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GOD'S ONLY SON:  
THE TRANSLATION OF JOHN 3<sup>16</sup> IN THE  
REVISED STANDARD VERSION

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READERS of John 3<sup>16</sup> in the Revised Standard Version have been surprised or even shocked to find the words "only Son" where they read "only begotten Son" in the King James Version. Some have declared that the translators of the Revised Standard Version were "seeking to set aside the virgin birth of Jesus" and others have declared that it "is simply another attempt to water down a Bible doctrine which they do not believe — the doctrine of the deity of Christ." This article, written by one who believes not only in the pre-existent deity of Christ but also that he became incarnate by the miracle of the virgin birth, attempts to show that the translators have simply corrected an error repeated for fifteen centuries and by making this correction they have rendered a translation that gives greater emphasis to the uniqueness and deity of Jesus Christ.

It should be said, however, that the removal of the term "only begotten" was prompted, not by theological interest, but by the plain demands of linguistic study. The word translated "only" in John 3<sup>16</sup> is *monogenēs*, from *monos* (single) and *genos* (kind). Since Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1886) students have known that *monogenēs* meant "single of its kind, only" and that the term denotes "the only son of God" in the Johannine writings (p. 417). Ferdinand Kattenbusch's article in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (1908) takes the position of J. H. Heinrich Schmidt who proves that "the word *gignesthai* has in general usage entirely lost the early sexual sense of the root *gen*" and that *monogenēs* "is merely a fuller form of *monos*" (Vol. II, p. 281). Kattenbusch's brief article is a good condensation of facts known when his essay was written. Walter Bauer's *Dictionary of the New Testament* (1920, 1928, 1937, 1949–52), the fourth edition of which is being translated into English, supports the conclusions of Schmidt and Kattenbusch. Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (1930), add illustrations from the Papyri and other non-literary sources to support the conclusion that *monogenēs* means "one of a kind," "only," "unique," not "only begotten," which would be *monogennētos* (pp. 416 f.). The revised edition of Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English*

*Lexicon* (1940), defines *monogenēs* as meaning “the only member of a kin or kind,” hence, “only,” “single,” “unique,” and the possibility of “only begotten” is not even mentioned (Vol. II, p. 1144). Friedrich Buechsel’s article in Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1932– ), the monumental dictionary not yet complete, is a classic exposition of the theological significance as well as the linguistic sources of *monogenēs* (Vol. IV, pp. 745–750). However, the most thorough study of *monogenēs* is a doctoral dissertation by Francis Marion Warden, *Monogenēs in the Johannine Literature* (1938). This exhaustive study, written under the direction of the late W. Hersey Davis of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that *monogenēs* means “uniqueness of being, rather than any remarkable-ness of manner of coming into being, or yet uniqueness resulting from any manner of coming into being” (pp. 35 f.). Unfortunately, this thesis has never been published, but it is available in the Library of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, and a digest by the author may be read in the *Review and Expositor* (April, 1953), a publication by the faculty of Southern Seminary. How then, with all the evidence to support the RSV, did “only begotten” get into the English Bible and stay there so long?

### I. THE TRANSLATION OF A TERM

In the Cathedral of Vercelli, Italy, is the most notable of the Old Latin MSS, Codex Vercellensis(a), supposedly written in A.D. 365 by Eusebius, Bishop of Vercelli. In this document, which contains the Gospels, with lacunae, the word *monogenēs* in John 1 14, 18; 3 16, 18 is translated with the Latin word *unicus* (only), not *unigenitus* (only begotten). The importance of this translation of the Gospel of John is evident when it is remembered that Jerome (c. A.D. 347–420) came to Rome from Constantinople in A.D. 382 and, at the request of Pope Damasus, undertook a revision of the old Latin versions of the Scriptures. The revision of the Gospels appeared in A.D. 383 and, after the death of Pope Damasus in A.D. 384, Jerome went to Palestine in A.D. 385 to complete his revision of what became the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church, the Latin Vulgate. Jerome’s Vulgate revised the old Latin *unicus* (only) in John 1 14, 18; 3 16, 18 to *unigenitus* (only begotten). A further examination of the Old Latin MSS, as they are conveniently recorded in Wordsworth and White, *Novum Testamentum Latine*, indicates that Jerome made the changes, together with I John 4 9 and Heb 11 17, out of interest for ecclesiastical dogma. Linguistic study did not force the change, for Jerome left *unicus* (only) as the translation of *monogenēs* in Luke 7 12; 8 42; 9 38 where no theological question is involved.

Epiphanius (c. A.D. 315–403), bishop of Constantia (Salamis) in

Cyprus, was a violent opponent of every form of heresy, particularly those that pertained to the person of Christ. At the close of his work *Ancoratus* (the Anchored One) of A.D. 374, written at the request of several Presbyters in Pamphylia, he gives two creeds as a summary of the orthodox teaching on the Holy Trinity. The second creed contains the significant phrase *gennēthenta ek theou patros monogenē* (the only begotten Son of God the Father.) There in the accusative case it takes both the word *gennethenta* (begotten) and the word *monogenē* (only) to say “only begotten,” because *monogenēs* there as in the NT has to do with uniqueness rather than conception. It is the word *gennēthentos* that means “begotten,” but it does not appear with *monogenēs* in the NT. Now Jerome too was an advocate of the Nicene creed, and it seems clear that his orthodox zeal tempted him to read his creed which required two words (*gennēthenta monogenē*) into the one word (*monogenēs*) found in John 1 14, 18; 3 16, 18; I John 4 9; Heb 11 17. These facts may be easily checked in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. II, p. 35. Furthermore, Schaff’s comparative table of the gradual formation of the Apostles’ Creed reveals the fact that the word *unigenitum* as the Latin translation of *monogenēs* is found only in Augustine (A.D. 400) and the *Sacramentarium Gallicanum* (A.D. 650), and that the ultimate text of the Western Creed (A.D. 750) had *unicum* (only), not *unigenitum* (only begotten). Even Augustine at first said *unicum!* (Philip Schaff, *op. cit.*, p. 52).

The real debate in the fourth century, however, raged around the words *gennēthenta ou poiethenta* (begotten, not made), and zeal for this orthodox formula led to confusion in Jerome’s translation of the word *monogenēs*. It has been said that Jerome left Constantinople to come to Rome in A. D. 382, and it should be added that Jerome became thoroughly imbued with the expositions of Gregory of Nazianzus (c. A. D. 329–390), the great theologian of the Eastern Church, who was an ardent defender of the Nicene formula. Gregory’s theological orations (Migne, Vol. 36, pp. 11–171) were preached in the Church called Anastasia at Constantinople at the very time (A. D. 379–381) Jerome was in Constantinople. Gregory’s Oration XXIX (Migne, Vol. 36, pp. 74–103), which discussed the Father as Begetter (*gennētōr*) and the Son as Begotten (*gennēma*), throws a flood of light on the theological motivation of Jerome in translating *monogenēs* “only begotten.” It should be noted that Gregory used the term *gennēma* for Begotten, and that his argument pertains to the eternal relation between the Father and Son, but there is little doubt that Jerome was influenced by these orations in his revision of the Old Latin MSS from *unicus* (only) to *unigenitus* (only begotten).

The jumble of Jerome remains in the Latin Vulgate, and from the Latin Vulgate translation “only begotten” got into the King James Version of 1611, the English Revised Version of 1881, and other translations, with a partial exception, until the error was removed in *The Twentieth Century*

*New Testament* in 1898. Surprisingly enough the NT of the American Standard Version of 1900 continued the error, as Worrell (1904), Improved Edition (1912), Berkeley Version (1945), Swann (1947), and the Roman Catholic translation of the Latin Vulgate continued to do. The odd translation by Rotherham (1878) was not satisfied with Jerome's error in John 1 14, 18; 3 16, 18; I John 4 9; Heb 11 17. He made the error complete by translating *monogenēs* "only begotten" in Luke 7 12; 8 42; 9 38 also! Fenton (1903) corrects the error in John 1 14, 18; Heb 11 17 ("the one declared born for the promises"), but leaves it in John 3 16, 18; I John 4 9. Montgomery (1924), a translation of great merit in most places, corrects Jerome's error in John 1 14; Heb 11 17; I John 4 9, but leaves the error, for no apparent reason, in John 1 18; 3 16, 18. Some commentaries, including A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures of the New Testament*, correct the error (Vol. V, pp. 13 f., 424), then fall back into it (Vol. V, pp. 50–52; Vol. VI, p. 232). Since *The Twentieth Century New Testament* (1898) removed the error from the New Testament completely, Weymouth (1902), Moffatt (1922), Ballantine (1923), Goodspeed (1923), Torrey (1933), Williams (1936), *The New Testament in Basic English* (1941), and Phillips (1948–1952) have done the same. Even Williams bobbles in a footnote to John 3 18 when he says that *monogenēs* means "only begotten in Greek"! It is hoped that the furious discussion over the RSV will spread enough knowledge to bring an error to an end! The "partial exception" between Jerome's Latin Vulgate and *The Twentieth Century New Testament* was no less a person than William Tyndale, the first translator of the NT from Greek to English. He failed to correct Jerome in John 1 14, 18; Heb 11 17; I John 4 9, but his editions of 1526 and 1534 correct the error in John 3 16, 18. His translation of John 3 16–18 follows:

For God so loveth the worlde, that he hath geven his only sonne, that none that beleve in him, shuld perissh: but shuld have everlastinge lyfe. For God sent not his sonne into the worlde, to condempne the worlde: but that the worlde through him, might be saved. He that beleveth on him, shall not be condempned. But he that beleveth not, is condempned all redy, be cause he beleveth not in the name of the only sonne of God.

*The Newe Testament, 1534*

## II. THE MEANING OF *MONOGENĒS*

*Monogenēs* is a meaningful word in the teachings of the New Testament, both outside and within the Johannine writings. Outside the Johannine writings it is found in Luke 7 12; 8 42; 9 38 and Heb 11 7. Even in the passages in Luke, in which *monogenēs* is translated "only" in the King James Version and all other English translations, to my knowledge, save Rotherham and the Geneva translation (1557) of Luke 7 12, the use of the term is illuminating for the understanding of Johannine christology. The widow's son at Nain is called "the only (*monogenēs*) son of his mother," and surely no one would insist that she begat him!

That, according to Webster, the Bible (Matt 1 1-16), and biology is a male function! It clearly means the only son born to her, the only one in existence, the only one she had! Jairus's daughter is called "an only (*monogenēs*) daughter" (Luke 8 42), and the epileptic boy healed by Jesus at the foot of the mountain is called the "only (*monogenēs*) child" of his father. Strong evidence for translating *monogenēs* in Luke with the word "only" is found in the Septuagint translation of Judges 11 34. Jephthah's daughter is called "his only child" and "besides her he had neither son nor daughter." *Monogenēs* is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *yachid* (cf. Amos 8 10; Zech 12 10), which has the literal meaning of "dear one" or "one and only." The fact that he sacrifices his "one and only child" is the tragic element in Jephthah's vow. And three times the Hebrew word for "only" (*yachid*) is translated by *monogenēs* in the Septuagint Psalms (22 20; 25 16; 35 17). In the Apocrypha, Tobit 3 15 says: "I am my father's only (*monogenēs*) child; he has no other child to be his heir." The Wisdom of Solomon (7 22) speaks of "a spirit" as *monogenēs* (unique). Hatch and Redpath, *Concordance to the Septuagint*, Vol. II, p. 933 give other examples that demonstrate clearly that *monogenēs* means "unique" or "only" in the Septuagint.

No passage illustrates the meaning of *monogenēs* more clearly than Heb 11 17 when read in the light of the OT. It is said that Abraham was "ready to offer up his only (*monogenē*) son," and it is impossible to say Isaac was the only son begotten by Abraham. What about Ishmael (Gen 16 3-5; 17 25), thirteen years before Isaac (17 19, 21; 18 10)? Isaac was the only son of promise, the only one of his kind, but not the only son Abraham begat. The uniqueness of Isaac is seen in the fact that God said: "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named" (Gen 21 12; Heb 11 18). However, the most important thing in the Isaac reference is the context from which the event mentioned in Heb 11 17 is taken. Three times in the famous story of Abraham's faith Isaac is called his "only (*yachid*) son" (Gen 22 2, 12, 16). *Yachid* is the common Hebrew word for "only." Aquila's Greek translation uses *monogenēs* to translate it in Gen 22 2, and Symmachus does the same in Gen 22 12. So Heb 11 17 declares Isaac to be Abraham's "unique" son, but it clearly does not mean "only begotten." This conclusion holds even if Isaac is interpreted to be the only son born to Sarah or the only son Abraham had left.

The meaning of *monogenēs* in the Johannine writings is an epitome of christology. *The First Letter of John* declares "his only (*monogenē*) Son" the revealer of God (4 9) and redeemer of men (4 10). Revelation of love came when "God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him" (4 9), and redemption from sin happened when God "sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (4 10). *The Gospel According to John*, in two famous chapters that emphasize the deity, the uniqueness of the Son of God, expands the twofold declaration of *The First Letter of John*.

First, the Son of God is declared to be the only revealer of God. This is declared in connection with the Logos (Word) of God. Two things are emphasized about the Logos: (1) the Logos *became* flesh (John 1 14), and (2) the Logos *was* God (John 1 1). So Jesus Christ, the Logos of God, is the only Son of God in the incarnation (John 1 14). The Son of God became flesh in the miracle of incarnation. The denial that the Son of God became flesh is inspired by the Antichrist (I John 4 2; II John 7). Cf. I Tim 3 16; Gal 4 4; Rom 1 3; 8 3; II Cor 8 9; Phil 2 5–8. But the Son of God, the Logos, not only *became* flesh! He *was* (Greek tense indicates an eternal fact) God from all eternity! John never tires of saying that the Father sent (John 12 44; 13 20; 20 21) the Son, and that the Son came (John 1 11; 5 43; 6 38; 8 14, 42; 10 10; 12 27, 46 f.; 16 27 f.; 17 8) into the world. Jesus declares that he was before Abraham (John 8 58), and this great teaching is one of the major themes of John's gospel. Cf. Heb 1 1–3. In John 1 18 this eternal relation between the Father and his only Son is so emphatic, that John calls the Son of God *monogenēs theos* (only God). Translators have hesitated to go all the way with the Greek here, but John is rising to such a high christology, to such an emphasis on the deity of Christ, that he can say "Only God, who being in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him." Dr. Williams brings this out in the following translation of John 1 18: "the only Son, Deity Himself, who lies upon His Father's breast, has made him known."

The second thing emphasized by *monogenēs* is that the Son of God is the only redeemer of men. The work of the only Son of God is declared in John 3 16 and the person of the only Son of God is declared in John 3 18. The work of the Son of God is the only sacrifice for sin and the only way for men to receive eternal life. The person of the Son of God is linked with "the name" (John 1 18), one of the most important teachings on deity in the Bible.

Some popular objections to the above conclusions arise from the failure to observe the distinctive vocabulary of the Johannine writings. Those who argue that it is incorrect to say that Jesus is God's "only Son" because God has many sons (e.g. Job 2 1; Rom 8 14; Heb 2 10) fail to note that the Johannine writings never use the word "son" (*huios*) to designate a believer's relationship to the Father. The term *huios* is reserved for the Son of God alone. (John 1 34, 49; 3 18; 5 25; 10 36; 11 4, 27; 17 1; 19 7; 20 31; I John 1 3, 7; 3 8, 23; 4 9, 15; 5 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 20; II John 3). When the Johannine writings designate the relationship of a believer to the Father the term "children of God" (*tekna theou*, John 1 12; I John 3 1, 2; 5 2) is used. So the Johannine writings reserve not only the adjective *monogenēs* but also the noun *huios* for the Son of God. God's "only Son" does not imply that God has no more children, any more than "my beloved Son" (Matt 3 17=Mark 1 11; Matt 17 5=Mark 9 7) would rule out the Father's love for others or that "his own Son" (Rom 8 39)

would rule out others' belonging to God. A second objection insists that the term "begotten," whether it is designated by the word *monogenēs* or not, should, since it is part of our Christian heritage, be retained to designate the unique relationship between the Father and the Son. First of all it should be said that honest translation is according to truth, not tradition. But the word "begotten" (*gennaō*) is used in the Johannine writings to designate the relationship between the Father and all his children (John 1 13; 3 3, 5, 6, 7, 8; I John 2 29; 3 9; 4 7; 5 1, 4, 18). And here we must depart from Buechsel in Kittel's *Dictionary* when he argues that John 1 13 and I John 5 18 probably speak of the Father begetting the Son (Vol. IV, p. 750). Sir Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, pp. 163–166, has explored the possibility of the singular in John 1 13 for all it is worth and declares the evidence for the plural "overwhelming" (p. 163) and "unavoidable" (p. 164). And it is a surprise to find the RSV adopting the reading "him" (*auton*) in I John 5 18 so that "He who was born of God" has reference to the Son of God instead of to "any one born of God." This departure of the RSV from the KJV and the ASV despite the support of BA and the evidence suggested by Brooke in *The International Critical Commentary* has three facts against it: (1) the Johannine use of *gennaō*, (2) the support of  $\text{NA}^{\text{corr}}$  KLP for "himself" (*heauton*), and (3) the repetition of the same idea (yourself, *heauta*) in I John 5 21. Ps 2 7 is quoted in the NT to declare that the Son is begotten of the Father, but the context is either the resurrection (Acts 13 33) or the exaltation (Heb 1 5; 5 5) of Jesus. In other words, as in Ps 2 7, it is a coronation idea, not a conception idea. Jesus is conceived of the Holy Spirit (Matt 1 18), but the NT never uses *gennaō* to designate the relationship between the Father and the Son at the *beginning* of the life of Jesus.

As long ago as 1883 B. F. Wescott, in *The Epistles of St. John*, pp. 162–165, made clear that the meaning of *monogenēs* "is centered in the Personal existence of the Son, and not in the Generation of the Son" and concluded that "the grand simplicity of the original idea of the word was lost . . . towards the close of the fourth century." Efforts to refute these conclusions from such references as Ignatius (*Eph.* VII.2), *Epistle of Diognetus* 10:2, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 20:2, and Justin Martyr (*Dial.* 105) are fruitless. This discussion may be closed with a quotation from a writing contemporary with *The Gospel According to John* which shows clearly that the above conclusions on *monogenēs* are correct.

There is a bird which is called the Phoenix.

This being the only one of its kind (*monogenēs*) lives 500 years.

— I Clement XXV. 2.

Now the Phoenix was neither born nor begotten, but it could be *monogenēs*, the only one of its kind!