Christ as *Monogenēs:* Proper Translation and Theological Significance

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The controversy over the doctrine of the Trinity in the church is now present in several parts of the world field. One of the arguments used to support the idea that Christ was not eternal but that He had a beginning is that the title *monogenēs* means "only begotten." As we will indicate, this is a misuse and a mistranslation of the Christological title. That term appears nine times in the New Testament and always designates human objects: a son (Luke 7:12; 9:38), a daughter (Luke 8:42), Jesus (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9), and Isaac (Heb 11:17). We will begin by examining the etymological meaning of the term and its usage.

I.   Etymology

The term *monogenēs* is derived from the adjective *monos* ("single," "only," "unique,") and the verbal substantive *genos* ("race," "kind," "species"). Based on that information it can be suggested that *monogenēs* means "only one of its kind," "unique."[1] This has become the most common rendering of the term in English. However, since *genos* is related to the verb *ginomai* ("be born," "be made," "become"), *monogenēs* could also mean "only begotten." The question is whether or not the use of *genos* always expresses the verbal etymological idea of origin or birth.

Before we arrive at any conclusion we should examine some additional evidence. First, we should acknowledge that there are cases in Greek literature in which *monogenēs* seems to be connected to the idea of generation. This is particularly the case when the term is applied to humans or to offspring. For instance, in cases where it is stated that someone is the "only" child of a specific couple, *monogenēs* could mean "only child born to someone."

Second, there is linguistic evidence indicating that by the time of the New Testament the idea of derivation or birth was detached from the verbal substantive *genos*. Hence we find terms like *homo-genēs* ("of the same kind") and *hetero-genēs* ("of a different kind"), in which *genēs* has absolutely nothing to do with birth or derivation. In fact, there are usages in the Greek literature in which the term *monogenēs* itself is totally disconnected from the idea of derivation. For instances, the liver is described as *monogenēs*, that is to say as a "unique" organ; the heavenly bodies are qualified as *monogenēs*, "unique." There are certain trees that are *monogenēs*, "the only ones of their kind."[2]

Third, we should be careful not to press the argument of etymology too much.[3] The study of semantics indicates that the meaning of a term is not determined by its etymology but by the way the author employs it. That is to say, the context in which the term is used should determine how it is being used by the writer. In the study of words it is incorrect to force the etymological meaning of a term into every usage of it. We have already shown that *monogenēs* is often used without any connection at all to the idea of generation of birth while in other places it seems to retain some of the etymological significance. The conclusion is that in both cases the context was the determining factor in establishing the meaning of the term. We will examine the New Testament materials in the light of that conclusion.

II.   Non-Christological Usages

Monogenēs is used to designate the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:12). He is "the only son [*monogenēs*] of his mother." At first one could conclude that he is the only begotten son of the widow, but contextually that does not seem to be the case. That piece of information is not provided to establish a genealogical connection between the two, but to describe the desperate

situation of this lady. She was already a widow and now she lost her *only* child; for her there is no other like him. The usage intensifies her pathos and invites those ready to sympathize with her.

The same applies to the daughter of Jairus who is described as "his only [*monogenēs*] daughter" (Luke 8:42). She is unique in the family because she is the only daughter and consequently her death would be a great tragedy.

The father of the boy with an evil spirit refers to his son as "my only [*monogenēs*] child" (Luke 9:38). Like in the other cases the emphasis is on the loss or the threat of a loss of someone that is precious and unique to the mother or the father. Although one could not totally rule out the idea of generation, the interest of the biblical writer is not found there but in the fact that those individuals are facing a serious painful tragedy. In that case the translation "unique" is more appropriate in that it stresses the enormous magnitude of the loss. There is no other like this child/daughter; they are irreplaceable.

In Heb 11:17 Isaac is described as Abraham's "one and only [*monogenēs*] son." The translation "only begotten" is ruled out by the fact that Isaac was not the only son of the patriarch (Gen 16:3-4; 25:1). He is unique, the only one of his kind, in the sense that he is "the only son of the promise"[4] (Gen 21:12).

III. Christological Usages

When the title is applied to Jesus several theological ideas are expressed that help to clarify the meaning of the term. First, He is the *monogenēs* in the sense that He is divine. This is expressed in John 1:18[5] where we find the strange phrase, "God the One and Only [*monogenēs theos*]" applied to Jesus. The idea of generation does not fit the context at all. In this case *monogenēs* stands in apposition to "God" and serves to shed light on the usage of this term. Although Jesus is human, He is also divine, and consequently He is and has always been "unique;" there has never been anyone like Him in the universe. This phrase summarizes what John has been saying from the beginning of His gospel, namely that the divine *Logos* became flesh (John 1:1, 14). That explains why Jesus was free to say, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

Second, the title *monogenēs* is applied to Christ to indicate that He is the only and unique revelator of God: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only [*monogenēs*], who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). As in the previous passage the title *monogenēs* is used in the absolute, i.e. the term son is not attached to it. The context indicates that He is unique in that He is the only one who can reveal the glory of God to us. This is possible because He is divine. In other words, the title *monogenēs* speaks of Jesus as unique in nature and in function. These two ideas are found in John 1:18: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." His divine nature and His closeness to the Father enable Him to be the only and unique revelator of the Father.

Third, the title *monogenēs* identifies Jesus as the one and only redeemer through whom God's saving love reaches us: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son [*monogenēs*] into the world that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9). Here we find two terms together, *son* and *monogenēs*. In His redemptive mission Jesus demonstrated to be God's unique and only Son, i.e., to have a unique relationship with God that made possible our redemption. In fact, the Father loved us so much that He "gave his one and only Son" to save those who believe in Him (John 3:16, 18).

When the title *monogenēs* refers to Jesus it designates the uniqueness of His nature, the uniqueness of His relationship with the Father, His uniqueness as the revelator of God, and His

uniqueness as redeemer. There is no other like Him; He is the only one of His kind. The idea of "the only *begotten*" of the Father does not appear in those passages and is not required in their contexts. They deal with Christ's nature and mission.

IV. From "Unique, Only" to "Only Begotten"

The translation "only begotten" came into our Bibles through the Latin versions.[6] The early Latin manuscripts rendered *monogenēs* in the Christological passages as *unicus* ("unique"), but in Jerome's Latin version it was changed to "only begotten" (*unigenitus*). The shift apparently took place during the Arian controversies. Arian and his followers taught that Christ was created. The apologists argued that Christ was begotten before all creation. According to them the generation of the Son from the Father was eternal and therefore He was not a created being. In other words, when the phrase "only begotten" was applied to Jesus they intended to establish Christ's eternal equality with the Father.

The biblical and Adventist emphasis on the cosmic conflict places the uniqueness of Christ at the center of theological analysis. There is an enemy that claims to be like Him and who in heaven as well as throughout human history attempted and continues to attempt to usurp His uniqueness. The title *monogenēs* makes clear that there is no one like Christ in the totality of the cosmos. He is indeed the only one of His kind!

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[1]See, J. A. Fitzmyer, "*Monogenēs*," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 2, edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 439.

[2]For these examples consult, Gerhard Pendrick, "*Monogenēs*," *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 588; and Fitzmyer, 440.

[3]This was done, among others, by James M. Bulman, "The Only Begotten Son," *Calving Theological Journal* 16 (1981): 56-79.

[4]Fitzmyer, 440.

[5]There are some textual problems here, but the reading found in most modern translations appears to be the best one.

[6]On the history of this change see, Dale Moody, "God's Only Son: The Translation of John 3:16 in the RSV," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72 (1953): 214-216; R. L. Roberts, "The Rendering of 'Only Begotten' in John 3:16," *Restoration Quarterly* 16 (1973): 2-3, 6-7.

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