ANOTHER LOOK AT MONOGENES (Gr. μονογενής)

by

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The purpose of this study is to determine the meaning of the Greek word *μονογενής (monogenes*). This is especially with respect to the apostle John's use of it when describing Christ (see John 1:14, 1:18, 3:16, 3:18, 1 John 4:9). This will involve a study of how this word was used in Greek literature prior to, also following, the first advent of Christ. It will also involve how it was used in other places in the Bible where it is not used with respect to Christ.

In this was manifested the love of God

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten [*monogenes*] Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life…. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten [*monogenes*] Son into the world, that we might live through him." John 3:16, 1 John 4:9

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First published 7th September 2024

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Examining the Linguistic Data

"First, a search of *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* — a comprehensive database of ancient, Koine, and medieval Greek — reveals that the word *monogenēs* is used most basically and frequently in contexts having to do with biological offspring. Its fundamental meaning is "only begotten" or "only child" in the sense of having no siblings…It must be acknowledged that there are indeed instances where a translation such as "only," "only one of its kind," or "unique" is required by the context…But these are uniformly metaphorical extensions of the basic meaning, "only begotten" or "only child." Context determines which usage is in view, and the five Johannine uses are in the context of sonship…" *(Charles Lee Irons, Let's Go Back To 'Only Begotten', www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lets-go-back-to-only-begotten)*

Last edited 7th September 2024

Another look at monogenes *(Gr. μονογενής)*

Introduction

If like me, you are a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, you will no doubt realise that for many years within our denomination, there has been an ongoing controversy over the teaching of the Godhead, or perhaps better said, an ongoing controversy over the teaching of the trinity doctrine.

One of the main issues involved in this controversy, at least it is to most who oppose what the SDA Church is teaching today, concerns the identity of Christ. This is because the church today, in its official publications, is teaching that He is only role-playing the part of a son, whereas the non-trinitarians are saying that He really is the Son of God.

Integral to this Sonship debate is the meaning of the Greek word *μονογενής* (*monogenes*) which, in the Bible, is used 5 times with reference to Christ. Each of these occasions is in John's writings, all of which, in the KJV and various other translations of the Bible, are translated as *only begotten* (John 1:14, 1:18. 3:16, 3:18, 1 John 4:9). Some say that this is a mistranslation. They say that *monogenes* means unique (one of a kind or type) but lacking in the concept of begotten (derivation or brought forth of a parent).

The goal of this article is to discover the true meaning of *monogenes*. To do this, we shall first look at how it was used in Greek literature prior to the first advent of Christ, long before the New Testament was written. This includes how it was used in the Septuagint, a 2nd/3rd BC Greek translation of the Old Testament. Secondly, we shall see how it is used in other places in the Bible where it is *not* used with respect to Christ. Third, we shall discover how it was used after the canon of Scripture was closed. When this is done, we should have a well-balanced view of what the word *monogenes* was intended to convey by those who used it.

Even before doing any of these things though, we need to realise that the meaning of a word is totally dependent upon what an author intends it to convey. This means that having a knowledge of the context in which an author uses a word is crucial to understanding its intended meaning. While dictionary definitions are helpful, as is the etymology of a word, only its context (when, how, and where it is used etc.) can truly determine what a particular word is meant to convey to the readers of it.

The easiest way to show this is by citing some examples. I will do this in English, but I am assured that in a similar way (although not exactly), this also happens in Greek, and perhaps most, if not all, languages. Whatever the language, context is crucial.

English words with variations of meaning (homographs)

Here can be seen, depending upon the context in which they are used, how English words change in meaning. Note the following.

Light

There is a *light* shining through the window.

This bag of groceries is quite *light*.

Please *light* the fire.

Row

A *row* of houses.

Are you going to *row* the boat, or am I?

I had a *row* with my wife today.

Last night there was a very noticeable *row* coming from the apartment next to ours.

Contract

I have an annual *contract* with a company to supply my internet.

It is still possible today to *contract* the Covid virus.

Gases, like solids and liquids, *contract* when cooled.

Presently

Presently, I am writing an article about the Greek word monogenes.

Presently, I will be going into town with my wife.

List

I have compiled a *list* of words that can have different meanings.

That ship has a very pronounced *list*.

Pronounced

That man has a very *pronounced* Welsh accent.

You have *pronounced* that word incorrectly.

Bank

The *bank* of that river is quite steep.

I have a deposit account at my local *bank*.

Don't *bank* on me being there.

Aeroplanes often *bank* when landing.

Lead

Please *lead* me to the nearest exit.

Lead is a very heavy metal.

Fetch the dog's lead please

Bark

The *bark* of that tree is peeling off.

That dog has a very loud *bark*.

Object

This is a very heavy *object*.

I *object* to the decision you have made.

The *object* of the exercise is to discover the truth about monogenes.

Season

This is the strawberry-picking *season*

Season the casserole with salt and pepper.

Novel

That is a *novel* idea.

I have just had my first *novel* published.

Console

We could not *console* him after the death of his friend.

I had to buy a new *console* for my Xbox

Intimate

They had a very intimate relationship

He did not even intimate that he was leaving his job.

Even from this very small sample of words, it can clearly be seen that a word can have more than one meaning – with each of its individual meanings being determined by the context in which it is used. Hundreds more examples like this could be cited. These words, spelt the same with varying meanings, are called *homographs*.

The witness of Greek literature prior to the first advent of Christ

We will now see how *monogenes* was used in Greek literature before the incarnation of Christ. Here I would mention a man by the name of Harry Foundalis. Mr Foundalis is Greek. He was born in Edessa in northern Greece. He is educated in classic Greek and holds a double PhD. On his website (https://www.foundalis.com/lan/grkask.htm), he offers to help people understand the Greek language (modern or ancient). This is how we 'met' in 2017. I had asked him to help me understand the meaning of certain Greek words that are used in the Bible. Since then, he has very kindly continued to do so.

In 2023 in answer to a Seventh-day Adventist minister who was claiming that *monogenes* does not contain the concept of begotten, Mr. Foundalis wrote an article that can be found here on my website.

https://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Articles_pdf/Monogenes.pdf

In this article you are now reading, I will, as well as quoting other sources, quote his translation of various texts. This will also include some of his comments. They can all be found in much more detail in the article he wrote at the above link. Note that from hereon in this section, the highlighted in red in the Greek text is either *monogenes*, or *mounogenes (mouno* being the Ionic dialect of Greek).

The first text we shall look at is from an 8th century BC poem by Hesiod. This poem is called "*The Theogony"* (the genealogy or birth of the gods). It was written in ancient Greek. In this poem, Hesiod wrote

"οὐδ', ὅτι **μουνογενής**, ἦσσον θεὰ ἔμμορε τιμῆς καὶ γεράων" *(Hesiod, Theogony* 426)

Mr Foundalis translated this text as follows:

> "nor [is it the case that], because she [the goddess Hecate] is an only child (mounogenes), does she receive less honor and privileges" *(Foundalis, https://www.theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Articles_pdf/Monogenes.pdf)*

The following translation is from the *Perseus Digital Library* website

> "Also, because she is an only child, the goddess receives not less honor…"*(https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0130%3Acard%3D404)*

Hesiod also wrote in the same poem

> "οὕτω τοι καὶ **μουνογενὴς** ἐκ μητρὸς ἐοῦσα / πᾶσι μετ᾽ ἀθανάτοισι τετίμηται γεράεσσι." *(Hesiod, Theogony 448–449)*

The English translation by Mr. Foundalis reads

> "thus, although she is the only child of her mother, she has been honored among the immortals with all the privileges." *(Foundalis, Op. cit.)*

Mr Foundalis commented

> "Nothing new here; the word "although" (τοι καὶ) gives away the meaning: "only child"." *(Foundalis, Op. cit.)*

The translation on the Perseus website reads

> "So, then, albeit her mother's only child, she is honored amongst all the deathless gods." *(*www.perseus*, Op. cit.)*

In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the word *mounogenes* appears only once. The text in question reads

> "**μουνογενὴς** δὲ πάις εἴη πατρώιον οἶκον / φερβέμεν· ὣς γὰρ πλοῦτος ἀέξεται ἐν μεγάροισιν· / γηραιὸς δὲ θάνοι ἕτερον παῖδ᾽ ἐγκαταλείπων." *(Hesiod, Works and Days 376–378)*

Here is how Mr Foundalis translated this text

> "May you have an only boy-child to be taking care of your household; / for, in this way the wealth will be increased in your home; / and may you leave a second boy-child behind before you die of old age." *(Foundalis, Op. cit.)*

The text on the Perseus website has the following

> "There should be an only son to feed his father's house, for so wealth will increase in the home; but if you leave a second son you should die old" *(Hesiod, www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0132%3Acard%3D370)*

Herodotus, known as the father of history, wrote in his famous work *Histories*

"ἔφασαν δέ μιν Αἰγύπτιοι τοῦ πρώτου βασιλεύσαντος Αἰγύπτου παῖδα **μουνογενέα** γενέσθαι, ἀποθανόντα δὲ αὐτὸν ἄνωρον θρήνοισι τούτοισι ὑπὸ Αἰγυπτίων τιμηθῆναι […]" *(Herodotus, Histories, Book 2 §79:)*

Mr. Foundalis translated this as follows

"And some Egyptians told me that he [a person called Maneros] was the only son of the first king of Egypt, and upon his untimely death he was honored by the Egyptians with these mournful songs […]" (Foundalis, Op. cit.)

On the Perseus website it is translated as

"The Egyptians told me that Maneros was the only son of their first king, who died prematurely, and this dirge was sung by the Egyptians in his honor; and this, they said, was their earliest and their only chant." *(Herodotus, Histories, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126%3Abook%3D2&force=y)*

In book 7 of his *Histories*, Herodotus wrote

"[Μεγιστίας], φανερός ἐστι Λεωνίδης ἀποπέμπων, ἵνα μὴ συναπόληταί σφι. ὁ δὲ ἀποπεμπόμενος αὐτὸς μὲν οὐκ ἀπέλιπε, τὸν δὲ παῖδα συστρατευόμενον, ἐόντα οἱ **μουνογενέα**, ἀπέπεμψε." *(Herodotus, Histories, Book 7 §221)*

Here is how Mr. Foundalis translated this text

"[Megistias, a certain Spartan seer], clearly received orders by Leonidas [king of Sparta] to depart, so that he would not die with them [the 300 Spartans, getting ready to fight the Persian army]. And he, although ordered to depart, did not leave; but his son who was a member of the army unit, being an only son, he did send away." *(Foundalis, Op. cit.)*

On the *Perseus* website it is translated as

"This was Megistias the Acarnanian, said to be descended from Melampus, the one who told from the sacrifices what was going to happen to them. He was dismissed but did not leave; instead he sent away his only son who was also with the army." *(Herodotus, Histories, book 7, 221, Https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126%3Abook%3D7&force=y)*

Plato was one of the world's most well-known philosophers. In his writings, the word *monogenes* appears a number of times. In his work *Laws* he wrote

"θεὸς εἶναι κηδόμενος ὑμῶν τις, ὃς τὰ μέλλοντα προορῶν, δίδυμον ὑμῖν φυτεύσας τὴν τῶν βασιλέων γένεσιν ἐκ **μονογενοῦς**, εἰς τὸ μέτριον μᾶλλον συνέστειλε." *(Plato, 'Laws', Book 3, 691)*

Mr. Foundalis translates this text as:

> "Watching over you [all] there is some god who, foreseeing the future events, changed the royal ancestry line from single to twofold, decreasing the royal power to a more moderate one." *(Foundalis, Op. cit.)*

He also noted

> "Here we don't have a comparison of two ancestry lines but the *bifurcation* of a single one: from a prior single king, some people ended up with two kings, perhaps because of a twin-birth event. (The word δίδυμον means "twin".) The concept here is one of *birth*. As such, it is appropriate to use the adjective "monogenous" in Greek, meaning "of a single-birth event" in this case." *(Foundalis, Op. cit.)*

Another of Plato's works was called *Critias*. In this work he wrote

> (Critias speaking): "οὕτω δὴ καὶ τὴν νῆσον Ποσειδῶν τὴν Ἀτλαντίδα λαχὼν ἐκγόνους αὐτοῦ κατῴκισεν ἐκ θνητῆς γυναικὸς γεννήσας ἔν τινι τόπῳ τοιῷδε τῆς νήσου. πρὸς θαλάττης μέν, κατὰ δὲ μέσον πάσης πεδίον ἦν, ὃ δὴ πάντων πεδίων κάλλιστον ἀρετῇ τε ἱκανὸν γενέσθαι λέγεται, πρὸς τῷ πεδίῳ δὲ αὖ κατὰ μέσον σταδίους ὡς πεντήκοντα ἀφεστὸς ἦν ὄρος βραχὺ πάντῃ. τούτῳ δ' ἦν ἔνοικος τῶν ἐκεῖ κατὰ ἀρχὰς ἐκ γῆς ἀνδρῶν γεγονότων Εὐήνωρ μὲν ὄνομα, γυναικὶ δὲ συνοικῶν Λευκίππῃ: Κλειτὼ δὲ **μονογενῆ θυγατέρα** ἐγεννησάσθην." *(Plato, Critias, Critias, 113c–d)*

A translation into English by Benjamin Jowett reads:

> "And Poseidon, receiving for his lot the island of Atlantis, begat children by a mortal woman, and settled them in a part of the island, which I will describe. Looking towards the sea, but in the centre of the whole island, there was a plain which is said to have been the fairest of all plains and very fertile. Near the plain again, and also in the centre of the island at a distance of about fifty stadia, there was a mountain not very high on any side. In this mountain there dwelt one of the earth born primeval men of that country, whose name was Evenor, and he had a wife named Leucippe, and they had an only daughter who was called Cleito." *(Translation by Benjamin Jowett on Plato's Critias, 113c–d, https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/critias.html)*

Twice the word *monogenes* appears in Plato's *Timaeus*:

> "ἵνα οὖν τόδε κατὰ τὴν μόνωσιν ὅμοιον ᾖ τῷ παντελεῖ ζῴῳ, διὰ ταῦτα οὔτε δύο οὔτ' ἀπείρους ἐποίησεν ὁ ποιῶν κόσμους, ἀλλ' εἷς ὅδε **μονογενὴς** οὐρανὸς γεγονὼς ἔστιν καὶ ἔτ' ἔσται." *(Timaeus, 31b:)*

Benjamin Jowett's translation reads:

> "In order then that the world might be solitary, like the perfect animal, the creator made not two worlds or an infinite number of them; but there is and ever will be one only-begotten and created heaven." *(Translation by Benjamin Jowett of Plato's Timaeus, 31b:, https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html)*

Later in the same work, Plato wrote

> "καὶ δὴ καὶ τέλος περὶ τοῦ παντὸς νῦν ἤδη τὸν λόγον ἡμῖν φῶμεν ἔχειν: θνητὰ γὰρ καὶ ἀθάνατα ζῷα λαβὼν καὶ συμπληρωθεὶς ὅδε ὁ κόσμος οὕτω, ζῷον ὁρατὸν τὰ ὁρατὰ περιέχον, εἰκὼν τοῦ νοητοῦ θεὸς αἰσθητός, μέγιστος καὶ ἄριστος κάλλιστός τε καὶ τελεώτατος γέγονεν εἷς οὐρανὸς ὅδε **μονογενὴς** ὤν." *(Plato, Timaeus 92c:)*

Jowett translated this as

> "We may now say that our discourse about the nature of the universe has an end. The world has received animals, mortal and immortal, and is fulfilled with them, and has become a visible animal containing the visible and the sensible God who is the image of the intellectual, the greatest, best, fairest, most perfect and the one only begotten heaven." *(Jowett, Op. cit.)*

Mr. Foundalis commented

> "First, we observe that the author is Plato, the same person who wrote *Critias* and (later) the *Laws* (see earlier excerpts). The same person is expected to have and use the same vocabulary, usually for a lifetime. But we examine the possibility that "monogenes" might have a second meaning; namely, "unique". To say that the heaven is unique does indeed make some sense: it is one-of-a-kind. Therefore, *both* interpretations are possible in the above two excerpts. I would say that "only begotten" is *slightly* more plausible, both because this is an event of creation and because we expect Plato to be consistent in the use of his vocabulary." *(Foundalis, Op.cit.)*

As previously noted, words, depending upon the context in which they are used, can take on different meanings. This is why, to be dogmatic about *monogenes* having only one specific meaning, is not a very wise thing to do.

As can be seen above though, when speaking of offspring in Greek literature prior to the time of Christ, μονογενὴς/μουνογενής (*monogenes/ mounogenes*) was consistently used to denote an only child/son/daughter born of his or her parents. This is how it would have been understood during Christ's time on earth, also how it would be used and understood immediately following that time. We shall see this later.

The witness of the Septuagint

The Septuagint, also known as the translation of the seventy (LXX), is a Greek translation of the Old Testament, the latter of which, in the main, was originally written in Hebrew with some portions in Aramaic. This work of translation into Greek was accomplished during the 2nd and 3rd centuries prior to Christ coming to earth. As *monogenes* is used a number of times in this translation, this should help us to understand what this word meant to people at that time.

In Judges chapter 11, we find the story of Jephthah. He rashly made the promise that if God gave into his hands the children of Ammon, he would, on returning from battle, offer as a burnt offering, the first thing that came through his door to meet him (Judges 11:31). Very sadly, this happened to be his daughter – an only child. As the KJV reads

"And Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances: and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter." Judges 11:34 KJV

In the Septuagint, the Hebrew text was translated into Greek to read

"Καὶ ἦλθεν Ἰεφθάε εἰς Μασσηφὰ εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἡ θυγάτηρ αὐτοῦ ἐξεπορεύετο εἰς ὑπάντησιν ἐν τυμπάνοις καὶ χοροῖς· καὶ αὕτη ἦν **μονογενής**, οὐκ ἦν αὐτῷ ἕτερος υἱὸς ἢ θυγάτηρ." Judges 11:34

To convey that the daughter of Jephthah was his "only child", the Greek word "μονογενής" (*monogenes*) was employed. The phrase that followed ("beside her he had neither son nor daughter") is an indisputable disambiguation that *monogenes* conveyed here the idea of an only begotten (an only born) child. As an only child, she would have been regarded as very precious (greatly beloved) by her mother and father.

In the Septuagint, Psalm 22:20 reads

"ῥῦσαι ἀπὸ ῥομφαίας τὴν ψυχήν μου, καὶ ἐκ χειρὸς κυνὸς τὴν μονογενῆ μου·" Psalm 22:20 KJV (21:21 in the Septuagint)

The Brenton English translation of the Septuagint says

"Deliver my soul from the sword; my only-begotten one from the power of the dog." *(Sir Lancelot Charles Lee Brenton, translation of the Septuagint, 1851)*

Psalm 25:16 reads in the Septuagint

"ἐπίβλεψον ἐπ᾽ ἐμὲ καὶ ἐλέησόν με, ὅτι μονογενὴς καὶ πτωχός εἰμι ἐγώ." Psalm 25:16 (24:16 in the Septuagint)

The Brenton translation renders this verse as

"Look upon me, and have mercy upon me; for I am an only child and poor." *(Brenton Op. cit)*

Included in the Septuagint is the Book of Tobit. In chapter 3 verse 15 we read in English

"And that I never polluted my name, nor the name of my father, in the land of my captivity: I am the only daughter of my father, neither hath he any child to be his heir, neither any near kinsman, nor any son of his alive, to whom I may keep myself for a wife:" *(Tobit 3:15, Brenton, Op. cit)*

The translation of the Hebrew into Greek says

"καὶ οὐκ ἐμόλυνα τὸ ὄνομά μου οὐδὲ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρός μου ἐν τῇ γῇ τῆς αἰχμαλωσίας μου. μονογενής εἰμι τῷ πατρί μου, καὶ οὐχ ὑπάρχει αὐτῷ παιδίον, ὃ κληρονομήσει αὐτόν, οὐδὲ ἀδελφὸς ἐγγὺς οὐδὲ ὑπάρχων αὐτῷ υἱός, ἵνα συντηρήσω ἐμαυτὴν αὐτῷ γυναῖκα." Tobit 3:15

Here, to denote an "only daughter", the word *monogenes* ("μονογενής") is again used.

In Brenton's translation of the Septuagint, Tobit 8:17 reads

> "Thou art to be praised because thou hast had mercy of two that were the only begotten children of their fathers: grant them mercy, O Lord, and finish their life in health with joy and mercy." *(Tobit 8:17, Brenton Op. cit.)*

This is referring to two children who were the only sons of their two respective fathers. The Greek reads (note again the usage of *μονογενεῖς·/monogenes)*

> "εὐλογητὸς εἶ ὅτι ἠλέησας δύο μονογενεῖς· ποίησον αὐτοῖς, δέσποτα, ἔλεος, συντέλεσον τὴν ζωὴν αὐτῶν ἐν ὑγιείᾳ μετ᾽ εὐφροσύνης καὶ ἐλέους." Tobit 8:17

Mr. Foundalis commented

> "This is about two children (boys, their gender is revealed by αὐτοῖς). Each was an only child." *(Mr. Foundalis, Op. cit.)*

Consistent with the Greek writers of earlier centuries, we can see that the translators of the Septuagint used *monogenes* to denote an only child/son/daughter that was born of his or her parents. Leading up to the time of Christ when referring to offspring, *monogenes* was consistently used this way.

The witness of the New Testament

We have seen above that when speaking of offspring prior to the first advent of Christ, the Greek word μονογενής (*monogenes*) was understood to denote an only born son or daughter of his or her parents. We shall now see how it is used in the New Testament scriptures. This is apart from where it is used with reference to Christ – the meaning of which, is being attempted to be determined by means of this study.

Apart from John, Luke is the only gospel writer to use the word *monogenes*. He was a physician, and probably the most learned of the four gospel writers. In his gospel, he uses *monogenes* three times (Luke 7:12, 8:42, and 9:38)

> Luke 7:12
> "Now when he [Jesus] came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son [m*onogenes*] of his mother, and she was a widow:…"

> Luke 8:42
> "For he [Jairus] had one only [*monogenes*] daughter, about twelve years of age, and she lay a dying..."

> Luke 9:38
> "And, behold, a man of the company cried out, saying, Master, I beseech thee, look upon my son: for he is mine only child [*monogenes]*."

What we see here is simply a repeat of how *monogenes*, before Christ came to earth, was used in Greek literature to denote the only son or daughter born (begotten) of his or her respective parents. This is how the readers of John's gospel would have understood this word. This is where John uses it four times with reference to Christ (John 1:14, 1:18. 3:16, 3:18). There is no reason why they would have understood it any differently. This is

because John uses it in the context of Christ's Sonship to God (John 20:31). John's readers would have regarded him as saying that Christ was the only one begotten of (born of/brought forth of) God. John also used *monogenes* in one of his little letters (1 John 4:9). We shall return to John's usage of this word later.

In the above texts, it would not make sense to say that in defining these offspring as *monogenes,* that Luke was only saying they were unique (one of a kind). Try it for yourself and you will see what I mean (substitute "only" with "unique"). If an individual is the only born of his or her parents, then in that sense (as an only begotten), he or she would be unique but first it needs to be established that the person in question is an only born son or daughter of his or her parents. If the word *monogenes* is interpreted in these texts as only meaning unique (one of a kind or type), then there is no way of establishing that the persons being spoken of were an only born (an only begotten). Just saying they were unique would be pointless. It would not be telling anyone anything. They could be unique for any number of reasons.

It must also be said, very importantly, that removing the concept in these texts of the person being an only born (an only begotten) would also invalidate (negate) the highly emotional and intense plea of the parents for Jesus to heal their *only* son or *only* daughter. Removing this 'only born child' concept would take away the entire force and meaning of the texts.

Paul's use of *monogenes* (Hebrews 11:17)

Why then, it may be asked, if *monogenes* means only begotten when speaking of a son or daughter, did the apostle Paul, in the book of Hebrews, describe Isaac as Abraham's only begotten (*monogenes*) son? After all, the Bible is very clear that Abraham had other sons, so Isaac was not an only born son of Abraham. We shall deal with this now. To some people, quite understandably, this is very much a problem text.

In the chapter in Hebrews that is sometimes referred to as the roll call of faith, the apostle Paul wrote the following

> "By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten [*μονογενής] son*," Hebrews 11:17 KJV

Note very importantly that in the KJV, the word *"son"*, because it is not in the Greek text, is in italics. It is a supplied word. Paul actually wrote that Abraham "offered up his only begotten [*μονογενής]*". We shall now see why this is so very important.

It needs to be remembered that in writing to the Hebrews, Paul was addressing his fellow countrymen. He knew that like himself, they were very knowledgeable concerning what we refer to today as the Old Testament Scriptures. This is why, when referring to the experience of Abraham being willing to sacrifice Isaac as recorded in Genesis chapter 22, he had to be 'spot on' as to what he was writing. To misrepresent the words written by Moses would have been disastrous.

It should go without saying that Paul knew that Isaac was not Abraham's only biological son, yet he describes him as "*monogenes*". So why did he describe him this way?

In the KJV, Genesis chapter 22 records that God said to Abraham

> "… Take now thy son, thine only *son* Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of." Genesis 22:2 KJV

Note that the second usage of the word *"son"* is in italics. This is because it is not in the Hebrew text. This is no more than it is in the Greek text of Hebrews 11:17. It is a supplied word, supplied by the translators of the KJV.

When God saw that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, He said to Abraham

> "…. Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only *son* from me." Genesis 22:12 KJV

Again there is an occasion of the word *"son"* in italics. This again is because it is a supplied word. It is not in the original text. The same happens in Genesis 22:16 where Moses records that God said to Abraham

> " …. By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only *son*: Genesis 22:16 KJV

Again the second usage of the word *"son"* is a supplied word.

These three occasions of "only *son*" are translated from the Hebrew *yāḥîḏ.* Much could be said here concerning how this word is used in the Old Testament, but space is limited. Suffice to say that apart from the above in Genesis chapter 22, it is translated in the KJV as 'only *son*' (Amos 8:10, Zechariah 12:10), 'only son' (Jeremiah 6:26), 'only child' (Judges 11:34), 'darling' (Psalm 22:20 and 35:17), 'desolate' (Psalm 25:16), 'solitary' (Psalm 68:6) and 'only *beloved*' (Proverbs 4:3).

Here is how the three verses of Genesis 22 are rendered in the Septuagint

> "καὶ εἶπε· λαβὲ τὸν υἱόν σου τὸν ἀγαπητόν, ὃν ἠγάπησας, τὸν ᾽Ισαάκ, καὶ πορεύθητι εἰς τὴν γῆν τὴν ὑψηλὴν καὶ ἀνένεγκον αὐτὸν ἐκεῖ εἰς ὁλοκάρπωσιν ἐφ᾽ ἓν τῶν ὀρέων, ὧν ἄν σοι εἴπω." Genesis 22:2
>
> "καὶ εἶπε· μὴ ἐπιβάλῃς τὴν χεῖρά σου ἐπὶ τὸ παιδάριον μηδὲ ποιήσῃς αὐτῷ μηδέν· νῦν γὰρ ἔγνων, ὅτι φοβῇ σὺ τὸν Θεὸν καὶ οὐκ ἐφείσω τοῦ υἱοῦ σου τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ δι᾽ ἐμέ." Genesis 22:12
>
> "κατ᾽ ἐμαυτοῦ ὤμοσα, λέγει Κύριος, οὗ εἵνεκεν ἐποίησας τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο, καὶ οὐκ ἐφείσω τοῦ υἱοῦ σου τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ δι᾽ ἐμέ," Genesis 22:16

Now notice how Brenton translates these three verses in his translation of the Septuagint

> "And he [God} said, Take thy son, the beloved one, whom thou hast loved …" Genesis 22:2 *(Septuagint, Brenton translation)*

> "And he [God] said, Lay not thine hand upon the child, neither do anything to him, for now I know that thou fearest God, and for my sake thou hast not spared thy beloved son." Genesis 22:12 *(Septuagint, Ibid)*

> "I have sworn by myself, says the Lord, because thou hast done this thing, and on my account hast not spared thy beloved son." Genesis 22:16 *(Septuagint, Ibid)*

Now compare these same verses with how Thomson translates them in his translation of the Septuagint.

> "And he said, Take thy son, thy dear son whom thou hast loved…" Genesis 22:2 *(Septuagint, Thomson translation)*

> "And he said, Lay not thy hand on the lad, nor do any thing to him; for now I know that thou fearest God and on my account hast not spared thy darling son." Genesis 22:12 *(Septuagint, Ibid)*

> "saying, By myself I have sworn, saith the Lord, Because thou hast done this, and for my sake hast not spared thy beloved son;" Genesis 22:16 *(Septuagint, Ibid)*

These renderings ("beloved one", "beloved son", "dear son" and "darling son") are translated into English from the Greek text highlighted in red on page 13 above, thus, in the Septuagint, the idea of God referring to Isaac as Abraham's "only *son*", as in the KJV translation of these verses, is not there. It appears that the translators of the Septuagint (from Hebrew into Greek) saw more in the usage of the word *yāḥîḏ* than just a numerical value (one or only). They appear to have understood it as depicting someone who is regarded as beloved as an only son. It is even translated in the Septuagint, by both Brenton and Thomson, as "only-begotten" or "only child" etc. (see Psalm 22;20. 35:17, 25:16, Judges 11:34).

God had promised that Abraham and Sarah would have a son (Genesis 17:15-19). This was even though Sarah was past childbearing age (Genesis 17:17, 18:11-13). Encouraged and persuaded by his wife Sarah, as a way of fulfilling God's promise, Abraham produced a son by her handmaiden Hagar (Genesis 16:1-3). On God's instruction, this child was called Ishmael (Genesis 16:11, 15). Ishmael though, was not the promised son. His existence was the result of human devising. Isaac was different. He was of God's devising. Like Christ, he was a promised son – the only begotten son of Abraham and Sarah.

Isaac was caused to be by God. His existence was a miracle. In this sense he was unique, one of a kind in a specific relationship (of Abraham and Sarah). He was their only begotten. He was also the promised of God, the one through whom the world would be blessed. This must have compounded Abraham's love for Isaac. Abraham must have regarded him as very precious, thus Isaac would have been Abraham's greatly beloved. Paul was describing Isaac as loved by Abraham as an only son would be loved by a father. The depiction of an 'only son', is sometimes used to denote a greatly beloved (see Jeremiah 6:26, Amos 8:10, Zechariah 12:10). This was in keeping with how Isaac was described in Genesis chapter 22. Paul therefore chose a Greek word that would suit this perfectly. It was *monogenes*.

In the Septuagint (see pages 9-11 above), the translators into Greek used *monogenes* to depict an only son or daughter born of his or her parents. If those same translators had understood Genesis 22:2, 12 and 16 as saying "only son" (as in the KJV), then why did they not use *monogenes*? They must have regarded God as emphasising the love of Abraham for Isaac within the context of him being the covenanted seed of Abraham (Genesis 17:21), the promised one, the one through whom the world would be blessed (Genesis 12:3, 18:18. 22:18). Thus he was described by God as Abraham's beloved.

So Paul, in Hebrews 11:17, was simply echoing God's description of Isaac as revealed in Genesis chapter 22 as loved as (a) an only son would be loved, and (b) as a son who was loved as the promised one of God. Neither of the contexts, Genesis or Hebrews, reveals God or Paul as speaking of Isaac as Abraham's only biological son. This shows that context is crucial.

The use of *monogenes* after the close of the canon of scripture

From the above, we have seen that prior to the time of Christ, also decades after His ascension, various authors used *monogenes* (*μονογενής*) to convey that a person was the only born (only begotten) son or daughter of his or her parents. This is regardless of the age of the person at that time (not necessarily when speaking of a child).

So that we can see how *monogenes* was used centuries later, I will cite here its usage in the creed that was adopted at the first Council of Nicaea. This was in AD 325. This creed, at that time, was of the utmost importance to the developing Christian church. Many denominations still regard it as being so today. This is because its purpose is to explain the relationship that exists between God the Father and Christ. It is also an integral part of the orthodox trinity doctrine held by many churches. This creed reads

> "Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα πάντων ὁρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων ποιητήν· καὶ εἰς ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ τουτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρος Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ, Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί,…" *(Creed of Nicaea, AD 325)*

Translated into English, this says

> "We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all visible and invisible; And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten [γεννηθέντα] from the Father, only-begotten [*μονογενῆ - monogenes*], that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten [γεννηθέντα] not made, of one substance with the Father…" *(Creed of Nicaea, AD 325)*

Here Christ is referred to as a *μονογενῆ (monogenes*] Son. It cannot be denied that this was intended to depict Christ as only begotten. This is because by reason of the two-fold use of γεννηθέντα – meaning *born* - there is a double disambiguation. This disambiguation ensured that no mistake would be made in understanding what was intended by the usage of *monogenes*. It was to denote an only begotten (only born) Son.

Note the creed describes Christ as "begotten from the Father only-begotten". Quite recently, Mr Foundalis enlightened me about this phrase. He explained

> "Just one minor observation (which, for you, might be important): the Greek text says: "γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ". That's a single phrase, a unit, which in the English translation is rendered in two units separated by a comma: "[unit 1] begotten from the Father, [unit 2] only-begotten". I understand that this is because the word "begotten" is used to translate both the "γεννηθέντα" and the "μονογενῆ"." *(Email, Harry Foundalis to Terry Hill, 21st July 2024)*

We have seen from the above that for over 1000 years amongst Greek speaking people, the word *monogenes* was intended to mean, when speaking of an offspring from his or her parents, that this was an only begotten son or daughter. There is no reason therefore to believe that the readers of John's gospel would have regarded it any differently. The revelation found in John's gospel concerning Christ, would have been a major contributor to the formation of the Creed of Nicaea.

John's use of *monogenes*

Five times John used *monogenes* to describe Christ. This was 4 times in his gospel, and once in one of his little letters (epistles). Each time, in the KJV, it is translated as "only begotten". Here are the relevant texts

> "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth." John 1:14

> "No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." John 1:18

> "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16

> "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 Son of God." John 3:18

> "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." 1 John 4:9

When considering John's usage of *monogenes*, it needs to be borne in mind that he wrote his gospel with the intention of showing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31). This though, if not explained, could have given rise to confusion. This is because created beings and believers in Christ are also called sons of God (Genesis 6:2, 6:4, Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7, John 1:12, Romans 8:14, Philippians 2:15 and 1 John 3:1-2). In fact, immediately before his first usage of *monogenes* (John 1:14), John wrote that believers in Christ's name had "the power to become the sons of God." (John 1:12). By using *monogenes* to describe Christ, John was differentiating between the created and adopted sons of God, and Christ as the "only begotten" Son of God. Even apart from anything else, John's usage of *monogenes* was a disambiguation.

Whereas *monogenes* is translated in some Bibles as "only begotten" (John 1:14, 1:18, 3:16, 3:18, 1 John 4:9), other versions read "only" or "one and only". This though, while conveying the same basic thought as does *monogenes*, does not fully represent ***why*** John used it. His usage of it immediately brought to people's mind an only son or daughter

born of his or her parents. John therefore was stressing (emphasising) that Christ was the ONLY BEGOTTEN of God. This depicts Christ as the Son of God in a sense that no one else can be (a unique Son). If John had wanted to write “only son”, or “one and only son”, he could have written μόνος υἱός (only son), or εἷς καὶ μόνος υἱός (one and only son) but this would not have served as such a clear disambiguation as did *monogenes*, neither would it have emphasised so emphatically that Christ is the ONLY BEGOTTEN of God.

This begetting (bringing forth) of Christ from God, must have taken place before anything was created. We know this because God created all things through and by Christ (John 1:3, 1 Corinthians 8:6, Ephesians 3:9, Colossians 1:15-16, Hebrews 1:1-2). Christ therefore, the divine Son of God, must have been begotten (brought forth) of God’s very own substance. This is because when He was begotten (brought forth), nothing existed except for God. John was saying that Christ is the ***only one*** begotten of (brought forth of) God’s very being (God’s own substance).

By describing Christ as the *monogenes* Son of God, John removed any ambiguity that may have arisen over Him being called the Son of God. It would also have immediately brought to the minds of those reading his gospel, that Christ was the only begotten of God Himself (God’s own substance).

From its beginning to its end, John’s gospel is replete with ‘signs’ that reveal Christ’s ***divine*** Sonship to God. This is what makes Him so different than the other sons of God. In this sense He is unique – a ‘one of a kind’ Son of God. Those wishing to understand more about the begotten concept can do so by going here

> https://www.theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Articles_pdf/Understanding_the_begotten_concept.pdf

Etymology

Under the heading “Etymologies’, the current online Webster’s dictionary states

> 1**:** the history of a linguistic form (such as a word) shown by tracing its development since its earliest recorded occurrence in the language where it is found, by tracing its transmission from one language to another, by analyzing it into its component parts, by identifying its cognates in other languages, or by tracing it and its cognates to a common ancestral form in an ancestral language.” *(Webster’s online 2024 dictionary, Etymology)*

Webster’s also explains

> “The etymology of *etymology* itself is relatively straightforward. *Etymon* means "origin of a word" in Latin, and comes from the Greek word *etymon*, meaning "literal meaning of a word according to its origin." Greek *etymon* in turn comes from *etymos*, which means "true."” *(Ibid)*

The goal of etymology is to aid in the discovery of the true meaning of a word, but I would suggest that this can only be fully achieved by realising what a word was intended to mean to an audience (a) at the time it was originally written and (b) as understood in a given context. This brings us back to the section of this study where it was shown that words can change in meaning according to the context in which they are used.

To put this in another way: While dictionary definitions, origins (roots) of words, and their various cognates in other languages are interesting and perhaps very helpful, a word's true meaning is completely dependent upon the context in which an author uses it.

Looking at it another way again: The true meaning of any given word can only be understood by realising what an author expects his or her audience to understand by the usage of it, which in turn will be determined by the context in which it is used.

Another important point to remember is that the meaning of a word today does not necessarily represent what it was intended to convey when it was originally written. This is because over the years, particularly over hundreds of years, a word may change in meaning (or shade of meaning). This is why it is crucial to understand a word as it is found in its original setting at the time it was used.

As far as etymology is concerned, the word *monogenes* can be broken down as follows: *mono (μονο)*, meaning one only (singular), *gen (-γεν-)*, denoting origins and generations, and *es (-ής),* making it an adjective.

No one questions the first part of the word (*mono*) but the second part (*gen*) is highly debated. Some say that instead of it having anything to do with origins, it only means type or kind – giving the impression that *monogenes* only means 'one of a kind or type' (unique). As we have seen above though, as used in Greek literature over the centuries, *monogenes* was mostly used in the context of offspring, denoting an only born son or daughter of his or her parents. When determining what was meant by the usage of *monogenes*, this is vital to understand.

For a further, and a scholarly, discussion of the etymology of *monogenes*, see page 15 of the article by Mr. Foundalis already mentioned above. Here again is the link

https://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk/Articles_pdf/Monogenes.pdf

Unique or not unique

As we have noted, there are those who take the view that *monogenes* does not contain the concept of begotten, but only means *unique* (one of a kind). Here though we need to do some reasoning.

It must be remembered that if something is said to be unique (one of a kind, type or sort), there must be a reason for it. Something cannot be unique without a specific reason; neither, really, would it be logical to refer to something as unique without giving a reason for making such a claim.

Look at it this way: Imagine one day I invite you to my house for lunch. As we make our way to the dining room, I stop and point to a vase on a shelf. It is a very colourful vase. It is a blaze of greens, reds, yellows and oranges. Unfortunately, it has a distinct crack running from top to bottom. So I point out these two things to you, and you respond by saying, "You are right, it is very colourful, and I agree, the crack does spoil its appearance".

What though, if I do not say anything about the colours of the vase or the crack? Instead I say, pointing to the vase, “Do you see that vase over there by the window? It is unique. It is one of a kind. Now let’s go and have some lunch”.

If I did that, and offered no explanation as to why the vase was unique, would that make sense to you? You can see it is colourful, also that it has a large crack in it, so you didn’t need me to tell you that - but because I said it was unique, what have I told you about it that makes it so? The answer is, I haven’t told you anything. By saying it is unique, this is, at the very best, just an uninformative and pointless statement to make. In other words, saying the vase is unique, without an explanation as to why it is so, is of no value whatsoever – even if it did happen to be true. The only thing it would do is to inspire the question, “why is it unique?”, thus an answer would be required from me for claiming it to be as such.

So, if it is said that *monogenes* only means *unique* (one of a kind}, then what would this convey to the readers of John’s writings where he described Christ as being so (see John 1:14, 1:18, 3:16, 3:18 and 1 John 4:9)? The answer is that it would have conveyed nothing. This is because there always must be a reason for referring to someone (or something) as unique. Unless a specific reason is given, a person (or anything) could be unique for any number of reasons.

Some may say that Christ is one of a kind (unique) because of His relationship to the Father (that no one else has the same relationship), but would not this also apply to the relationship of the Father to Christ? Would not this also be unique? If so, can it be said that the Father is also *monogenes*? And what about the Holy Spirit? Does He also have a unique relationship with both the Father and the Son that no one else has, and would not this make Him *monogenes*?

Some may say that Christ is *monogenes* because of who He is (His personal identity – that there is only one Christ), but how many Fathers are there of the Godhead? There is only one, so is He also *monogenes*? How about the Holy Spirit? How many Holy Spirits of the Godhead are there? There is only one, so is the Holy Spirit also *monogenes*? We could go on ad infinitum with this reasoning.

We could also reason, if we are referring to personal identity, that every person ever born on this earth was unique (one of a kind) so would they all be *monogenes*? That would make no sense. This is why to conclude that John, by describing Christ as *monogenes* was only saying that Christ was unique because of His personal identity, makes no sense either. It would be telling us nothing. This is why, by using *monogenes* to describe Christ, John must have had an entirely different intention than just saying He was unique.

Could *monogenes* be used to point out something to be unique? Of course it could – if the context demanded it. For example: In a letter attributed to Clement of Rome when writing to the Christians at Corinth about the resurrection of Christians, he cited the mythical Phoenix which is said to die and be resurrected. He wrote

> “There is a bird which is called the phoenix. This, being the only one of its kind [*μονογενής/monogenes*], liveth for five hundred years.” *(Clement of Rome to the believers at Corinth)*

Mr. Foundalis commented

> "The meaning here is quite clear: the bird Phoenix (a mythological creature) was believed to be "the only one of its kind". What we call "kind" today was "γένος" in ancient Greek, which passed into Latin as "genus". Thus, a "mono"–"genus" was one that had a single ancestry line. (Cf. earlier Plato's Laws, Book 3, 691e: "monogenous" = "of a single ancestry line".) Phoenix was believed to die in flames in a "sepulcher" that it built for itself before dying, and its offspring would come out from the ashes and grow to a new Phoenix — in a never-ending 500-year-long cycle." *(Mr. Foundalis, Op. cit)*

It is understandable that *monogenes* is used here to describe the Phoenix as "the only one of its kind" (unique) but as Charles Lee Irons noted in his article *Let's Go Back To 'Only Begotten'*

> "First, a search of *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* — a comprehensive database of ancient, Koine, and medieval Greek — reveals that the word *monogenēs* is used most basically and frequently in contexts having to do with biological offspring. Its fundamental meaning is "only begotten" or "only child" in the sense of having no siblings…It must be acknowledged that there are indeed instances where a translation such as "only," "only one of its kind," or "unique" is required by the context….But these are uniformly metaphorical extensions of the basic meaning, "only begotten" or "only child." Context determines which usage is in view, and the five Johannine uses are in the context of sonship…" *(Charles Lee Irons, www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lets-go-back-to-only-begotten)*

Context really is crucial. As we have seen earlier, without a context, a given word can have various meanings and interpretations of usage.

Conclusions

John's purpose for writing his gospel was to show that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31). John's usage of *monogenes* therefore was in the context of Sonship. As will be seen if his gospel is read, every instance (sign) John recorded about Christ, revealed His divinity. John did not present Christ as created of God, nor as having been adopted by Him, but as the eternal divine Son of God who was begotten of God's own being (own substance). As the Creed of Nicaea says – "God from God", "true God from true God". In fact, the way that John opened his gospel was to declare that Christ was God.

> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." John 1:1-5 KJV

These opening words of John were the forerunner of everything else he would write in presenting Christ as the divine Son of God (John 20:31). These words therefore are the undergirding (underpinning/foundation) that would support and lead people to believe

Christ to be the divine Son of God. According to Jesus, this belief (His Sonship to God) was to be the foundation of the Christian faith (Matthew 16:13-18). Christ's divine Sonship to God therefore was from eternity when He was begotten of God, not from any other happening or for any other reason.

From the above, we have seen that before, during, and after the time of Christ, the Greek word μονογενής *(monogenes)*, whenever used of an offspring, conveyed the idea that an individual was the only son or daughter born (begotten) of his or her parents. This is exactly what the readers of John's writings would have realised he was saying about Christ. They would have taken John as saying that Christ was the only one who is begotten of God's own substance (not created or adopted as a son), therefore He is truly the only begotten Son of God. Amen.

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