

# The rise and fall of a translational compound: “the only begotten” in the English versions of the New Testament

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to account for the emergence of the designation “only begotten” in the English Bible, its widespread use in pre-modern versions, and its gradual and almost complete disappearance from most contemporary translations. A close examination of the origins of this designation, traceable to its Latin cognate *unigenitus* first introduced into the biblical tradition by St. Jerome to render selected occurrences of the Greek adjective *monogenēs*, reveals a unique theological inspiration behind it. “Only begotten,” recurring in English translation of the Bible for almost six centuries as an important christological title, has recently been replaced by translational solutions reflecting a more accurate understanding of the underlying Greek word.

KEYWORDS: monogenes, only begotten, unigenitus, Vulgate.

## Introduction

If the writings of the Apostle John hold a somewhat special place in the New Testament, that is hardly because of their linguistic merits. It is commonly known that the Fourth Gospel, the three Epistles and the Revelation employ relatively unsophisticated language—both lexically and syntactically—which typically makes them the default study material for beginner learners of *koine* Greek. Simplicity, however, may sometimes be a mere guise of depth. Such is the case with the Johannine corpus which contains a significant number of theologically laden phrases that over the centuries became ingrained in the collective Christian memory. One of such passages is John 3:16, arguably the best known verse of the Bible. Its traditional English rendering is found in the King James Version (KJV): “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”. In this paper, I shall attempt to account for (1) the emergence of the designation “only begotten” in the English Bible, (2) its widespread use in pre-modern versions and (3) its gradual and almost complete disappearance from most contemporary translations.

## The Rise

The Greek word behind “only begotten” is *monogenēs*. The New Testament records nine occurrences of this adjective: three in Luke (7:12; 8:42; 9:38), four in John (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18), one in Hebrews (11:17) and one in 1 John (4:9). In all said passages, *monogenēs* describes the relationship between a parent and a child. Even though in Luke 9:38, John 1:14, Hebrews and 1 John the adjective is used substantively and does not modify *huios* (“son”), it is clear from the immediate context that it describes the filial position of the referent. In the Johannine passages *monogenēs* is used of Jesus whereas elsewhere it refers to human offspring. This fact, as we shall see below, has not been insignificant for translators.

The translational differentiation between the particular uses of *monogenēs* depending on its reference goes as far back as Wycliffe. Indeed, a close examination of the nine verses in his rendering reveals a clear line of demarcation. In Luke, Wycliffe oscillates between fairly literal (“he hadde but o douyter,” 8:42) or surprisingly descriptive solutions (“the sone of a womman that hadde no mo children,” 7:12; “biholde my sone, for Y haue no mo,” 9:38) but as he passes on to the other occurrences he becomes remarkably consistent and every time speaks of the “oon begetun [sone],” thus introducing into English the phrase that was to become a key Christological title for almost six centuries.

The rationale for Wycliffe’s translational decisions becomes more apparent when one bears in mind that he was not translating directly from the Greek but from Latin, as was the common ecclesiastical practice in his day. As a result, the first complete English translation of the Bible merely mirrors the distinction found in the Vulgate which translates *monogenēs* as *unicus/unica* in Luke and *unigenitus* elsewhere. Interestingly, the Old Latin Codex Vercellensis (dated about 365 CE) which contains the Gospels, renders *monogenēs* as *unicus* throughout, even when the reference is to Christ, i.e. in John 1:14, 18 and 3:16, 18 (Moody 1959:146). It seems that several decades later, while revising the Old Latin translations, St. Jerome decided to introduce *unigenitus* as the Latin equivalent of *monogenēs* in all but the Lukan passages. It has been argued that behind this innovation were dogmatic rather than linguistic reasons, largely related to the Arian controversy (Carson 1984:30; Ridderbos 1997:53). Clearly, in the context of the struggle against Arians questioning the deity of Jesus and essentially equating him with other created beings, the opportunity to confront them with a Bible version emphasizing Christ’s eternal procession from the Father as the “only begotten” Son was not to be missed. Given the role of the Vulgate in the emergence of the vernacular versions of the Bible, the spectacular rise of “the only begotten” in the English translations was only a matter of time.

## The Centuries of Triumph

Introduced into the English biblical tradition by Wycliffe, “only begotten” became the standard equivalent of *monogenēs* in all but the Lukan passages. After it reappeared in Tyndale’s version of 1525—the first English translation based on the Greek—in John 1, Hebrews and 1 John (interestingly, Tyndale preferred “only” in John 3:16, 18), this designation was to be found throughout the major versions of the Bible originating in the following centuries, regardless of their ecclesiastical background, including Miles Coverdale’s Bible (1535), the Bishop’s Bible (1568), the Geneva Bible (1587), the Douai-Rheims Version (1609), Young’s Literal Translation (1863), Darby’s Version (1867), Rotherham’s Emphasized Version (1872), the English Revised Version (1881), and the American Standard Version (1901). Most importantly, however, such was the rendering of *monogenēs* (except in Luke) preferred by the authors of the King James Version (1611). It is therefore little wonder that the concept of Christ as the “only-begotten” Son of God became—or rather continued to be—an important element of mainstream Christian theology. That the use of this designation and the underlying specific understanding of Christ’s relationship to the Father gave significant buttressing to certain theological notions, particularly the doctrines of Christ’s divine generation and eternal pre-existence, is evident from the following passages coming from a manual of systematic theology and an expository dictionary, respectively:

The personal property of the Son is that He is eternally begotten from the Father ... The doctrine of the generation of the Son is suggested by the Biblical representation of the first and second person of the Trinity as standing in the relation of Father and Son to each other. **Not only do the**

**names “Father” and “Son” suggest the generation of the latter by the former, but the Son is also repeatedly called “the only begotten”.** (Berkhof 1941:93; emphasis added)

With reference to Christ, the phrase “the only begotten from the Father,” John 1:14 ... indicates that as the Son of God He was the sole representative of the Being and character of the One who sent Him ... **We can only rightly understand the term “only begotten” when used of the Son, in the sense of unoriginated relationship.** “The begetting is not an event of time, however remote, but in fact irrespective of time. The Christ did not *become*, but necessarily and eternally *is* the Son. He, a Person, possesses every attribute of pure Godhood. **This necessitates eternity, absolute being**” ... In John 3:16 the statement, “God so loved the world that He gave His Only Begotten Son,” must not be taken to mean that Christ became the Only Begotten Son by Incarnation. (Vine 1966:140; italics in original, emphasis added)

Obviously, it would be wrong to attribute the emergence of those doctrines to a certain translation of *monogenēs* in the English Bible. The idea of the generation of the Son had already been elaborated by both Latin and Greek Fathers pursuing extremely fine trinitarian distinctions, and at one point resulted in articles 21-23 of the Athanasian Creed:

The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone, not made, nor created but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son, neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.

Without necessarily establishing the direction of the causal relationship between the particulars of the Christological doctrine and the rendering “only begotten,” it must be admitted that the dominant English translation for over half a millennium corresponded to a specific theological understanding of certain occurrences of *monogenēs* in the Greek New Testament. Only in the last several decades did it become increasingly clear that this was not the only possible rendering, and perhaps not even the most accurate one.

## The Fall

The radical reinterpretation of *monogenēs* as well as several other theologically significant terms—among which the replacement of “a virgin” in Isaiah 7:14 with “a young woman” probably raised the fiercest opposition (see e.g. Thuesen 1999:96ff)—came with the publication of the Revised Standard Version (RSV) in 1952 in the United States, which substituted “only” for “only begotten” throughout. This rendering was not entirely innovative, for a number of lesser known translators had offered it before, e.g. Fenton (1895), Weymouth (1902), Moffatt (1922), Ballantine (1923), Goodspeed (1923), Montgomery (1924), Torrey (1933), Williams (1936), and Phillips (1948-52) (Moody 1959:146). However, because of the endorsement of the RSV by the National Council of Churches and a huge marketing campaign surrounding its launch, the disappearance of the familiar (though probably somewhat unclear) “only begotten” did not pass unnoticed, leaving some readers “troubled” (Grant 1966:11) and others “surprised or shocked” (Moody 1959:145).

While the reaction to the abandonment of the traditional translation of *monogenēs* was definitely fuelled by dogmatic anxieties, the suspicions of a predominantly theological inspiration behind it, seeking to undermine important elements of the orthodox christological doctrine (as some critics would say), probably tended to oversimplify the problem and certainly overlooked important aspects of it. It is no secret that the RSV came from what some consider a theologically liberal background (e.g. Foster 1983:98) which may have had some bearing on its doctrinal tenor here and there, but it nevertheless seems likely that in

choosing the lexically simpler option the authors of the RSV were informed more by linguistic than theological data. Setting aside the doctrinal aspect for the time being, let us focus on the linguistic dimension and explore it in somewhat greater detail.

## Etymology

It may be argued that “only begotten” as well as the underlying Latin cognate *unigenitus* rely on an etymological analysis of *monogenēs*, conceived of as having sprung from *monos*, “only,” and *gennaō*, “to beget” (Carson 1984:29). This hypothesis, however, is weakened by the realization that the more likely morphological form corresponding to the meaning “only begotten” would be *monogennētos* (Grant 1966:12; Balz and Schneider 1990:440), which in turn gives more weight to the alternative solution, endorsing the derivation from *monos* and *genos*, “kind, race” (Danker 2000:658). But this does not exhaust the etymological discussion. An important observation related to the earlier stages of the etymological analysis is brought forth by Balz and Schneider (1990) in their *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (EDNT): “although the noun *genos* is related to the verb *gi(g)nesthai*, the root *genes-* lost its originally sexual connotation and soon meant simply ‘become,’ **without any reference to ‘birth’**” (ibid:440; emphasis added). Moreover, it has been pointed out in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT) (Kittel 1967:738-39; emphasis added) that even though “in compounds like *dio-genēs*, *gē-genēs*, *sug-genēs* the *-genēs* **suggests derivation (genos) rather than birth**” the reconstruction of the etymological meaning of *monogenēs* may require a more complex reasoning:

Nouns as the first part of the compound give the source, e.g. from Zeus, the earth. Adverbs describe the nature of the derivation, e.g., noble or common. *Mono-genēs* is to be explained along the lines of *eugenēs* rather than *dio-genēs*. The *mono-* **does not denote the source but the nature of derivation**. Hence *monogenēs* means “of sole descent,” i.e. without brothers or sisters. **This gives us the sense of only-begotten**. The reference is to the only child of one’s parents, primarily in relation to them. *Monogenēs* is stronger than *monos*, for it denotes that they have never had more than this child. **But the word can also be used more generally without reference to derivation in the sense of “unique,” “unparalleled,” “incomparable”** ... (ibid:738-39; emphasis added)

This brief analysis—by no means conclusive—demonstrates that both attempts to construe the etymological meanings of *monogenēs*, the more general “only” or “unique” and the more specific “only-begotten,” may be supported linguistically, though the overall evidence in the opinion of the present author should probably be considered to weigh in favor of the former. Still, quite regardless of the potential exegetical usefulness of etymological speculations, it must be contended that meaning is not ultimately determined by derivation but by usage. Consequently, some comments concerning this aspect are now in order.

## Usage outside the New Testament

Before we properly focus on the semantic intricacies of the New Testament use of *monogenēs*, let us consider it within the broader perspective of ancient literature. The word appears in the writings of Hesiod, Herodotus, Plato, and Aeschylus (Kittel 1967:737-38), every time referring to an only child. In the Septuagint *monogenēs* is used to render the Hebrew *yāhîd*, (“alone” or “only”), e.g. in Judges 11:34, “she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter” (RSV), Tobit 3:15, “I am my father’s only child” (RSV), and

Tobit 8:15, “thou hast had compassion on two only children” (RSV). It seems that *monogenēs* often carries the Hebrew nuance of “lonely,” as in Baruch 4:16; Psalms 21:21; 24:16; 34:17 (Balz and Schneider 1990:440). Interestingly, the Septuagint several times translates *yāhîd* by *agapētos*, “beloved” (Kittel 1967:739), which more likely corresponds to the meaning “only (i.e. unique, special, favorite)” rather than “only begotten.” Having surveyed the literary material preceding the New Testament, Grant (1966:12) concludes: “It is obvious that in ordinary use *monogenēs* did not carry any more weight than *monos*” and his conclusion can hardly be challenged.

## Usage in the New Testament

On the basis of the occurrences of *monogenēs* in the New Testament and other early writings, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BAGD) (Danker 2000) distinguishes the two following meanings: “(1) *pertaining to being the only one of its kind within a specific relationship*, one and only, only; ... (2) *pertaining to being the only one of its kind or class*, unique (in kind)” (p. 658). This differentiation closely corresponds to the Lukan and Johannine uses of this adjective. In Luke 7:12; 8:42 and 9:38 *monogenēs* plays a significant role from the narrative perspective by emphasizing the despair of the parents over the death or fatal illness of their only children and—against this background—stressing the momentousness of Jesus’ miracles. At the same time, as it has been humorously observed, the meaning “only begotten” does not seem to follow from the available linguistic data: “How little emphasis Greek usage laid on the second part of the word is obvious from Luke’s addition [at 7:12], ‘she was a widow’ (women do not beget children in Greek any more than in good English; they bear them)” (Grant 1966:12).

However, the exegetical and, consequently, translational debate is mostly concerned with the use of the word in John’s writings. The problem is two-fold: (1) whether the fact that the Fourth Evangelist repeatedly uses *monogenēs* to describe Jesus’ relation to God gives sufficient grounds for advocating a specifically “Johannine use,” semantically differentiated against the four other occurrences in the New Testament where *monogenēs* is used to refer to human offspring; and (2) whether the Johannine use entails the idea of begetting, thus providing justification for rendering *monogenēs* as “only begotten.” In order to adequately address these questions, let us recall the verses in question as rendered in the RSV:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (John 1:14)

No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known (John 1:18)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)

He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God (John 3:18)

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him (1 John 4:9)

With regard to the first of the questions posed above, one is led to conclude that the purely linguistic analysis of the text does not provide sufficient evidence to speak of distinctly

Johannine use of *monogenēs*. It must be stressed that this hypothesis rests solely on the fact that John uses the word exclusively in reference to Jesus, therefore its verification or refutation requires making referential judgments. The question of whether words used of divine beings are to be interpreted differently than when used of people—all grammatical considerations being equal—is essentially a matter of *theology* and not *semantics*. This means that the theological interpretation operates quite irrespectively of the linguistic level, i.e. even when *monogenēs* is translated as “only” throughout, as in the RSV, it may still be asserted that it has a special meaning whenever used of Jesus, as evidenced in *EDNT*: “‘the/his *only* son’ is the clear meaning of *monogenēs* in John 3:16, 16 and 1 John 4:9. The expression indicates Jesus’ unique personality, relation to the Father, and mission” (Balz and Schneider 1990:440; italics in original). If this information is encoded in the said occurrences of the adjective “only,” this must be on a level surpassing ordinary semantics.

Likewise, the problem of whether *monogenēs* as used by John entails the idea of begetting is ultimately a theological one and thus evading linguistic verification. In non-theological terms it may merely be observed—in addition to the etymological considerations briefly mentioned above—that John 1:13 contains a possible parallelism, *ek theou egennēthēsan* (“were born of God”), which may hint at the meaning of *monogenēs* in the next verse as well as at later occurrences as related to birth, hence possibly supportive of the understanding “only begotten.” This argument, however, is rather unconvincing: not only does it reopen the unsettled etymological debate (is *monogenēs* derived from *gennaō* or *genos*?) but also fails to recognize the referential difference, since *egennēthēsan* in John 1:13 refers to believers, namely human beings, while *monogenēs* in John 1:14 is used of Jesus.

Having said that the Johannine corpus does not give a definite answer regarding the meaning of *monogenēs*, let us turn to the last verse in which it is found, i.e. Hebrews 11:17, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son” (RSV). From the Book of Genesis we know that Isaac was not, in the strict sense, the only son of Abraham, who had also fathered Ishmael (16:3f; 17:22-25) and after Sarah’s death had more children with Keturah (25:1ff). Therefore as used of Isaac, *monogenēs* should be preferably taken to mean “*only (son) of his kind*, i.e. the only son of the promise (Gen 21:12)” (Balz and Schneider 1990:440; italics in original), without any reference to begetting. Still, it was arguably the typological correspondence between Isaac and Christ that made St. Jerome render *monogenēs* as *unigeintus* not only in John’s writings but also in Hebrews, breaking ground for the emergence of “only begotten,” even though both the Latin and English translations seem to lack the necessary linguistic support and rest predominantly on theological presuppositions.

### ***Monogenēs* in modern English versions**

Since the publication of the RSV in 1946 (the New Testament) and 1952 (the complete Bible), “only begotten” has been gradually disappearing from the majority of contemporary versions. Of the twenty examined translations, ten render *monogenēs* as “only” throughout: J.B. Phillips (1958), New English Bible (1961), New American Bible (1970), Good News Translation (1976), New Jerusalem Bible (1985), New Revised Standard Version (1989), Contemporary English Version (1995), New Living Translation (1996), English Standard Version (2001) and Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004). The International Standard Version (1998) has “only” in Luke and “unique” elsewhere; the Jewish New Testament (1989) translates “only” in Luke, John 1:14, Hebrews and 1 John and “only and unique” in the

three remaining Johannine passages. The Today's New International Version (2002) has "only" in Luke and "one and only" elsewhere; the New English Translation (1998) additionally prefers "only" in Hebrews while in John it additionally offers the alternative "the unique one." These attempts to emphasize a special dimension of "only" when used with reference to Christ seem indicative of the apparent reluctance of some translators—at times perhaps more emotional than rational—to accept a departure from the historically prevalent translational tradition, even when they dismiss the rendering "only begotten" as inaccurate. After all, the traditional reading of the best known verse of the Bible is at stake!

At the same time, it must be noted that "only begotten" has not been abandoned by all. It appears as the main reading of the New American Standard Bible (1963) in John's writings and in Hebrews (at John 1:18, 3:16, 18 alternatively "unique, only one of His kind") and as the alternative rendering in Luke. In the New International Version (1973) it is offered in the margin alongside "one and only" in the Johannine corpus. In the New King James Version (1979), 21st Century King James Version (1994), and Third Millennium Bible (1998)—all being conservative revisions of the KJV—it is the default translation of *monogenēs* except in Luke. Finally, the New World Translation (NWT, 1950) has "only begotten" in all nine occurrences of *monogenēs*. However, in the latter case the striking consistency is clearly a matter of translation philosophy presented in the *Preface*: "To each major word, we have assigned one meaning and have held to that meaning as far as the context permitted." Paradoxically, of all translations, the NWT—the official version of the Jehovah's Witnesses—insists on "only begotten" throughout, in spite of endorsing the opposite theological position to that which originally inspired that rendering in Latin in the midst of the early Christological debate!

Behind this insistence are at least two important factors. First, unlike the early Church Fathers, who in stressing the fact of Christ's being begotten by the Father focused on the same divine substance (Greek *ousia*) of both persons and thus were led to affirm the deity of Christ, the Jehovah's Witnesses emphasize the hierarchical aspect of this relationship by arguing that if Christ is begotten, this means that he is ultimately the Father's creation and had a beginning, which leads them to question his full deity. Second, from the perspective of the polysystem theory advocated by Even-Zohar (1990/2000), it would seem likely that the authors of the NWT, widely criticized for its doctrinal bias, may actually aim at securing a more central place for their work among the contemporary English Bible versions by retaining elements typically associated with an established translational and theological tradition, namely that of the KJV.

## Closing remarks

Once the default rendering of *monogenēs*, "only begotten" has been ultimately replaced by simpler translational solutions in most contemporary English versions of the New Testament. Today, against the background of the almost universal abandonment of "only begotten," the isolated cases of insistence on this reading could perhaps be viewed in predominantly intertextual terms as aimed at retaining the desired associations with the allegedly superior and perceived as theologically conservative translational tradition of the KJV. As we have seen, the emergence of "only begotten," traced to *unigenitus* in the Vulgate, in the final analysis is to be attributed to theological concerns and the desire to preserve doctrinal orthodoxy rather than to linguistic or exegetical considerations.

Consequently, if "only begotten" is to be considered a merely translational (and not

exegetical) compound—as suggested in the title of this paper—it is not surprising that in the age in which one of the “preliminary norms” (Toury 1995:58) in Bible translation is to work directly from the original languages, a rendering apparently doing more justice to the Greek than the Latin should ultimately prevail, regardless of the overwhelming intertextual pressure building up over many centuries. It will be interesting to watch how soon and to what extent this phenomenon will occur in other languages which have also perpetuated St. Jerome’s differentiation, including German, Italian, Polish, Russian or Spanish.

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