

monogenēs

I grew up rejecting the old-school translation of *monogenēs* (mah-nah-geh-NAYSE) as “only-begotten.” I think I first picked that up from Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* (though he has since changed his mind).¹ Then, one really pays heed when he reads it in Carson’s *Exegetical Fallacies*.² In college I received (paid a lot for) the boss of Greek dictionaries, *BDAG*, which confirmed it. So, I was convinced that translators in the past mistakenly thought the Greek compound *monogenēs* owed its meaning to *mono* (only) plus *gennaō* (to beget), thus rendering “only begotten Son” (KJV), when in fact it comes from *mono* and *genos* (genus, kind), thus “one-of-a-kind.”

This went hand in hand with my rejection of the phrase in the Nicene Creed that God’s Son was “begotten, not made.”³ That sounded like a contradiction to me, since “to beget” means “to bring a child into existence” or, metaphorically, “to give rise to, bring about.” To my modern English ears, the Creed meant “made, not made.” And I knew that I knew that God the Son was not made. As God, He never began; He has always existed, of Himself, the I AM who I AM.⁴ I don’t think I even knew it at the time, but I was rejecting the ancient doctrine of the Son’s “eternal generation,” that the Son is begotten of the Father, not at a point in time, but eternally (that is, *always* begotten, *never-not*-begotten). But more on that later (below).

The Meaning of *Genos*

Recently, however, Professor Denny Burk has me rethinking all of this.⁵ He realized that all the nay-sayers source the same journal article from Dale Moody as the definitive word, but Burk believes Moody was “really wrong” about several points. First, though, Burk says, “Moody is correct that the Greek suffix *-GENES* derives from the word *GENOS*.”⁶ But it turns out that *genos* itself can refer to an offspring. As Murray J. Harris explains, “In compound adjectives, *-γενής* [*-genēs*] refers to

¹ *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 1233-34. Denny Burk chronicled Grudem’s change of mind in “A Note on the Trinity Debate at ETS,” 21 Nov 2016 (dennyburk.com/a-note-on-the-trinity-debate-at-ets/).

² D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 30-31. Andreas J. Köstenberger’s footnotes helpfully point to scholars on both sides of this fence (*John*, BECNT [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004], 42-44, 49 [notes 72-75]). Denny Burk quotes a sampling of those against “only begotten” (“Deep in the Weeds on MONOGENES and Eternal Generation” (dennyburk.com/deep-in-the-weeds-on-monogenes-and-eternal-generation/)).

³ See ccel.org/creeds/nicene.creed.html.

⁴ See *The Preeminence of Christ: Part Two, The I AM* (Lawrence, KS: Project one28, 2017) at ProjectOne28.com/IAM.

⁵ I’m a fanboy of Professor Burk’s blog, and you should be, too. Unless otherwise indicated, all of the following quotes of Burk come from “Deep in the Weeds on MONOGENES and Eternal Generation” (dennyburk.com/deep-in-the-weeds-on-monogenes-and-eternal-generation/). I don’t reproduce every one of his points here, so you should read his full article.

derivation or descent in general, rather than to birth in particular or to species.”⁷ Oops. “In fact,” Burk writes, “in John’s one use of the term *GENOS*, it clearly refers to ‘offspring’ or ‘one that is begotten from another’ (Revelation 22:16). ‘Offspring’ is the *only* attested meaning for this term in John’s writings!”⁸ So, I was already feeling a little silly. But it gets worse.

Burk adds: “There are many examples of this suffix that indicate ‘begottenness.’ For example, *OIKOGENES* means ‘home-born’ (Gen. 15:3 LXX). Paul uses the term *EUGENES* to mean ‘well-born’ (1 Cor. 1:26).” Lee Irons examined the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* and found “at least 145 other words based on the *-genēs* stem.” He listed three examples: “*theogenēs* (‘born of God’), *neogenēs* (‘newborn, newly produced’), and, my personal favorite, *konchogenēs* (‘born from a shell’; picture the birth of Venus).”⁹ He also found at least 58 proper names with our stem, “like the common *Diogenēs* (‘born of Zeus’). Since these are names presumably given by parents to their children, we may assume they generally have some connection with the embodied reality of biological offspring, rather than the abstract notion of species or kind.”

Isaac (Hebrews 11:17)

One of the most convincing arguments to me, originally, was that Hebrews 11:17 calls Isaac Abraham’s *monogenēs*, but we know that Abraham had already “begat” Ishmael (Gen. 16:5). Therefore, Isaac was not the “only begotten,” but he was *one-of-a-kind* – the only son from God’s promise of a miracle in Sarah’s old, barren womb (Gen. 17:15-21). But now I think Burk is correct:

The writer of Hebrews is specifically pointing out that Isaac is “uniquely *begotten*.” The author is showing incredible sensitivity to the wider context of Genesis in which Abraham had once questioned whether his heir would come from his own body (Gen. 15:2-4) and whether that heir from his own body would be Ishmael (Gen. 17:18, 21). “Begotten” addresses the first question, and “uniquely” addresses the second. In other words, the idea of “begottenness” is *necessary* in this context.¹⁰

God’s *Monogenēs* and Our New Birth

Then I highlighted Burk’s next point and wrote in the margin, “FTW” (for the win):

In every instance that John uses the term *MONOGENES*, it follows a passage/context in which he uses the term *GENNAO* to refer to the “new birth” – every single instance (see John 1:14, 18; 3:16,

⁶ Burk pointed me to Lee Irons, who says, “This argument collapses once it is recognized that both *genos* and *gennao* derive from a common Indo-European root, *ǵenb* (‘beget, arise’)” (“Let’s Go Back to ‘Only Begotten,’” 23 Nov 2016 [thegospelcoalition.org/article/lets-go-back-to-only-begotten]). Murray J. Harris writes, “Etymologically *μονογενής* [*monogenēs*] is not associated with begetting (*γεννᾶσθαι* [*gennasthai*]) but with existence (*ὑΐγενεσθαι* [*gignesthai*])” (*Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992], 86). I’m not educated enough (yet?) to adjudicate.

⁷ *Jesus as God*, 84.

⁸ Emphasis his.

⁹ He adds, “Of these 145 words, fewer than a dozen have meanings involving the notion of genus or kind—for example, *homogenēs* (‘of the same genus’) and *heterogenēs* (‘of different kind’).” But the point is well taken that these impersonal uses derived from the personal, familial uses. So also, Harris, “The meaning ‘without siblings’ does not result from the application to the sphere of family of the category of ‘singularity of a kind.’ Rather, from the personal application of *μονογενής* [*monogenēs*] to ‘the only member of a kin’ there developed a nonfamilial and nonpersonal use in reference to ‘the only member of a kind’” (*Jesus as God*, 85).

18; 1 John 4:9). That is no accident. John is intentionally drawing a distinction between the new birth that we experience and the Son's unique begottenness from the Father. John seems to be saying that while Christians have been "begotten" by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is the "uniquely begotten" Son of God. His "begottenness" is different from ours and indeed utterly without parallel.¹¹

So, now I embrace that *monogenēs* includes a sense of "derivation or descent,"¹² and thus bears some relation to *gennaō* (to beget), even if not etymologically.¹³ Burk doesn't mention it, but I wonder what he thinks of 1 John 5:18, which seems to call Jesus "the One having been begotten of God" (a substantival participle of *gennaō*).

"One-of-a-kind"

I still don't think "only begotten" is the best English translation. First, its root is *genos*, not *gennaō*. Secondly, "begotten" is too easily misunderstood in an Arian sense, as if Jesus didn't exist and then, once He was begotten, He came into existence. That is such a damning heresy that we ought not risk it with modern English readers and listeners. Thirdly, I agree with those who teach that the emphasis of *monogenēs* is on the uniqueness of the child, and therefore, the parent's intensified endearment.¹⁴ For these reasons, I continue to translate *monogenēs* as "one-of-a-kind [son/daughter]" though I no longer buck the sense of "offspring" that is inherent in "kind."

Eternal Generation?

Burk explains that "the Nicene Fathers feature *MONOGENES* in the Creed as an exegetical linchpin for the doctrine" of eternal generation. Burk and Irons have worn down some of my defenses and

¹⁰ Emphasis his. On this verse, Irons wrote, "It may not be literally true that Isaac is Abraham's only son, but he can still be called 'only begotten' to highlight the fact that he is Abraham's sole heir. Ishmael has been rejected from the line of promise. Sarah told Abraham to cast out Hagar and her son, 'for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac' (Gen. 21:10). God agreed with Sarah and told Abraham to do as she said, 'for through Isaac shall your offspring be named' (v. 12; quoted in Rom. 9:7; Heb. 11:18). As a result, it is 'as if' Isaac is Abraham's only begotten son. This 'as if' usage of *monogenēs* is attested elsewhere in Greek literature."

¹¹ Köstenberger (43, n. 72) says this point (as made by Dahms) has been refuted by Gerard Pendrick, "*Monogenes*," *New Testament Studies*, v41 n04 (1995):587-600, but I was not impressed (on that point). Worth the read, though. Probably Pendrick's strongest point is a second-century use of *monogenēs* on the lips of mother, referring to her *only* surviving son in the same breath as referencing her two deceased sons. There it obviously *can't* mean "only begotten" (592). Cf. n. 14 below.

¹² Harris, *Jesus as God*, 84.

¹³ Harris: "Etymologically *μονογενής* [*monogenēs*] is not associated with begetting (*γεννᾶσθαι* [*gennasthai*]) but with existence (*γίγνεσθαι* [*gignesthai*]). Yet it is not surprising that *μονογενής* soon came to acquire overtones of 'begetting' or 'generation,' for in 1 John 5:18 Christ is described as ὁ γεννηθεὶς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ [*ho gennētheis ek tou theou*, 'the One having been begotten of God']" (*Jesus as God*, 86). Cf. also the quote from Irons in my n. 6.

¹⁴ Köstenberger: "Being an only child, and thus irreplaceable, makes a child of special value to its parents (cf. Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38...)" (43). "De Kruijth (1970: 114) notes that even though Luke 8:42 and 9:38 have parallels in the other Synoptics, only Luke uses the term *μονογενής* [*monogenēs*] or even gives the information that the girl and the boy have no siblings. The presumable reason for this is Luke's desire to highlight the special value that the salvation of these children has for their parents" (43, n. 73). "Hence, the LXX often uses ἀγαπητός (*agapētos*, beloved) instead of *μονογενής* (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16; Amos 8:10; Jer. 6:26; Zech. 12:10...)" (43). Harris, with some ambiguity: "Certainly in Johannine usage the conjunction of *μονογενής* [*monogenēs*] and υἱός [*huios*, son] shows that it is not the personal uniqueness of Jesus in itself that John is emphasizing but his being 'of sole descent' as the Son of God. There is undoubtedly, a certain overlapping between the NT terms *μονογενής*, πρωτότοκος [*prototokos*, firstborn], and ἀγαπητός [*agapētos*, beloved] when applied to Christ, for each word implies his unique filial relation to God... How the meaning of *μονογενής* could shade off into ἀγαπητός is clear. The child who is 'without brothers or sisters' will naturally be the special object of parental affection" (85-86).

caused to me rethink it. I believe I have come to embrace the point of the doctrine, but, along with theologians such as John Calvin and John Frame, I am still uneasy with the language of it, as I try to explain in a helpful manner in “The Doctrine of Eternal Generation.”¹⁵ *Monogenēs* was step one; that is step two. There is still more to consider in a reverent study of the Son’s eternal, divine nature.

But at least two things are certain: the Son is worthy of our worship because He is matchless in His eternal participation in the Father’s nature, and He is worthy of our gratefulness for our adoption as sons through His blood (Eph. 1:5-7). To the praise of the glory of His grace!

¹⁵ ProjectOne28.com/teachings/eternal-generation/