

Why Was Jesus Called the *only begotten* of God?

By Dave DeWitt

Questions

Since Jesus was called the *only begotten* of God:

- Was He created by God?
- Was there a time when He was begotten of God?
- Was there a time before He was begotten of God?
- Were angels begotten of God?
- Was anyone other than Jesus called *only begotten*?
- Is it possible to understand what it means that Jesus was the *only begotten* son of God?

From the Dictionaries and Lexicons

The Greek word translated “only begotten” is μονογενής (*monogenēs*). *Mono* is “only” or “unique,” and *genēs* is to generate in the sense of “to cause to be.” The phrase *only begotten* is used six times in the New Testament. It is always a masculine singular adjective. So it modifies or describes a noun. In the New Testament *only begotten* is used to describe the noun *son* three times, *God* one time, [the one] *from the Father* one time, and *son of God* one time. Since one of these references (Hebrews 11:17) is about Isaac being the only begotten of Abraham, we know the phrase is not exclusively used of Jesus but a metaphor describing the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Actually, even using the word *Father* for God is a metaphor. But it is a prominent metaphor. Jesus called God *My Father* 40 times, and He referred to Himself as the *Son of God* 43 times. [Strong’s Greek Dictionary]

From New Testament Christology

There are four significant passages that describe the nature of God the Son. They come from: (1) the Apostle John, (2) the Apostle Paul, (3) the author of Hebrews, and (4) Jesus in His revelation to John. First the passages, then some observations.

- **John 1:2-3**, *He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.*
- **Colossians 1:15-16**, *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.*
- **Hebrews 1:2-8**, *...in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power... For to which of the angels did He ever say, “You are My Son, today I have begotten you”? And again, “I will be a Father to Him and He shall be a Son to Me”? And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, and let all the angels of God worship Him.” ...But of the Son He says, “Your throne, o God is forever and ever.”*
- **Revelation 1:8**, *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”*

The authors of the New Testament understood:

1. Jesus proceeded from God the Father in a unique way, and the only One (mono) who was “caused to be” (*genēs*) from the Father, in that way.
2. Jesus was the creator and sustainer of all things.
3. Jesus was *the image* [it is the word for “icon”] *of the invisible God*. So we can conclude that every theophany (appearance) of God is that of the one who was *only begotten* of God.

4. Jesus was worshiped by angels.
5. Jesus was called “God” by God the Father.
6. Jesus will inherit an eternal kingdom with an eternal throne.
7. Jesus was eternal in both past and future time. Although He was the first born, and the only begotten, there is no time when He was not yet born or begotten.

So we must conclude that Jesus came from God the Father. He was the only one who came from the Father in the unique role as a Son. He was also deity, i.e. having the attributes of God. And, although He was begotten, **there is no time when He was not.**

From Early Church Christology

The first significant controversy over who Christ was, occurred between Arius and Athanasius.

Arius (A.D. 250-336) taught that the Son was created. In other words, “there was a time when the Son was not. “

Athanasius (A.D. 293-373) disagreed, claiming that “only begotten” refers to Jesus’ eternal generation from the Father, not to His being created in time. His analogy was the Father is like a light source, and the Son is like the radiance from that light. “As radiance from light, so is He begotten... The radiance is ‘begotten’ but never created; it always exists with the light.” [Orations Against the Arians, II.22]

Augustine (A.D. 354–430) taught that *only begotten* was about the unique nature of the Son, not a reference to a time of His beginning. He believed that the Son is begotten of, meaning of the same substance as, the Father, not made at some point in time. [From On the Trinity, I.13]

The Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) concluded,

We believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father.

Others like **Gregory of Nazianzus** (A.D. 329–390) taught that the nature of the Trinity was beyond human comprehension. He said,

The begetting of God must be honored by silence... it is a great thing for you to learn that He was begotten; it is a greater thing still not to pry into how.” [Oration 29.8 (Historical information from ChatGPT, ourkcc.ca and Britannica)]

From the New Testament Uses of the Phrase *only begotten*

The phrase *only begotten* is used six times in the New Testament: twice by Jesus about Himself, three times by the Apostle John about Jesus, and once by the author of Hebrews about Abraham’s son Isaac.

- **John 3:16**, *For God so loved the world, that He gave His **only begotten** Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*
- **John 3:18**, *He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the **only begotten** Son of God.*

This is the only passage where Jesus (twice) refers to Himself as the only begotten Son. Speaking of Himself in the third person, Jesus first (in John 3:16) used the phrase *only begotten* of Himself as a gift from God and second (in John 3:18) as a way to escape the judgment of God (see also John 5:22). Both things are only accessible through faith.

Three times, the Apostle John called Jesus the *only begotten*. Twice in his gospel and once in his first epistle, John said the *only begotten* was from the Father, and He took on human flesh in such a way that He explained the invisible God.

- **John 1:14**, *And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the **only begotten** from the Father, full of grace and truth.*
- **John 1:18**, *No one has seen God at any time; the **only begotten** God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.*

- **1 John 4:9**, *By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His **only begotten** Son into the world so that we might live through Him.*

“Some suggest that this verse [John 1:14] may be the most crucial passage in the Bible on the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ.” [gotquestions.org] Here John tells us the only begotten became flesh. Possibly John focused on this because the Gnostic cult of his day was claiming the spirit was good and the flesh was bad, therefore they said Jesus was all spirit and not flesh (2 John 7). Whether John was aiming at the Gnostics or not, the proclamation is profound. The *only begotten* of God, took on flesh and became the God-man (Philippians 2:6-7).

The only other use of the phrase comes from the author of Hebrews writing about Isaac:

Hebrews 11:17, *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his **only begotten** son...*

This tells us that the phrase *only begotten* can be a description of human reproduction. That means the phrase is not a description of Jesus’ origin but a metaphor of something that cannot be physically described.

Conclusion

Since Jesus was called the *only begotten* of God:

Question: Was Jesus created by God?

Answer: No. The word “created” was never used for the relationship between the Father and the Son.

Question: Was there a time when He was begotten of God?

Answer: No. Begotten is not the description of an event, it is a metaphor of a relationship.

Question: Was there a time before He was begotten of God?

Answer: No.

Question: Were angels begotten of God?

Answer: There is no mention of angels being begotten. They were created at some point in time, but they do not reproduce, so they cannot be begotten.

Question: Was anyone other than Jesus called *only begotten*?

Answer: Yes. Isaac was called Abraham’s *only begotten son*.

Question: Is it possible to understand what it means that Jesus was the *only begotten* son of God?

Answer: It is tempting to just agree with Gregory of Nazianzus when he said, “...it is a great thing for you to learn that He was begotten; it is a greater thing still not to pry into how.” Many areas of theology, when investigated at length, end in a paradox. The trinity, the dual nature of Christ, time and eternity, predestination and free will—all end in true statements that contradict. The same is true in science, quantum physics, time and speed, the nature of the universe, the spiritual nature of mankind—all come to logical conclusions that contradict. But that does not mean we should ignore logical conclusions. The reality is the Bible uses the metaphor *only begotten* to refer to Jesus’ connection to God the Father. We cannot conclude it is just there to take up space. Since God inspired Jesus and the Apostle John to record it, we must assume it is valuable to observe, interpret, and apply it.