

HERESIES, ANCIENT and MODERN.

Lecture 8 – The Battle Over A Word

Q&A Continued

Introduction

In our Q&A time after the last lecture on Arianism, a question was posed about the word “begotten”. That is an important question because critics of Christian orthodoxy often use that to support the notion that Jesus was created. You will recall that I said that “Arianism adopted the idea that the Son is a semidivine being created, not begotten, by the Father and having an origin in time, or at least a definite beginning before the creation of the material world.”¹

Arius’ great opponent, Athanasius, argued that only God could save mankind from sin. If Jesus is not God, there is no salvation. He argued that it was illogical that a created being could bring believers to glorification.

But, of course, proponents of Arius’ views and even some of his modified views, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses point to our own Bible and point out texts like (you will note that I am quoting from the 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.” (John 3:16, KJV 1900); and texts like:
- “Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:” (Colossians 1:15, KJV 1900)

The question last week had to do with the first case; the case of the “begotten”. I intend to answer that and also touch on the phrase “firstborn of every creature”. Both are often used in defense of this Arian doctrine.

Begotten

The difficulty of discussing this word is that the argument is rooted in understanding the Greek language and it spreads to manuscript criticism (both of which we are not experts in). The Greek word is *μονογενής*, transliterated *monogenēs*. It is used about 9 times in the New Testament. John uses it the most in his Gospel:

- “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the **only begotten** of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14, KJV 1900)
- “No man hath seen God at any time; the **only begotten** Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” (John 1:18, KJV 1900)

¹¹ Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 106

- *“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.” (John 3:16, KJV 1900)*
- *“He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the **only begotten** Son of God.” (John 3:18, KJV 1900)*

The King James translators always translate *monogenes*, “only begotten”. They take this two syllable Greek word and make two English words. *Mono* meaning only; and *genes*, or begotten. Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other cults, have taken this to mean that Jesus was *literally* begotten. If Jesus was begotten, then he is a created being. If we understood it that way, they make sense. Even in the first verses of the New Testament we read: *“Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren.”* (Matthew 1:2, KJV 1900). Clearly this teaches that to beget is to be the father of in the sense of procreation.

The root of the problem. The translators of the KJV believed that the word *genes* was derived from the Greek word γεννάω (*gennaō*, to beget). But more recent translators believe that μονογενής (*monogenes*) could as easily spring from μόνος (*monos*, only) plus γένος (*genos*, type or form) to mean “only one of its kind,” “unique,” or the like.² Now, obviously this is a debate that I have no ability to argue. Those who insist that the KJV translators are incorrect tend to rest on one key argument to support their “only one of its kind” view. They refer to a parallel passage: Hebrews 11:17.

There the writer refers to Isaac as Abraham’s “only begotten son” (KJV). Abraham had more than one son, but Isaac was the only son he had by Sarah and the only son of the covenant. Therefore, it is the uniqueness of Isaac that is emphasized. This is a very persuasive argument. Isaac who was not Abraham’s *only* son by creation but was one-of-a-kind because he was the child of the promise. So, in this case the word means “one-of-a-kind” and is similarly used by John to describe Jesus.

John was primarily concerned with demonstrating that Jesus is the Son of God (John 20:31), and it is very likely that he uses *monogenes* to highlight Jesus as uniquely God’s Son—sharing the same divine nature as God.

Therefore, more recent manuscripts don’t use the word “begotten” due to its confusion and you will find them translating the Greek this way:

- *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14, ESV) “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14, NIV)*
- *“No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” (John 1:18, ESV) “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” (John 1:18, NIV)*

² Carson, D. A.. *Exegetical Fallacies* (p. 30). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

- *“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, ESV) *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* (John 3:16, NIV)
- *“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”* (John 3:18, ESV) *“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”* (John 3:18, NIV)

Summary. So in summary, the manuscript question is this: Does the 2nd syllable of the word monogenes (genes) find its origin in gennaō, to beget, or γένος ,genos, kind or uniqueness? The bottom line is that terms such as "Father" and "Son," descriptive of God and Jesus, are human terms that help us understand the relationship between the different Persons of the Trinity. Jesus is God’s unique, one-of-a-kind Son.

You can call him the “only begotten” Son if you like, but remember, this word isn’t about procreation. It’s about a unique relationship between the Father and Son. This is why many modern translators have chosen to use “only” (ESV), or “one and only” (NIV, NLT, HCSB, NET) instead of “only begotten” (KJV, NASB). They are trying to avoid unnecessary confusion.

Firstborn

In Colossians, chapter 1 we have these words: *“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”* (Colossians 1:15, ESV). Again It would be wrong to think in procreative terms here. Paul is not suggesting that Jesus had a physical origin as Arius promoted. Again, we run into the difficulty of translating the Greek. The Greek word used here is πρωτότοκος (*prōtotokos*). Now textual experts understand that this could mean:

- a. The first in order of time, such as a first-born child; or it could mean,
- b. The first in rank or honor or preeminence.

In Colossians 1:15 the emphasis is on the priority of Jesus’ rank as over and above creation. Verse 18 emphasizes this: *“And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.”* (Colossians 1:18, ESV). The major emphasis of the author is on the idea of the supremacy of Christ. There is also the idea that is rooted in Jewish culture whereby the firstborn (whether first in order or not) in a family was accorded rights and privileges not shared by the other offspring. He was his father's representative and heir, and to him the management of the household was committed.

Summary. To agree with this line of thinking it is plausible to understand the passage to teach that Christ is his Father's representative and heir and has the management of the divine household (all creation) committed to him. He is thus Lord over all God's creation.

Application

When interpreting texts of Scripture, we must not overlook the overall unity of the Bible. God's Word is harmonious and unified. Jesus himself said that before Abraham was, I am (John 8:58). There he uses the words to describe his eternal existence. Isaiah called Jesus "the eternal Father" (Isaiah 9:6). Of course, we are so familiar with these words: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" (John 1:1, ESV).

The writer to the Hebrews uses Melchizedek as a type or foreshadowing of Christ and says, "*He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.*" (Hebrews 7:3, ESV).

In the Heidelberg Catechism, Questions 17 we are asked, "Why must Jesus be God?" The Catechism's answer is: So that, by the power of his divinity, he might bear the weight of God's anger in his humanity and earn for us and restore to us righteousness and life.

"There is no way any mere human could bear and fully satisfy God's wrath. By nature, this wrath is infinite in quality. In order to bear the weight of wrath, it is essential that the Savior be divine. But also, in order to satisfy this wrath, he had to offer a sacrifice of such a value that God would be pleased to accept it. Only Christ as God could bring a sacrifice of infinite and eternal value to God that he would propitiate heaven's wrath. By virtue of his divine nature, he is able to earn for us eternal life and favor with God" - Erik Raymond³.

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/must-jesus-human-divine/>