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Jesus as Begotten (The President's Desk)

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Variations of anti-Trinitarian views seem to be erupting on an unprecedented scale, at least in the southeastern United States where I live and work. One element I often encounter is the belief that Christ had some kind of beginning through some process of emanating out of the Father's existence in eternity. In short, they say the Son was literally begotten by the Father prior to any act of actual creation. Often, the advocates of the position consider being begotten and being made as different states of existence, asserting that Jesus is begotten but not made. I cannot here address the entire Trinitarian debate, nor can I take on the task of a full analysis of these views. I shall, however, briefly examine the New Testament texts that use the Greek words *monogenēs* and *gennaō* in reference to Christ, and the validity for arguing that Jesus is somehow begotten.

When *monogenēs* is used to refer to Christ, many English translations use *begotten* to translate that word, especially when used as an adjective to *son* (*huios*). John 3:16 would be the most famous example with the translation, "only begotten son." We must understand, however, that *monogenēs* is a compound word, derived from *monos*—one or only–and *genēs*–a kind of something (we derive the term *genus* and its basic meaning from *genēs*). Hence, quite literally, *monogenēs* means one-of-a-kind and thus

is used to depict something unique or singular. In biblical usage, *monogenēs* appears four times in the Septuagint (LXX), each time translating the Hebrew term *yahid*, which means "only," "sole," or "lonely." Specifically, Judges 11:34 uses the term for Jephthah's daughter as an only child. Two more occurrences in the Psalms use *yahid* to depict one's unique self (22:10; 35:17). Finally, in Psalm 25:16, *yahid* is used to depict being lonely. In no case does the LXX use of *monogenēs* show any hint of addressing the individual's essential nature or manner of origin. Rather, the term is always used in contexts of singularity or loneliness.

The New Testament uses *monogenēs* nine times. It occures three times in Luke's Gospel, always in reference to only children (7:12; 8:42; 9:38). The Book of Hebrews makes a more distinctive use of the term, calling Isaac the *monogenēs* of Abraham (Heb. 11:17). It is interesting that Isaac is labeled solely with the term *monogenēs.* (The word for "son" is not used in the Greek text.) It seems self-evident that in this case, *monogenēs* cannot be intended to mean an only child, for Isaac had several half-siblings. Rather, the term is used to designate Isaac as unique and singular from anyone else, even his half-siblings. Isaac was the only son of Abraham born through miraculous means and through whom the covenant promise and Abraham's name was to pass. No other son of Abraham could claim such an origin, blessing, and mission. So the author of Hebrews, because he is using the term to emphasize Isaac's unique singularity, is clearly not using the term to refer to issues of origins and essential nature. All the biblical data surveyed thus far favors one major focus of *monogenēs*, namely uniqueness and singularity.

Based on biblical evidence seen so far, we have good reason to suspect that the final five uses of *monogenēs*, found in John's writings (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9) and always used in reference to Christ, would be using the *monogenēs* in the same

way as the rest of Scripture, namely to communicate a sense of singularity and uniqueness. John does not use the term to describe essential nature; nor does he use it to explore issues of origins. Additionally, John always applies *monogenēs* to the incarnate Christ, the Word-made-flesh, and to One who is utterly unique—one of a kind—being both God and man in one person. Thus, in Scripture, *monogenēs* has nothing to do with the concept of being begotten and thus is incapable of supporting any claims that Jesus is somehow begotten. It merely expresses Christ's uniqueness as the incarnation of deity in human nature.

By contrast, there is a Greek word for begetting, *gennaō*. When used with a female subject, it means to bear an offspring (in humans or other animals) or to give birth. For the male subject, it means to sire an offspring, often translated in old English as "beget." In the passive voice—which is the most dominant use in the New Testament—*gennaō* means to be born. Thus, this word has to do with procreation and birthing but, as in English, the biblical writers sometimes use the word metaphorically of things other than procreation (1 Cor. 4:15; 2 Tim. 2:23; Philemon 1:10). (John makes regular use of *gennaō* for spiritual birth—being born again, born of God.) If we exclude the uses of *gennaō* in reference to the birth of Christ to Mary in Bethlehem, the New Testament includes only the verses in which *gennaō* is used in reference to Christ. All three occurrences quote Psalm 2:7.

Psalm 2 is widely recognized as a psalm celebrating a royal coronation. Verse 6 directly mentions setting up a king on his throne. Verse 7 uses the birthing metaphor as a parallelism for the installation in verse 6. The king is being "birthed" (*yalad*) into his kingship, and we have a clear, metaphoric use of birthing language in the text. Psalm 2:7 is quoted three times in the New Testament, with all three following the LXX in using *gennaō* as the Greek equivalent to *yalad*.

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In the first text, Acts 13 contains a Sabbath sermon by Paul to the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia. In verses 32 and 33, Paul declares, "'We declare to you glad tidings—that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: *You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.*"" [*] Paul explicitly ties the decree of Psalm 2:7 to the resurrected Jesus and places the begetting mentioned in the text not back in eternity, but after the resurrection and ascension. Paul is using the text exactly the same way as the Hebrew text does, namely as a metaphor for installation into an office or function and is arguing that after the resurrection of Jesus, there was an installation ceremony to His kingship as prophesied in Psalm 2, and which fulfilled the ancient promise of the permanent messianic Davidic king. Both the installation context, with its metaphorical use of the birthing language, and the chronological timing of the pronouncement to the ascended Christ exclude this text as a basis for concluding that there was some kind of pre-creation begetting of Christ by the Father. Psalm 2:7 says nothing about a begetting back in eternity.

The other two texts that quote Psalm 2:7 are both found in Hebrews. Hebrews 1:5 notes that no angel has been spoken to in terms of Psalm 2:7—being called "son." Hebrews 1 does not directly identify the time of the pronouncement of begetting, and hence is not a strong text to address the issue of when this begetting happened. Further clarification on the chronological question comes in Hebrews 5:5: "So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was *appointed* by him who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'" (ESV, italics supplied). First, Hebrews 5 clearly is in the mode of an installation ceremony. It is noting that Christ was *appointed* to His office of high priest, and Psalm 2:7 is used as evidence that Christ is now our high priest in heaven.

Hence, Hebrews matches Paul's other writing and the psalmist in using birthing language metaphorically. Furthermore, the author of Hebrews clearly puts the inauguration of Christ's priestly ministry in heaven after the cross. Hence, Hebrews 5 also applies Psalm 2:7 to the post-ascension Jesus, not to some kind of begetting back in eternity. It seems highly probable that this post-ascension installation into the high priest's office is the referent for Hebrews 1:5 as well, especially if we believe that the inspired author is using Psalm 2 consistently in both places.

We see, then, that outside the birth narratives about Jesus, when *gennaō* is used of Christ, it is always in the context of quoting Psalm 2:7; and like Psalm 2:7, all three use the birthing terminology metaphorically for installation into an office. These texts reveal nothing in reference to a proposed begetting of the Son by the Father in eternity past.

It seems safe to conclude that these texts offer no support for the view advocating a begetting of Christ by the Father back in eternity. Rather, they use Psalm 2:7 in its design parameters, found especially in Psalm 2:6, namely to depict the concept of installing into an office.

In the New Testament, neither *monogenēs* nor the uses of *gennaō* in the three quotes of Psalm 2:7 provide any platform for building a theology claiming that Jesus was begotten, sometime back in eternity, by the Father. By contrast, Christ is ascribed with the full attributes of deity, including self-existence (John 1:2, 4; 5:26), creation (Col. 1:16, 17; Heb. 1:2), and sustaining the world (Col. 1:19; Heb. 1:3). The great glory of the gospel is that God chose to inhabit human flesh, assume a human nature, to be our saving substitute from the penalty and power of sin.

* Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture texts are quoted from the *New King James Version.*