



Truth

On Tough Texts

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The “Only Begotten” Son

John 3:16

IN ONE OF OUR “READER QUESTIONS” INSTALLMENTS last year (TOTT #57), we addressed the modern rendering of John 3:16. While the KJV (as well as the NKJV, NASB, YLT), reads “only begotten Son,” the NIV (as well as the NCV and MSG) reads “one and only Son.” Other translations (ESV, NRSV, NLT, CEV, GWT) simply read “only.” While I provided an answer then, one I hope was adequately clear, I have since felt compelled to go a little deeper. My reason is simply because this issue is actually more important than we realize. There is, in fact, something at stake here, namely, *doctrine*.

As I always do before approaching anything having to do with the issues of textual criticism or Bible translations, I want to make it clear up front that I know some TOTT readers embrace the Critical Text and the modern translations based on it, so I do not wish to offend or inflame. While there are godly men on both sides of the issue, I do defend the historic (and what I believe is the providentially preserved) text of the New Testament (i.e., Traditional or Ecclesiastical Text) instead of the modern Critical Text.

That said, the issue at hand has nothing to do with the underlying text, but rather accuracy in translation and, most importantly, the teaching of Scripture that results from a particular rendering. In other words, saying Christ is the “only begotten” Son of God is *vastly* different than saying He is the “only” or “one and only” Son of God. I hope we can all agree in that. Words mean things and these words are most certainly very different.

Since our initial examination of this, I have come across some additional resources that discuss it. For one thing, when this change appeared in the Revised Standard

version of 1952, it actually caused quite a stir. Why? Simply because this was a blatant departure from a reading that had stood for centuries. Even the original Revised Version of 1881, as well as its American counterpart, the American Standard Version of 1901 (both of which were based, of course, on the Critical Text of Westcott and Hort) retained “only begotten.” Along comes the RSV, however, and *poof* “begotten” vanishes.

I for one simply do not understand why so many evangelicals just shrug this off as apparently irrelevant. At the time of its publication, and for several years after, the RSV was notorious for being the most liberal translation to date. One of its greatest errors, for example was rendering the Hebrew *‘almāh* in Isaiah 7:14 as “young girl” instead of the correct “virgin” (an error still retained in the NRSV but fixed in the ESV). But now, lo and behold, we have several translations that retain the same reading. This is not surprising for either the NRSV or ESV because they are both based on the RSV (the increasingly popular ESV, in fact, is 91% the same). But why doesn’t this bother NIV users, who insist that this is a great Bible? Something is seriously amiss here.

Interestingly, this rendering was not totally novel with the RSV. Several lesser known translators had offered it before.¹ Because of the endorsement of the RSV by the National Council of Churches, however (which also owns the NRSV and the ESV), not to mention a huge marketing campaign at its launch, the now missing “only begotten” was noticed by many.

Also interesting (and revealing) was the reaction of some of the RSV committee members when they were

criticized for this change. One, Frederick C. Grant, was down right indignant. In an article in *The Bible Translator* in 1966, he wrote:

. . . perhaps the great truth expressed in the Gospel of St. John is better expressed, and better safeguarded, in *modern English*, by the perfectly correct, entirely accurate, and theologically far more adequate expression ‘only son’, than the cumbersome, antiquated (antiquated in 1611) translation ‘only begotten son.’ One needs only to study it a little and the Greek behind it, and to become a little more familiar with the new version as a whole, to realize its superiority over the older rendering.²

Well, setting aside his mildly condescending attitude, I did just what Grant challenged. I studied it. What I found is that this reading is far from “correct,” “accurate,” and “theologically adequate.” It is, in fact, error textually, doctrinally, and historically.

“Only Begotten” in the Language and Theology

As we originally noted, in addition to the great truths in this verse concerning God’s *love* (*agapē*) for His own and the eternal life that comes by *faith* (*pisteuō*) in Christ, it is also distinctive because the Apostle John is the only Scripture writer who uses the term *monogenēs* to describe the relationship of Jesus to the Father. *Monogenēs* is a compound, comprised of *monos* (English *monograph*), “only, alone, without others,” and *genos* (English *gene*), “offspring, stock.” The idea then is “only offspring,” “only physical stock,” or, as one commentator puts it, “only born-one.”³ In ancient Greek, this word was used to refer to a unique being.

This makes it very clear that something is unique here, but saying that Christ is the “only son” or “one and only son” is not unique. Why? Because as we will see, He is neither one of those. There are other sons, so we must say something that actually sets Him apart from those, and that is what “only begotten” (“one physically born one”) does.

To go a little deeper first, however, the massive 10-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, has been recognized as a chief authority for many years. Within its four large pages on *monogenēs*, we read the following:

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 give us the sense of only begotten. . . . It is found only in later [New Testament] writings. It means “only-begotten.” . . . [It] occurs in John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9. What is meant is plainest in John 3:16 and 1 John 4:9. . . . It is only as the only-begotten Son of God that Je-

sus can mediate life and salvation from perdition. . . . In John [it] denotes the origin of Jesus. He is *monogenēs* as the only-begotten.⁴

There is undoubtedly no specific connection, but it is interesting that this dictionary was published only a year after Grant’s article appeared (1967). While Grant calls this reading “cumbersome [and] antiquated,” this dictionary has no problem using it a dozen times.

As for his comment that “only begotten” was even “antiquated in 1611,” he is actually correct but for the wrong reason. The same is true, for example, of the “thees” and “thous” that are so maligned nowadays and replaced with modern pronouns. Most people mistakenly say, “That’s the way they talked then, but we don’t talk like that anymore.” But that shows the misinformation that is propagated nowadays. The fact of the matter is that they did *not* talk like that. These pronouns were purposely used because they alone could accurately convey the singular and plural indicated in the Greek and Hebrew; only they can differentiate between single and plural in second person pronouns.⁵ Tyndale knew all this almost 100 years before and *deliberately* revived words that had already passed from common use for the sole purpose of accuracy. The KJV translators likewise understood this and left them untouched, as the KJV is 90% Tyndale’s work. I often have to just smile and walk away when I hear someone say, “Oh, the KJV is not accurate,” because the fact is that because of the “antiquated” pronouns, it is fundamentally more accurate than modern translations in over 19,000 instances.⁶

Add to this, if the Apostle John had really wanted to indicate “only son” or “one and only son,” why didn’t he actually say that and erase all question? For the former he could have used *monos huios* and for the latter he could have written *heis kai monos huios*. No, he uses a term that underscores physical birth, something that is indeed unique.

It is here that Grant launches into a long peroration of how often *monogenēs* is used in classic Greek writings, as well as in Scripture, to indicate “only son,” not “only begotten son.” As Bible scholar Jacob van Bruggen well says, however, while it is true that *monogenēs* can refer to an only child, *it does so only when this fact is actually true.*⁷ In Luke 7:12, for example, the widow’s son at Nain is said to be “the only son of his mother.” In 8:42 we also read that Jairus “had one only daughter,” and in 9:38, the father of the demon possessed boy says “he is mine only child.” But again, in each case that was the real state of things.

Based on that, Grant confidently concludes, “Jesus is the *only* son of the Father” (emphasis Grant’s). But, is that, in fact, true? Is it true that God only has one Son or “one and only Son”? Of course not. If modern translations read “only unique son” we could agree, because that is clearly what *monogenēs* implies, but “only” or “one and

only” is simply not so. If it were, then Paul was wrong when he wrote that Christ is “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). Who are those brethren? We are! As 2 Corinthians 6:18 and other verses make crystal clear, all believers are “sons and daughters.” Christ is the only Son of God by *natural* means (“one physically born one”), the only one actually *begotten* (born into the world) as a son of God, while we are children by *adoption*. Jesus, however, is, as one translator renders it, “His Son, the uniquely begotten one,”⁸ or another, “His Son—the only begotten.”⁹

John makes this same point earlier in His Gospel when he writes that Christ is “the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14) and is “the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father” (v. 18). He writes again in his first epistle “that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him” (4:9).

While Grant and modern translations get these wrong too, “only begotten” is the only rendering that makes sense and matches Scripture elsewhere. This term “only begotten,” in fact, is a wonderful summary of Psalm 2:7: “Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee,” a glorious reference to coming Messiah, which in in-turn is quoted and applied to Christ in Acts 13:33 and Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5.

So, this issue is not one of just vocabulary or grammar; it also has to do with underlying biblical truth. Neither of the two can ever be forced to stand alone. If that is not enough, however, there is something else to consider.

“Only Begotten” in History

While it is certainly true that “only begotten” is, as Grant insists, the “older rendering” (like that is automatically bad), what seems to be missed is that it’s also the *historic* rendering. Why was it that latter 20th-century Christianity consistently ran as fast as it could away from historic doctrine, historic texts, and virtually all other things historic? And it is still running.

While many today insist this is “no big deal,” history very pointedly rebukes such a lack of wisdom. The framers of both the original *Nicene Creed* of 325 and the later 381 version recognized this fact. That creed is the most widely used brief statement of the Christian Faith, and both versions declare Christ to be the “only begotten” Son of God.

It seems that even Jerome understood the importance of this doctrine. While his 4th-century Latin Vulgate has its problems, he correctly chose to use the Latin *unigenitus*, “only begotten.”

Another important historical document was *The Definition of Chalcedon* in 451. While the *Nicene* established the eternal, pre-existent Godhead of Christ, the *Chalcedon* came as a response to certain heretical views concerning His nature. In addition to declaring His virgin birth,

sinless nature, and co-equality with the Father, it also declared that His “nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

This was also recognized by the great theological minds that penned *The Heidelberg Catechism* (1576). In answer to Question 33—“Why is Christ called the ‘only begotten Son of God, since we are also the children of God?’”—it states: “Because Christ alone is the eternal and natural Son of God; but we are children adopted of God, by grace, for his sake,” adding Scripture proofs for both sentences.

The Canons of Dort (1619) likewise used this term. Speaking of Christ’s death, it declares: “This death is of such great value and worth for the reason that the person who suffered it is—as was necessary to be our Savior—not only a true and perfectly holy man, but also the only begotten Son of God, of the same eternal and infinite essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit” (Third Point of Doctrine, Article 4).

Of enormous significance are the two greatest statements of faith of all: *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), and *The London Baptist Confession* (1689). In both we read:

It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only-begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and men, the prophet, priest, and king; the head and Savior of the Church, the heir or all things, and judge of the world; unto whom he did, from all eternity, give a people to be his seed, and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified. (8.1).

This demands a question: Why is it that the ancient church, as well as the church of the Middle Ages, could recognize the unique sonship of Christ but we today cannot? It continues to puzzle me that so many evangelicals support the NIV. Here is one of the most graphic examples why they should not. It goes completely contrary to historic statements of faith on the present subject. We would lovingly submit that it makes no sense for evangelicals who are truly historic to support the NIV.

For those who still have doubts, I would strongly recommend Robert Martin’s *Accuracy of Translation*.¹⁰ This is a book of tremendous significance. Martin is *not* a “King James Only” advocate, and the book is published by the rock solid Banner of Truth Trust, a publisher that has consistently offered books that champion the historic positions of the faith. His point is to explain the principles lying behind contemporary translations and carefully analyze the NIV. While I don’t agree with his Appendix C, and while his book is not quite equal to Jacob van Bruggen’s *The Future of the Bible* (noted earlier), it is the best analysis available today from a mainstream publisher.

Conclusion

There is no ambiguity here. Grant is defending the indefensible. He is wrong, plain and simple, and so are modern translations. They are wrong textually, doctrinally, and historically. Let's be honest. The fact that Jesus was "the only begotten" is basic doctrine, baby's milk, Theology 101. If a Bible translation can't get this right,

what else is in danger? We need to humble ourselves and admit that several modern translations are retaining a reading that is clearly not "correct," "accurate," or "theologically far more adequate"—plain and simple.

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ANNOUNCING A NEW BLOG

We would like to announce a new blog that recently launched: "Expositing Ephesians: The Christian's Wealth and Walk." *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* is one of the chief passions of this pastor's life and ministry. He believes this epistle is at the very core of the Christian life. He spent years in the study of it and then three and one half years expositing it from the pulpit. While the complete exposition is on our website, we felt "bite sized" blog posts would be easier for readers to access. We hope this blog will be a blessing to you. We also hope you will tell others about this blog, Please check for new posts each *Monday* and *Friday*: <http://expositingephesians.blogspot.com/>.

NOTES

¹ Examples: Ferrar Fenton's *Holy Bible in Modern English* (1853); R. F. Weymouth's *The New Testament in Modern Speech* (1902); James Moffatt's *The New Testament: a New Translation* (1922); William G. Ballantine's *The Riverside New Testament* (1923); Edgar J. Goodspeed's *The New Testament: an American Translation* (1923); Helen Barrett Montgomery's *Montgomery New Testament* (1924); Charles B. Williams' *The New Testament in the Language of the People* (1936); and J. B. Phillips' *New Testament in Modern English* (1958).

² Frederick C. Grant, "'Only-Begotten'—A Footnote to the R.S.V.," *The Bible Translator* 17 (1966), pp. 11–14. Quotation from p. 14 (emphasis in the original). Grant was Edwin Robinson Professor of Biblical Theology at Union Theological Seminary, New York, and President of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, Evanston, IL.

This article was first brought to my attention by Jacob van Bruggen, *The Future of the Bible* (Institute for Biblical Textual Studies, 2003 reprint of the 1978 original), pp. 134–135. I was then able to locate it online and thoroughly investigate it (<http://www.ubs-translations.org/tbt/1966/01/TBT196601.html?seq=13>). van Bruggen is professor Emeritus of New Testament exegesis at the Reformed Theological College in Kampen, The Netherlands. While difficult to find, the book is available from the Institute For Biblical Textual Studies; 5151 52nd Street; Grand Rapids, Michigan; 49512; 616-942-8498; email@kiv-ibts.org.

³ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1983, 1985).

⁴ Gerhard Kittel (editor), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964; reprinted 2006), Vol. IV, p. 738–741.

⁵ For example, John 3:7 reads, "Marvel not that I said unto *thee*, *Ye* must be born again" (emphasis added), while new translations replace both "thee" and "ye" with "you."⁵ But "you" does not indicate whether the second person pronoun is singular or plural. In contrast, "ye" is plural and "thee" is singular. In fact, this is 100% consistent throughout the KJV. Every pronoun that begins with "y" (ye, you, and your) is plural, and every pronoun that begins with "t" is singular (thou, thee, thy, and thine).

Another example of the importance of this is how the KJV uses "you" and "thee" *in the same verse* no less than 382 times. Just one of these is Romans 1:11, where Paul writes: "For I long to see *you*, that I may impart unto *you* some spiritual gift, to the end *ye* may be established" (emphasis added). In other words, "I long to see *all of you as a group*, that I may impart unto *all of you* some spiritual gift, to the end that *each one of you individually* may be established."

⁶ Using *QuickVerse* 4.0, the data for the appearance of the second person pronouns is as follows: "thee" (3,827 times); "thy" (4,604 times); "thysself" (214 times); "thou" (5,474 times); "thine" (937 times); and "ye" (3,983 times); total 19,039.

To say that these pronouns are not significant is simply foolish. Just a few other examples, picked at random, one from each NT book (except 2 and 3 John), are: Matt. 5:11; Mk. 16:7; Lk. 6:31; Jn. 16:12; Acts 3:22; Rom. 12:1; 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 2:4; Gal. 1:6; Eph 4:11; Phil. 1:27; Col. 1:9; 1 Thes. 2:2; 2 Thes. 3:4; Heb. 5:12; Jas. 2:16; 1 Pet. 5:10; 2 Pet. 1:12; 1 Jn. 2:1; Jude 1:3; Rev. 2:10. Every instance plainly shows the difference between the singular and plural and provides better understanding of the verse.

⁷ van Bruggen, *op cit*.

⁸ *Wuest's Expanded Translation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961).

⁹ *Young's Literal Translation* (1862, 1898).

¹⁰ Martin is Pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church (Seattle, WA) and the author of *A Guide to the Puritans*, also published by Banner of Truth.