

Unique, Only Son, or Only Begotten?

By [Charles Lee Irons](#)

Introduction

In recent years, there has been debate over how best to translate the Greek word μονογενής in the New Testament. This word occurs nine times in the Greek New Testament—five times in Christological contexts (all in the Johannine literature: John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9) and four times in non-Christological contexts (Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38; Heb 11:17). In the non-Christological contexts, it has reference to an ordinary “only child” or “only son,” and does not necessarily convey any notion like the father’s act of begetting a child or a child being begotten. For example, in Luke 9:38, we read that a man from the crowd shouted out to Jesus, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, because he is my only child.” It would be perfectly reasonable to render μονογενής in these non-Christological instances as “only son” or “only child” (as the ESV and NIV do), and there is no compelling contextual reason to use the ponderous word “begotten” here.

However, the Christological uses of the word in the Gospel and First Letter of John are debated. The most famous example is John 3:16, which many of us have in our memory according to the King James Version: “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.” Here we have a livelier debate. Much more is at stake in the Christological uses of the word, because now we are entering into the realm of Christology and Trinitarian theology.

Three main approaches are emerging in this debate. The first approach is to follow the traditional translation of William Tyndale and the King James Version and adopt the rendering “only begotten” at least in the five Johannine occurrences. Admittedly, this rendering is somewhat of a challenge for modern readers for whom the word “begotten” is archaic and lacking in clear meaning. But it has the advantage of being in sync with the Nicene faith and the historic Tyndale-King James tradition of the English Bible. Only a handful of modern scholars defend “only begotten.”¹

¹ Friedrich Büchsel, “μονογενής,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Kittel, 4.737-41; James M. Bulman, “The Only Begotten Son,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 16 (1981): 56-79; John V. Dahms, “The Johannine Use of *Monogenēs* Reconsidered,” *New Testament Studies* 29 (1983): 222-232; Charles Lee Irons, “A Lexical Defense of the Johannine ‘Only Begotten,’” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 98-116; James M. Hamilton Jr., “John,” in *John–Acts* (ESV Expository Commentary; Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 40-42.

The second approach claims that μονογενής means “unique.” The defenders of this approach rejected the traditional rendering as an instance of church dogma being read into a Greek word. As far as I can tell, B. F. Westcott was one of the first scholars to question “only begotten” in the Johannine literature in his commentaries on the Gospel and Epistles of John. His approach was followed by Ferdinand Kattenbusch, Moulton and Milligan, Francis Marion Warden, Dale Moody, Joseph Fitzmyer, and many others.² It was the majority view among evangelical biblical scholars throughout the twentieth century and remains so to this day. I call this view the “revisionist” view.

A third option, which has emerged recently, is to agree with my critique of “unique” but to remain unconvinced that “only begotten” is right. Those adopting the third option agree with my critique of the revisionists, that is, they agree that μονογενής does not mean “unique” in the New Testament (both the Christological and the non-Christological passages). The reason is that the New Testament only uses the word in familial contexts, in reference to a human father having an only son. In the Christological contexts, on the analogy of a human father having an only son, God also has “his only Son.” But advocates of the third option argue, it is going too far to insert the dogmatic term “begotten.” These scholars suggest that we should simply follow the non-Christological usage in Luke and adopt the rendering “only Son.” This still captures the idea of sonship inherent in the word, but not the idea of begetting. That further idea of begetting comes from the Latin translation *unigenitus*, not from the Greek word μονογενής, which simply means, “only child, i.e., without siblings.” This approach is argued by Dr. Seumas MacDonald, a Greek instructor and patristics expert who writes scholarly articles at *The Patrologist* blog.³ It also would appear to be the approach recently taken by the ESV Translation Oversight Committee in the 2025 update.

In what follows, I will begin by responding to the arguments for “unique.” Then I will seek to convince those stopping at the half-way house of “only son” to move on to perfection and adopt “only begotten.” I understand some of the reasons for

² Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John* (New York: Macmillan, 1882), 23, 28; *ibid*, *The Epistles of St. John* (Cambridge and London: Macmillan, 1886), 169-72; Ferdinand Kattenbusch, “Only Begotten,” in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (ed. James Hastings; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 2.281-2; James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and other Non-Literary Sources* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1930), 416-17; Francis Marion Warden, *Μονογενής in the Johannine Literature* (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1938); Dale Moody, “God’s Only Son: The Translation of John 3:16 in the Revised Standard Version,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72 (1953): 213-19; R. L. Roberts, “The Rendering ‘Only Begotten’ in John 3:16,” *Restoration Quarterly* 16 (1973): 2-22; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1.591 (§58.52 μονογενής); J. A. Fitzmyer, “μονογενής,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 2.439-440; Gerard Pendrick, “Μονογενής,” *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 587-600.

³ <https://thepatrologist.com>

hesitancy, but I think there are compelling reasons to return to “only begotten.” Finally, I will review and respond to the ESV 2025 update.

Response to Arguments for “Unique”

In the twentieth century, it was common for revisionists to appeal to etymology, arguing that μονογενής was not derived from μόνος (“only”) + γεννάω (“beget”) but from μόνος (“only”) + γένος (“kind”). On this basis, it was argued that the word did not mean “only begotten” but “only one of its kind.” But most defenders of “unique” now seem less confident of this argument, and for good reasons. First, because, in general, usage not etymology is determinative of meaning. Second, because γένος itself can mean “offspring” or “descendant”—Jesus is “the γένος of David” (Rev 22:16)—and is in fact related to the word γεννάω, along with many other words that derive from the Proto-Indo-European root, *ǵenh*. Third, there are at least 145 Greek words formed on the -γενής stem.⁴ Examples include εὐγενής (“well-born”), ἰθαγενής (“born in lawful wedlock”), οἰκογενής (“born in the house”), ποντογενής (“seaborn”), and ὠογενής (“born of an egg”). While a handful of these words involve the concept of kind (e.g., ὁμογενής, “of the same genus,” and ἑτερογενής, “of different kind”), the majority involve the concepts of procreation and birth. In addition, there are 166 distinct proper names in Greek formed with -γενής.⁵ Examples include: *Apollo*genēs (“offspring of Apollo”), *Aristo*genēs (“high born”), *Diogen*ēs (“offspring of Zeus”), *Hermo*genēs (“offspring of Hermes”), and *Niko*genēs (“victory born”). This wealth of evidence of other -γενής words provides us with helpful context suggesting that μονογενής could very well mean “only born,” “only offspring,” or even “only begotten.”

So, we can set aside the etymological argument and turn to the decisive issue—the actual usage of μονογενής in extra-biblical Greek. Here the defenders of “unique” have a more plausible case. There are indeed many instances in extra-biblical Greek where μονογενής means “unique.” For example, Clement of Rome described the phoenix as “the only one of its species.”⁶ Other examples of this usage include Galen’s description of the liver as a “unique” organ, Clement of Alexandria’s statement that each of the Ten Commandments enumerates “an elementary principle, simple and of one kind,” Eusebius’s description of a church building as “unparalleled” in size and beauty, and references to the sun and each of the stars as “unique.”⁷

⁴ Search of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* word list via <https://www.tlg.uci.edu>.

⁵ *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, Vols. 1-5, ed. Peter M. Fraser et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987–2013).

⁶ 1 Clement 25:2; ET: Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 57.

⁷ Galen, *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* 6.9.31 (the liver); Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 3.12.89.1 (the Ten Commandments); Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 3.50.2 (a church building); Ammonius, *Fragments in*

This does not, however, tell the whole story. There are also many instances where μονογενής is used to mean “only child” or “only offspring.” This is in fact the earliest usage. Hesiod counsels: “Let there be a single-born (μουνογενής) son to nourish the father’s household: in this way wealth is increased in the halls.”⁸ If a man has more than one son, the inheritance will get divided, so it is advisable to have only one son. Diodorus Siculus recounts that Oenomaüs “begat a daughter, an only child (θυγατέρα μονογενῆ γεννήσας), and named her Hippodameia.”⁹ The use of the verb γεννάω in connection with μονογενής is striking.

I argue that μονογενής is polysemous, that is, a word with more than one meaning. And there is an easy test to determine which usage is in view: if it is used in an ordinary familial context, it means “only offspring,” that is, not having any siblings. If it is used in a non-familial context, that is a clue that most likely it means “unique” (although there are other specialized uses in scientific and grammatical literature). Some scholars have tried to explain the occurrences in familial contexts as also properly meaning “unique,” but that depends on holding to a rigid linguistic position called monosemy, which is not widely held. It is better for them to admit that μονογενής is polysemous and can be used either way.

When we approach the debate over how to render the word in the Johannine Christological uses, we ought to keep an open mind to a broader range of possibilities and decide based on context.

Seumas MacDonald’s Response

In 2017, in a chapter contribution to the book *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, edited by Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain, I made the above lexical case in more detail. I went on to argue that “unique” simply does not work in the Christological contexts, particularly John 1:14, 18, and that the renderings involving the traditional “only begotten” are much more appropriate in these contexts.

My case was well received by many systematic theologians. However, the Greek scholars were not totally convinced. In 2017, patristics scholar and Greek instructor Dr. Seumas MacDonald wrote a blog post responding to my chapter.¹⁰ He wrote that he was largely sympathetic to my negative argument, namely, that “unique” is not the best way to understand μονογενής in the New Testament. But

Joannem [ed. Reuss], frag. 86 (the sun); and Joannes Philoponus, *De aeternitate mundi* 549.13-14 (the stars).

⁸ Hesiod, *Opera et dies* 376-77; ET: Loeb Classical Library.

⁹ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 4.73.2; ET: Loeb Classical Library.

¹⁰ Seumas MacDonald, “A response and critique of Charles Lee Irons’ ‘A lexical defence of the Johannine “Only Begotten.”’” <https://thepatrologist.com/2017/11/29>.

he was not convinced of my positive argument in favor of “only begotten.” He argued that “only child” or “only son” is sufficient for all the New Testament uses (both the non-Christological and the Christological), without needing to add in the weighty term “begotten.” He wrote: “I think ‘only begotten’ ties us to a Latin trajectory [*unigenitus*] that places weight upon the ‘begotten’ part of that phrase more than the Greek term [μονογενής] itself does.” In 2021, Dr. MacDonald subsequently published an article, “The Siblingless Son: μονογενής in Greek Literature,” in six installments, in which he examined many of the occurrences of μονογενής in extra-biblical Greek, in the Greek church fathers, and finally in the Johannine literature.¹¹ He makes the same case in more detail, and as the title of the series indicates, he thinks John’s point is not to assert any high doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son but merely that Jesus Christ is “the only Son” of God, not having any siblings. This interpretation has the advantage of establishing uniformity across all nine New Testament occurrences, so that the Christological occurrences in the Johannine literature are not fundamentally different in meaning than the non-Christological occurrences. The word μονογενής just means “only child,” full stop, and there is no need to bring in the weighty notion of begetting.

How would I respond to this? To begin with, I must first take a moment to relish his agreement with the negative part of my argument, that is, my critique of the revisionist view that the word means “unique” in the New Testament. I am not sure Dr. MacDonald appreciates just how entrenched that view has been throughout most of the twentieth century, achieving consensus status. To this day, many dictionaries and commentaries repeat it endlessly, with little to no awareness of its severe difficulties, particularly in relation to Johannine exegesis. So, I will take Dr. MacDonald’s agreement with my critique of “unique” as a victory.

We then are left with a debate over “only Son” versus “only begotten.” Interestingly, this brings us full circle to B. F. Westcott, who first poured cold water on the traditional KJV’s “only begotten” and began the process that led to the twentieth century revisionist consensus. Westcott suggested that the non-Christological uses of μονογενής provide the key to understanding the Christological uses. The concept of an “only child” completely brings out the sense in John, without any need to bring in alien theological notions of the Father’s begetting of the Son.¹² If I am not mistaken, this seems to be precisely Dr. MacDonald’s position.

In his commentary on John 1:18, Westcott championed what was then the new text critical reading μονογενής θεός and suggested “God the only Son” as a valid English rendering.¹³ This translation is also the new proposal by the ESV in the

¹¹ <https://thepatrologist.com/2021/09/09/the-siblingless-son-μονογενής-in-greek-literature-1/>

¹² Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 23.

¹³ Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 28.

2025 update. Dr. MacDonald proposes “God the siblingless Son,” which amounts to the same thing.¹⁴

Pressing for “Only Begotten”

I am delighted that the revisionist view (“unique”) is beginning to crumble. But I would like to make a case for not halting at the middle position (“only Son” or “siblingless Son”) and instead for pressing on for a full return to the traditional “only begotten.” My reasoning here is not strictly linguistic or philological. I agree that the full-throated “only begotten” is a bit weightier than μονογενής taken on its own might suggest. I agree that “only child” is acceptable for the non-Christological uses in the New Testament. However, I do think that the notion of paternal procreation is in the background of the word and is ripe for activation in the highly Christological contexts in the Johannine literature. This is made clear by the overwhelming evidence that “only begotten” is deeply rooted in the most ancient traditions of the church—the apostolic fathers (Justin Martyr and Tertullian), ante-Nicene Latin Christian translations and literature (*unigenitus*), the ante-Nicene church fathers (like Origen), the Nicene Creed itself, and the fourth century fathers after the Council of Nicaea. All of this data is important because it shows that the ancient church was fairly unified in how it understood μονογενής in its Johannine Christological contexts, with primary emphasis on the two occurrences in the prologue of the Gospel of John (John 1:14, 18).

Justin Martyr (c. 100–c. 165) seems to have understood the word as including the notion of being begotten. He writes: “I have already proved that He was the only-begotten (μονογενής) of the Father of all things, being begotten (γεγεννημένος) in a peculiar manner Word and Power by Him, and having afterwards become man through the Virgin.”¹⁵ The use of γεγεννημένος (perfect participle of γεννάω) in apposition to μονογενής appears to be causal or inferential, as if to say, “The reason he is called the only-begotten of the Father is because he is begotten in a peculiar manner.”

Origen (c. 185–c. 254) similarly, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, specifically comments on the word and offers this interpretation of it:

The statement “as of an only begotten from the Father” [John 1:14] is to be understood as meaning that the Son is from essence of the Father (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς εἶναι τὸν υἱόν). For none of the creatures is from the Father, but rather they have their existence from God through the Word. For if others have their being from the Father, in vain is the word μονογενής present, since there would be many that have existence from the Father.¹⁶

¹⁴ <https://thepatrologist.com/2021/12/13/the-siblingless-son-μονογενής-in-greek-literature-6-the-johannine-literature/>

¹⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 105; ET: ANF 1.251

¹⁶ Origen, *Fragments on the Gospel of John*, fragment 9; translation mine.

For Origen, the profound affirmation of John 1:14 that the Son is μονογενής παρὰ πατρός (“only begotten from the Father”) signifies that only the Son is from the essence of the Father. Origen’s interpretation of John 1:14 laid the groundwork for the Creed of Nicaea, which I will explain below.

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340) provides glosses for the word μονογενής, using μόνος plus an aorist participial verb of begetting: “he alone was born from the Father himself” (μόνον δὲ ἐξ αὐτοῦ τοῦ πατρὸς ἀποτεχθέντα), and “the one who alone was begotten from the Father” (μόνος αὐτὸς ὁ ἐξ αὐτοῦ γεννηθεὶς τοῦ πατρὸς).¹⁷

Basil of Caesarea (c. 330–379) addresses the meaning of the word in his critique of the Arian Eunomius: “In common usage μονογενής does not designate one who comes from only one person, but one who is the only one begotten (ὁ μόνος γεννηθείς).”¹⁸ His claim that this is the meaning of the word “in common usage” is noteworthy. Basil was not only an important theologian but a sophisticated writer of Greek having received a top-notch education in Athens. His literary Greek style is some of the finest you will ever read. I do not think he can be accused of being ignorant of the meaning of a Greek word like μονογενής.

Many more quotes from the Greek-speaking church fathers could be adduced. But the situation in Greek-speaking Christianity is not the only consideration. It is also significant that Latin-speaking Christians used the word *unigenitus* as the Latin equivalent for the Greek word. This word was not a preexisting word in the Latin thesaurus but appears to have been introduced in Latin Christianity, likely in the earliest translations of the New Testament from Greek into Latin, called the *Vetus Latina* or Old Latin. Our earliest attestation of this word in Latin literature is Tertullian. He uses it both in his quotation of John 1:14, 18, as well as in his own theological discourse, explaining that the Word is called *unigenitus* “because he alone is begotten of God” (*solus ex deo genitus*).¹⁹ The majority of manuscripts of the Old Latin New Testament, prior to Jerome’s Vulgate, had *unigenitus* in the Johannine verses. A few manuscripts of the Old Latin had *unicus filius*, but they were in the minority. Dale Moody was totally wrong when he argued that the rendering *unigenitus* was a late innovation devised by Jerome who deviously inserted a piece of Nicene dogma into the Latin Bible. The rendering of μονογενής among Latin-speaking Christians as *unigenitus* (“only begotten”) was early (Tertullian, the Old Latin), widespread, and uncontroversial—it did not raise eyebrows among the Greek-speaking Christians.

¹⁷ Eusebius, *On Ecclesiastical Theology* 1.8.2-3; 1.10.5; ET: *The Fathers of the Church* 135, translated by Kelley McCarthy Spoerl and Markus Vinzent (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 169, 173.

¹⁸ Basil, *Against Eunomius* 2.20-21; ET: *The Fathers of the Church* 122; translated by Mark DelCogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 159, 161.

¹⁹ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 7, 15; ET: *ANF* 3.601, 611.

As Greek speakers or early translators of the New Testament into Latin, these Christian writers provide us with the earliest linguistic evidence of how the word was understood in its Johannine contexts. Note that they not only use the word in ways that indicate their understanding but even more amazingly, they explicitly comment on the meaning of the word itself.

The Nicene Creed

So much more could be said about the church fathers. What I would like to argue next is that their “only begotten” interpretation is not a private interpretation but has creedal authority. If I am right about that, we ought to be even more careful to ensure that our English versions are in sync with that tradition—or we risk creating tension or dissonance between what we read in our English Bible and what we confess in worship in agreement with the ancient church.

My claim is that the Nicene Creed provides us with a Scriptural logic in which the Johannine “only begotten” plays a key role. Not only does the rendering “unique” not fit, but even “only Son” fails to fully capture the logic of the Creed.

Here is the relevant portion of the Creed of Nicaea (AD 325) in Greek and English:

Καὶ εἰς ἓνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς μονογενῆ, τούτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρὸς, θεὸν ἐκ θεοῦ, φῶς ἐκ φωτός, θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί·

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.

It is important to pay close attention to this original version of the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Nicaea, since it differs from the version we are more familiar with, the creed of the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. The Creed of Nicaea has an important theological affirmation, before we even get to “begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father.” Right at the outset the Creed of Nicaea affirms that we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, “begotten of the Father μονογενῆ, that is, of the essence of the Father.” The word μονογενής (“only begotten”) modifies the participle γεννηθέντα (“begotten”), explaining more precisely the nature of his being “begotten.” The Son is begotten as “only begotten.” The Creed immediately explains the significance of this: “that is, of the essence of the Father,” which was exactly Origen’s argument as we saw above. The fact that the Son is begotten “of the essence of the Father” elevates his begottenness from the creaturely realm of change and time to the divine realm of eternal begetting from the essence of the Father and secures the *homoousion* later (“begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father”).

The location of μονογενής in this opening affirmation is significant. As Oskar Skarsaune pointed out, μονογενής is functioning as a *précising* term modifying the aorist passive participle γεννηθέντα, and it is able to do that because of the shared -γεν stem in both words. The aorist participle γεννηθέντα followed by the *precising* adjective μονογενῇ suggests the authors of the Creed viewed the -γενής portion of μονογενής as semantically encoding the concept “begotten.” To bring this out, Skarsaune translates: “begotten of the Father as only-begotten.”²⁰

The Creed of Nicaea is making an argument. To paraphrase: “He is begotten as ‘only begotten’ (as we read in the Gospel of John), meaning, he is begotten of the essence of the Father.” The second part, “that is, of the essence of the Father” is drawing an exegetical inference from the Johannine affirmation that he is “only begotten” to the conclusion that therefore he is begotten of the essence of the Father. I think we can be even more specific and surmise that the authors of the Creed have John 1:14, 18 specifically in view. The phrase “of the essence of the Father” is likely an explanation of the key Christological affirmations in the prologue of John’s Gospel that he is “the Only Begotten from the Father” (John 1:14) and “the only begotten Son [or God] who is in the bosom of the Father” (John 1:18). The phrase “who is in the bosom of the Father” was taken by the church fathers as equivalent to “of the essence of the Father.”

In the AD 381 version of the Creed, μονογενής is in a different position and functions as an adjectival description of the Son: “And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages” (τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ, τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων). In the AD 325 version, μονογενής functions as a *précision* of γεννηθέντα, but in the AD 381 version, the order is reversed, with τὸν γεννηθέντα functioning in apposition to τὸν μονογενῆ. The Nicene Creed (AD 381), like the Creed of Nicaea (AD 325), seems to be highlighting μονογενής, essentially quoting the prologue of the Gospel of John, and then explicating what it means, which is that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. In both versions, the Scriptural logic is fundamentally the same, and in both the Scriptural term “only begotten” is highlighted as the ground for the conclusion that the Son is eternally begotten of the essence of the Father. To corroborate this reading, we could go on to cite numerous church fathers writing after the Council of Nicaea in the tumultuous fourth century.²¹

How μονογενής gets rendered in our English versions of the New Testament (especially John 1:14, 18) has an impact on the congregation’s ability to hear the Scriptural argument in the Nicene Creed. If it is rendered “only Son,” the congregation’s ability to connect the dots will be limited. Further, if “only begotten” is heard only when reciting the Creed but never when Scripture is read,

²⁰ Oskar Skarsaune. “A neglected detail in the creed of Nicaea (325),” *Vigiliae christianae* (1987): 34-54.

²¹ For example: Athanasius, *Defense of the Nicene Definition* 13, 19-21; Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Councils* 51, 84-88; Gregory Nazianzen, *Fourth Theological Oration, Concerning the Son* 20.

then they may begin to wonder if the Creed's language is merely a human tradition. Worse, they may conclude that the Creed is relying on a mistranslation or over translation of a Greek word. We ought to minimize discordance between the Creed and our English Bibles and maximize agreement and concord. The Scriptural argument that the Creed is making ought to be perspicuous to the people of the church.

In appealing to the church fathers and the Nicene Creed, I am not arguing that we ought to render μονογενής as "only begotten" simply to bow to the weight of ecclesiastical tradition, much less that the church fathers were infallible. I am arguing that the tradition gives us insight into how the church fathers interpreted μονογενής in John 1:14, 18. I do not think they read those verses as affirming merely that Jesus Christ is God's "only Son," without siblings. I think they read those verses as affirming that he is the only one begotten of the essence of the Father, setting him apart from the creatures. This more profound meaning does not reside merely in the word μονογενής but in the word as used in this particular Christological context. I agree that it would be an over-translation to render it "only begotten" in non-Christological contexts (Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38), where it clearly means "only child" and the paternal act of begetting has receded into the background. But the paternal act of begetting is still in the background of the word, so that when John reaches to the heights of Christological affirmation he is able to activate a reference to that paternal activity in his specific context. The church fathers took note of that and drew upon it in their Christology and Trinitarian theology. Since their exegesis of the Johannine "only begotten" was not a private interpretation of one or two theologians but the unanimous understanding of the church, and even enshrined in the Nicene Creed, we ought to ensure that our English Bible is in sync with that tradition and does not needlessly cast doubt upon it.

The English Standard Version

I think the case for going all the way back to "only begotten" is sound in theory, but it needs to be applied to one particular contemporary English version that has found wide acclaim and use in English-speaking evangelical churches. The English Standard Version is a revision of the Revised Standard Version for conservative evangelicals. When the RSV New Testament was published in 1946, it was the first English version of the Bible to abandon "only begotten" and instead use "the only Son." Here is the RSV at John 1:14, 18: "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 ... No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." The key phrase "only begotten" has now shrunk to "only Son."

At John 1:14, the ESV has "and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father," which is essentially the same as the RSV—only "beheld" has

been changed to “seen,” but the rendering of μονογενής as “the only Son” remains. When we come to John 1:18 we see that the ESV has made a more significant modification to the RSV base: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” The ESV changed the RSV’s “the only Son” to “the only God.” This change is not a difference of interpretation of μονογενής but due to a different choice of underlying Greek text. The RSV’s underlying Greek text read μονογενής υἱός, but the ESV opted for the variant reading μονογενής θεός. It is not merely a difference in rendering of the same Greek, but of different understandings of what the Greek itself says.

On February 11, 2025, the ESV Translation Oversight Committee announced a number of changes to the text of the ESV, including the following change at John 1:18:

Another notable update appears in John 1:18. “The only God” has been updated to “God the only Son,” with “God” corresponding to *theos* and “only Son” to *monogenēs* (as in John 1:14). This translation incorporates the concept of descent (which is an implication of *monogenēs* in context) and maintains concordance with the other occurrences of *monogenēs* in the New Testament. The idea of sonship is evoked by *monogenēs* in the context of “Father” in John 1:18 and 1:14. The rendering “only son” for *monogenēs* in several ancient translations of the New Testament for Luke 7:12, 8:42, and Hebrews 11:17 indicates the propriety of a similar rendering in the verses referring to the Son of God. The footnote for John 1:18 has also been revised to reflect more clearly the manuscript variations, including alternative renderings such as “the only God who” and “the only Son,” allowing readers to engage with the full textual tradition.²²

The resulting text of the ESV 2025 update will read as follows at John 1:18: “No one has ever seen God; God the only Son, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” Instead of “the only God,” the ESV will now have “God the only Son.” No changes were announced for John 1:14 in the 2025 update.

I am thankful that the ESV Translation Oversight Committee seems now to have abandoned the revisionist interpretation of μονογενής. The Translation Oversight Committee states: “This translation incorporates the concept of descent (which is an implication of *monogenēs* in context) The idea of sonship is evoked by *monogenēs* in the context of ‘Father’ in John 1:18 and 1:14.” In other words, they think the idea of sonship is evoked, but not the more specific idea of begetting.

That is an advance on the twentieth century view that the idea of sonship is not included but only uniqueness. But I am also disappointed that they did not come all the way over by using the traditional translation “only begotten.” In my view that translation is both warranted on lexical grounds, but also desirable in order to keep our English versions “in sync” with the unanimous Nicene tradition. What

²² <https://www.crossway.org/articles/esv-bible-translation-update/>

are their reasons for going only part of the way back home, to “only Son” but not all the way to “only begotten”?

First, they desire to “maintain concordance with” the other occurrences of μονογενής in the New Testament. I assume the committee is referring to the four non-Christological occurrences of μονογενής—the ones outside of the Johannine literature (Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38; Heb 11:17).

In response to this, I repeat that I am not advocating the translation “only begotten” in the non-Christological occurrences in the New Testament. In those verses, I believe it would be perfectly acceptable to use renderings like “only son” (Luke 7:12; Heb 11:17), “only daughter” (Luke 8:42), or “only child” (Luke 9:38). I still maintain that the “only begotten” idea is implied in the word itself, even in those non-Christological occurrences. But unlike in the Johannine Christological contexts, the father’s begetting role is not particularly emphasized, and the point is that this is the father’s “only child” at this time, without reflecting on how he became a father. And in one of these occurrences, the father’s begetting role is even further pushed into the background as it is an “only child” to a mother who is a widow (Luke 7:12).

But words are flexible and can have various shades of meaning depending on the context. Why should the non-Christological use of μονογενής be determinative of the Christological use? I grant that we ought to maintain concordance across the Christological uses, i.e., all five of the Johannine uses (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). These uses share a common author (John) and a common field of discourse (Christology). But what is the rationale for maintaining concordance across both the Christological and the non-Christological uses? Surely, there is something more elevated and superlative about this “only child” concept in John 1:14 and 18 when John in his majestic prologue to his Gospel speaks of “the glory as of the Only Begotten from the Father” and “the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father.” At least the church fathers clearly thought so! To reduce the lofty Christological uses and tone them down to the level of an ordinary “only child” is taking a step backward.

Second, the ESV Translation Oversight Committee says, “The rendering ‘only son’ for *monogenēs* in several ancient translations of the New Testament for Luke 7:12, 8:42, and Hebrews 11:17 indicates the propriety of a similar rendering in the verses referring to the Son of God.” The ancient translations of the New Testament that have this rendering are not stated, but I believe they include the Old Latin, the Coptic versions (including the Sahidic and Bohairic dialects), and the Syriac versions. I agree that it would not be improper to render μονογενής as “only son.” But I do not think “only son” captures the full meaning implied in the contexts of John 1:14 and 1:18.

Third, the committee does not mention this, but one wonders if they are hesitant to use “only begotten” because of the perceived archaic sound of “begotten.” It is

not a word in common English usage today. However, several things ought to be kept in mind. To begin, the translation philosophy of the ESV is to “retain theological terminology, i.e., words like justification, sanctification, redemption, regeneration, reconciliation, and propitiation.” Some of these words are also not in common English usage today. In these cases, the ESV presumably feels that the desire to avoid archaic words is balanced by the concern to uphold theological tradition. This reasoning ought to apply to “only begotten” as well.

Furthermore, the ESV already retains the word “begotten” five times outside of the Johannine verses: twice in the Old Testament (Job 38:28; Psalm 2:7) and three times in the New Testament (Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5). In all but Job 38:28, these are in reference to Christ as the one spoken of in Psalm 2:7: “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.” Retaining “begotten” in the five Christological μονογενής verses in the Johannine literature would enhance the connection between Psalm 2:7 and the Johannine usage—a connection that the church fathers also pointed out.

The ESV affirms its commitment to “the truth of God’s Word and to historic Christian orthodoxy” (Preface). It would be hard to think of a more important summary of historic Christian orthodoxy than the Nicene Creed which uses the language of “only begotten” and “begotten not made.” Yet the 2025 update, by using the phrase “only Son,” falls short of orthodoxy as summarized in the Nicene Creed. Admittedly, it is not an unorthodox rendering, and it thankfully corrects course away from twentieth century revisionism. But its orthodoxy is less than perspicuous, and readers of the ESV cannot readily see that the Creed is using Scriptural language when it affirms that we believe that Jesus Christ is “the only begotten” Son of God and that he is “begotten not made.”

The ESV, of all the major English versions currently on the market, ought to be the one that most singularly honors the Tyndale-King James legacy. I am not a King James only-ist, or a defender of the *Textus Receptus*, and I recognize the need for updating archaic terms. Yet the reasons the RSV abandoned the Tyndale-King James legacy on μονογενής were not sound. Therefore, we should correct that error and restore the ESV to the traditional translation of μονογενής in the five Johannine Christological occurrences. This will in turn keep the ESV in sync with the Nicene faith so that there is concord between our English Bible and the traditional Trinitarian understanding of Christ as the only begotten Son of God.

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<https://bulletin.kenwoodinstitute.org/unique-only-son-or-only-begotten-translating-monoγενής/>

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