

Article of the Month
December, 2016

Monogenes

Last month's article dealt with a Greek expression. Why not look at some more Greek while we are at it! We don't really want to discourage anyone by speaking about things in a foreign language, but the Word of the Lord was written in Hebrew and Greek, and every now and then it is profitable to learn something about important expressions in those languages. The word "***monogenes***" is a relatively rarely-used word in the New Testament, but it is an important one because misunderstanding it can lead to all kinds of Scriptural confusion. It is used only nine times in the Bible. It is usually translated "only begotten." That seems simple enough; but it is really not quite so simple.

Beginning our investigation, we can look at Hebrews 11:17. It reads:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his **only begotten** son.

Those of us who know the story, if we think about it, will immediately say, "That's not true!" It is NOT true in the literal sense because we know that Abraham, at that time, had also begotten Ishmael. Therefore, Isaac was NOT his "only begotten son." This, therefore, is a good Scripture for beginning our examination because it immediately teaches us that "***monogenes***" is sometimes NOT a word to be taken for its seemingly literal meaning. While it literally translates as "only begotten," it clearly does NOT MEAN "only begotten!"

But, *hold on a minute!* It seems literally to mean "only begotten" in three of its nine uses in Scripture. In Luke 7:12, 8:42, and 9:38, it consistently refers to the only children of both men and women. In the New American Standard translation of these three passages, the word (monogenes) is translated as just one word: "only." There is no reason in these passages to doubt the literal translation of "monogenes" as meaning the ONLY CHILD. But, as we have seen in Hebrews 11:17, ***it doesn't always have that meaning.***

We have examined four of the nine uses of the word in the Bible. The remaining five usages apply to Jesus. It is in these passages that our understanding can be difficult.

Before looking at them, let us remind ourselves of the Hebrews text about Abraham. WHAT DID IT MEAN? We see that it did NOT mean that Isaac was literally Abraham's "only begotten son." It means, if we think about it, that Isaac was the very special son of Abraham — who, by the way, had other children as well. See Genesis 25:1, 2.

There is a book entitled:

***An Expository Dictionary
of
New Testament Words
with their
Precise Meanings
for English Readers***

by
W. E. Vine

This work is usually just called “Vine’s” — or its explanations are frequently referred to as “Vine says...”

We would like to quote a single sentence from Vine because it summarizes the meaning of how “monogenes” applies figuratively. Vine says, “The term is one of endearment as well as singleness.” We can see how this explains Hebrews 11:17. Isaac was the son who was DEAR to Abraham. He was SINGULARLY important to Abraham because God’s promise to Abraham was to be fulfilled THROUGH Isaac. Thus, even though Isaac WAS NOT Abraham’s “only begotten,” he was the child of “singular importance” and thus the “endearing” son. This helps us to apply the uses of “monogenes” which refer to Jesus — as we will shortly see.

— The Five Uses Applied to Jesus —

All five of these instances of “monogenes” are written in Scripture by the Apostle John.

(1) In John 1:14 we have a genuinely unique usage. While the passage is about Jesus, the actual wording is not. **It is a comparison.** It reads:

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And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of an only begotten from a father, full of grace and truth.

(It is important to note here that we have correctly made a slight alteration in the NAS translation. The NAS reads, "...as of THE only begotten from THE Father." This reading implies that the passage is talking about Jesus' relationship to his heavenly Father. It is not! It is making a COMPARISON. It is saying that Jesus' glory was like that SPECIAL QUALITY enjoyed by an only child. The Greek text does NOT have the word "THE" before "only begotten" or before "father." We have, therefore, removed these two words: "THE.")

This text is, however, a perfect beginning for our examination of the uses of "monogenes" in applications regarding Jesus. It is a good text because it parallels the way the word is used in Hebrews 11:17 regarding Abraham and Isaac. There, too, Isaac was the "only begotten" of Abraham because of Isaac's "glory" in God's plan and in Abraham's life. The two passages are very much alike.

(2) In John 1:18, "monogenes" appears once more:

No man has seen God at any time; the "**only begotten**" God [some manuscripts read "Son" instead of "God"], who is in the bosom of the Father, he [Jesus] has explained Him [God].

We now have a text specifically about Jesus. It does not (as did 1:14) make a comparison. It simply calls Jesus "the only begotten." What this MEANS, we will discuss. But we have seen already that this is a term of POSITION and of RESPECT rather than a term of literal meaning — even though we WILL find *some* literal meaning attached to it.

The text seems quite clear in its intent. God, Himself, has never been seen by anyone. But Christians KNOW Him best because of Jesus' EXPLANATIONS of Him to us. Jesus IS, please note, a "God." The Scriptures use this term very freely to refer to any mighty being — human or otherwise. Jesus, quoting the Old Testament in John 10:34 and 35, points out that the prophets were Gods. But in John 1:18, Jesus is called "the only begotten God" — in the SAME SENSE that Isaac was the "only begotten son" of Abraham. Both Isaac and Jesus occupy the most-favored status in their families. It is NOT that there are not other sons in the family; it is just that Isaac and Jesus are far above their kin. *However*, there is an additional thought yet to be discerned in this expression, "monogenes."

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(3) The next use of “monogenes” is in John 3:16. Almost everyone has this passage memorized!

For God so loved the world that he gave His “only begotten Son” that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Interestingly, the NAS margin suggests “unique” instead of “only begotten” in this passage. This goes along with what we have been seeing. The NAS translators seem to comprehend that “only begotten” can be misleading. It is Jesus’ UNIQUENESS that is the correct thought of “monogenes.” But the fact remains in this passage that the POWER of the phrase, “only begotten,” is John’s INTENT. John wants us all to understand that God gave up the dearest being to Him that has ever been or ever will be. All of this was done on our behalf. It would be great beyond description if God gave up ANY one of His sons in the spirit realm to save us. But John wants us to know that God did the ULTIMATE. He sent His “only begotten” — the treasure of His love, the “apple of His eye,” the favored child, the greatest thing He had.

(4) The word occurs again in John 3:18:

He who believes in him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the “only begotten” Son of God.

This “treasure” which God sent for our salvation is so very important in the plan — so “unique” — that belief in him becomes the standard for salvation. Those who believe (in the fullest sense) in this lifetime have the judgment of their previous condemnation removed! (See Romans 8:1.) Those who do not in this life enter into that special belief relationship REMAIN in the judgment passed upon Adam and his entire race. (They have “been judged already.”) Their new judgment and release from condemnation await the peaceable kingdom and mediation by Christ during his second advent. (Hebrews 10:12, 13, 16-18)

(5) The final use of “monogenes” in Scripture is in I John 4:9. In this text, the NAS again makes the point in the marginal translation of substituting “unique” for “only begotten.” It is a good substitution because it stresses that John’s point is NOT that Jesus in an only child, but that he is SINGULAR among God’s created beings. He is “special” in a seemingly uncountable number of ways.

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By this the love of God was manifested in us [margin = “in our case”], that God has sent His **only begotten** Son into the world so that we might live through him.

What an excellent finale to this list of texts. It sums it all up! Everything we have seen in the previous uses of “monogenes” comes to a climax in this verse. God’s love could not be more powerfully demonstrated than by His sending His most cherished and beloved one to arrange the whole plan of God for our salvation — the salvation of the Church now in the Christian Age, and the salvation of the rest of mankind (now unbelievers) soon in the Kingdom of the Millennial Age. (I Timothy 4:10)

— Another Consideration —

While Jesus, according to our study, is not literally the “only begotten” of God, he forever will hold this title because he IS the one, unique, favored-above-all of God’s creation.

But the followers of Jesus, the Church, are also “begotten” by God. They are, therefore, called God’s sons. Begotten, of course, means “to have received life from another.” Thus, Jesus IS, indeed, “begotten.” But he is NOT the “only” begotten in the literal sense of the word — only in the implied or idiomatic sense of the word.

To support this conclusion, we note that Jesus’ disciples are spoken of as “begotten” in John 1:12 and 13. It is usually translated “born” in this passage. But that is, without question, incorrect. The passage reads:

But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become **children of God**, even to those who believe in his name, who were **begotten** not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, **but of God**.

The Apostle John makes the same point with repeated clarity in I John 3:1,2; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1; 5:4, and 5:18. (Again, the word “begotten” in each case is mistranslated “born.”) That the disciples are “sons” (begotten) of God is an indisputable Scriptural truth. Thus, Jesus is NOT literally the ONLY begotten of God. But he IS God’s “only begotten” in the figurative sense we have found in our Scriptural comparisons.

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— A Final Point about Monogenes —

One thing is certain, Jesus IS a “begotten” being in the true sense of the word. He has received life from another — from his heavenly Father. He IS a created being. The very use of the words Father and Son are clear in their intent. One is a life-giver; the other is a life-receiver. But no being in the universe has Jesus’ UNIQUE position — the highest of all God’s creations. In the “endearing” and in the “singularity” of position and esteem, Jesus IS God’s “only begotten son.”

Since “monogenes” literally means “**only begotten**,” but because the use of it is usually not literal, it is important to summarize its peculiar meaning. When the word is used figuratively, the “**only**” part of the word (“*mono*”) does NOT mean “only.” It means *unique, special, singular in quality or position, superior, or dearest*. But the “**begotten**” part of the word (“*genes*”) remains quite literal — whether or not the expression is being used literally or figuratively. In other words, in each case, the “only begotten” person IS, INDEED, “begotten.” The person HAS RECEIVED LIFE from someone else. The person who is “begotten” did not exist prior to the time he RECEIVED LIFE.
