widow of Nain was her *only/unique* son. So, too, of the daughter of Jairus: she was his only child. Likewise with the man in Luke 9; his son was without siblings, in short, unique. With reference to Isaac, while we recognize that Isaac was *not* Abraham’s only son, his relationship to Abraham was nevertheless unique, since Isaac alone was born “according to promise,” that is, in fulfillment of a Divine promise. It seems that in all these cases, the very uniqueness of the relationship of parent and child would also carry a strong measure of endearment, preciousness, and love. *Unicus* carries no hint of the notion of begetting or fathering. Even the references to Christ fit nicely with the meaning *unique*. While there are many “sons of God,” he is the Son of God in a unique sense, that of eternal relationship, not as with us a relationship established in time on the basis of grace through faith. So even here, following the lead of the Old Latin versions of the NT, *unique* seems entirely appropriate and adequate as a translation of *monogenēs*.

However, in the revised Latin version of Jerome, commonly called the Vulgate, while the translation of *monogenēs* by *unicus* in Luke is left unchanged, in every case where the term is applied to Christ, as well as the singular reference to Isaac, the translation is altered to *unigenitus*,⁹⁴

⁹¹ See B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 169; James Hastings, ed., *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), II: 281; reprint of 1908 Charles Scribner’s Sons edition.

⁹² Cassell’s *Latin Dictionary*, 599.

⁹³ See Scrivener, ed., *Bezae Codex Cantabrigiensis*.

⁹⁴ See Bonifatius Fischer, *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, editio minor (Editio tertia emendate; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1984) in the passages noted previously. It is also notable that the Latin version of the so-called “Apostles’ Creed” (which pre-dates Jerome) translates the Greek *monogenēs* by *unicus*, while the somewhat later Nicene Creed translates *monogenēs* by *unigenitus*, just like the Vulgate. See Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (3rd ed.; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), II: 45, 57.

literally “only-begotten.” It was from this translation in the Latin Vulgate that this sense and meaning imputed to *monogenēs* into the Reformation vernacular versions of Europe passed (*eingeborenen* in German, *unigenito* in Spanish, *only begotten* in English, etc.). What motivated Jerome to make this revision? Dale Moody informs us that Jerome was influenced in his thinking by attendance at a series of lectures by Gregory of Nazianzus, in which he discussed the eternal relationship of the Persons of the Trinity, speaking of God the Father as the begetter (*gennetor*) and God the Son as the one begotten (*gennema*).⁹⁵ This led to or was based on the presumed etymology of *monogenēs* as from *gennaō* instead of the correct *genos*. Jerome’s substitution of *unigenitus* for the Old Latin’s *unicus* in six of the nine New Testament occurrences (all those which refer to Christ, and the one reference to Isaac—because he is a “type” of Christ?), was based on theological considerations, which in turn seem founded on etymological speculations, speculations which happened to be entirely false and misleading. As a result, Jerome’s revision introduced into the New Testament a much less accurate, in fact, positively misleading and erroneous translation. The influence of the Vulgate on Western vernacular translations preserved and propagated the error.

The Peshitta Syriac

Turning to the Peshitta Syriac version of the New Testament, we find that in all occurrences of *monogenēs* in Luke, John and 1 John, the Syriac has *yichidaia*’;⁹⁶ in Hebrews 11:17, the related word *yichida*’ is employed, both adjectives from the same root, *yehd*, having the basic idea of singleness, aloneness.⁹⁷ As with the Old Latin, the Syriac version found no sufficient grounds for translating *monogenēs* in any way connecting it with the idea of procreating, fathering, or begetting, nor did it draw a distinction between the use of the word with reference to Christ

⁹⁵ “Only begotten,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (5 vols.; ed., George A. Buttrick; New York: Abingdon Press, 1962.), 3: 604. This article is in my estimation exactly on target in all details, except for its failure to note the aspect of endearment in *monogenēs* when used of personal relationships, and his failure to note that both *agapētos* and *idios* are synonyms of *monogenēs*.

⁹⁶ Of necessity, Roman script is substituted here for the Syriac.

⁹⁷ See J. Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 191. Under the influence of the Vulgate, this lexicon gives among the meanings of these two words “only-begotten,” an idea wholly alien to the Syriac root or the word’s usage, as a comparison with usage in Jewish Aramaic—a sister dialect of the same language—abundantly proves; Marcus Jastrow, compiler, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Brooklyn: P. Shalom, 1967), 574.

on the one hand, and with reference to ordinary human children on the other.

Greek Old Testament Translations

It is important to take a look at the broader usage of *monogenēs* outside the New Testament, including the Septuagint, the Apocrypha, and early Christian writers. *Monogenēs* is found a number of times in the pre-Christian Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, along with the second century A.D. Jewish Greek versions of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, as the most common translation of the Hebrew adjective *yachid*. It is so used in the LXX at Judges 11:34 of Jephthah's only daughter (a usage identical with all three Lucan usages), and is employed in the LXX in Psalm 22:20 and 35:17 where *yachid* is used in parallel with "my soul"—resultant meaning being "my life" or some such idea. In Psalm 25:16, *yachid* / *monogenēs* are adjectival, meaning "alone." Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion have *monogenēs* at Proverbs 4:3, of a mother's only son (LXX has *agapōmenos*, literally, "one who is loved"); likewise Aquila and Symmachus have *monogenēs* at Jeremiah 6:26 of an only son.⁹⁸ There, as well as in Amos 8:10 and Zechariah 12:10, the LXX translates *yachid* by *agapētos* ("dear," "beloved"). Genesis 22, where *yachid* is used three times of Isaac (vv. 2, 12, 16), is a most notable case. In all three instances, the LXX has *agapētos*, while Aquila translated the first occurrence and Symmachus the second by *monogenēs*.⁹⁹ Furthermore, Josephus describes Isaac, with reference to this passage, as Abraham's *monogenēs*,¹⁰⁰ as did the writer of Hebrews, in spite of his dependence on the LXX. Philo wrote of Isaac as *agapētos kai monos* (literally, "dear and only").¹⁰¹

It seems evident from this text and their common interchange as Greek translations of *yachid* that *agapētos* and *monogenēs* are close synonyms. This would explain why *monogenēs* is absent as a term for Christ in the Synoptic Gospels, who use *agapētos* of Christ (and only of Christ) nine times: Matthew 3:17; 12:18;¹⁰² 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; 12:6; Luke 3:22; 9:35; 20:13. This instead of *monogenēs* was, perhaps, their chosen translation of an ostensibly original (Aramaic) *yichidaia*' spoken

⁹⁸ Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint*, (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 reprint.), II: 933.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* What they had in the other occurrences, or what Theodotion had was undiscovered by me.

¹⁰⁰ *Jewish Antiquities*, I, 222.

¹⁰¹ *On Abraham*, XXXII, 168.

¹⁰² Quoting Isaiah 42:1, where the LXX has *eklektos* ("chosen"). On this see the following note.

by God the Father at the baptism of Jesus and on the Mount (or, if spoken in Hebrew, *yachid*), and by Jesus in parables about himself.¹⁰³

Apocrypha

In the Apocrypha, *monogenēs* is employed in five passages (Tobit 3:15; 6:10 [ms. A, not Aleph or B]; 6:14 [ms. Aleph; A and B have *monos*]; 8:17; and Baruch 4:16 [mss. A and R; Aleph and B have *monos*]), all used of the only child of parents, as in Judges 11:34, and Luke 7, 8, and 9. Since the Greek of these passages is a translation of unknown and unavailable Aramaic (or Hebrew) texts, it is impossible to know with certainty what the original word(s) was.

Apostolic Fathers

In the Apostolic fathers, Clement of Rome (and later Origen, Cyril and others) employs *monogenēs* to describe the Phoenix, a bird reported to live 500 years--a unique bird, in a class by itself.¹⁰⁴ The usage here is strictly in the literal sense of the word—"unique, one of a kind"—with no thought of endearment or preciousness as commonly found in New Testament and Greek Old Testament usages. At the very least, it reveals with certainty that *monogenēs* has nothing *per se* to do with "begetting."

Translating *Monogenēs* into English

What then is the best way to translate *monogenēs* into English? "Only-begotten" is clearly unacceptable, because it is based on a false etymology and misunderstanding of the word. Taken literally, the English word suggests derivation, creation, origination of Christ, a view

¹⁰³ Two additional probable synonyms of *monogenēs* are *idios* ("one's own") and *eklektos*. In Matthew 12:18, Isaiah 42:1 is quoted. For the LXX's *eklektos* (used of Christ again in John 6:69, in many early manuscripts), Matthew reads *agapētos*. Paul uses *idios* of Christ (though never either *monogenēs* or *agapētos*) in Romans 8:32 (with "son" expressed), and almost certainly also in his sermon in Acts 20:28, "which he purchased with the blood of his own *idios* [son]." On this interpretation of the Acts passage, see F. F. Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles. The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (2nd ed.; London: Tyndale Press, 1952), 380-81; Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 480-81. Irenaeus, in his treatise "Against Heresies," has a tantalizing statement, "For Abraham. . . delivered up as a sacrifice to God his *only-begotten* and *beloved* son, in order that God also might be pleased to offer up for all his seed His *own beloved* and *only-begotten* Son, as a sacrifice for our redemption" (emphasis added) (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I: 467). It might prove very instructive to know just exactly what the Greek is for the italicized words in the above quote.

¹⁰⁴ J. B. Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers* (5 vols.; 2nd ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989 reprint), part 1; 2: 87.

which is doctrinally heretical and clearly in contradiction to the teaching of the Bible.

“Only” has long been used in at least some of the New Testament passages, especially those in Luke, and in some versions, it is used in the rest of the passages as well, even with reference to Christ. This rendering has the advantage of at least not being misleading, though it falls short in that it fails to convey the sense of preciousness, endearment, love which are inherent in *monogenēs* when used of inter-personal relationships. The paraphrase “one and only” employed by the New International Version in all the John, I John and Hebrews references (the latter being especially inexplicable contextually) fails on the same score.

Perhaps in the Luke passages, where the idea of preciousness is inherent in the context, the translation by “only” is adequate. For the other passages, in order to bring out all aspects of the word, I would suggest as the translation a sort of double rendering, namely “unique, dear” as in “We saw his glory, glory as of the unique, dear son of the father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14b); “God loved the world this way: he gave his unique, dear son so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life” (John 3:16). Perhaps this sounds a bit stilted, but it is at least accurate and brings out all facets of the word’s meaning in those contexts.

Theological Implications

Understanding *monogenēs* in its proper sense—one that completely excludes any notion of “begetting” or “begotten”—has strong theological implications for the doctrine of Christ. It renders moot the whole heated theological debate of the third and fourth centuries concerning the so-called “eternal generation of the Son,” a term which always left me with the uncomfortable feeling that if we accepted such terminology at face value, we were admitting *de facto* that Christ was a created being and not God. It also makes the Nicene Creed’s affirmation that Christ was “begotten but not made” (*gennēthenta, ou poiēthenta*) so much verbal nonsense.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, proposed translations of *monogenēs* such as that noted in BAGD, namely “begotten of the only one” are exposed as wholly ludicrous and unfounded.¹⁰⁶ Christ is the unique Son of God; that is, in the sense in which he is the Son of God, he has no brothers.

¹⁰⁵ For a frank and pointed analysis of the understanding of *monogenēs* adopted here as it applies to the Nicene Creed, see J. O. Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), I: 110-112.

¹⁰⁶ BAGD, 527.