

# The Meaning of "Begotten"

## Introduction

The word "begotten" in the KJV is used in reference to Christ nine times in the New Testament. In these various instances "begotten" is translated from three different Greek words: *gennaō*, *monogenēs*, and *prōtotokos*. Paul, thrice quoting from Psalm 2:7, applies *gennaō* to Christ in Act 13:33; Heb 1:5; and Heb 5:5. John applies *monogenēs* to Christ four times in his gospel (Joh 1:14,18; 3:16,18) and once in his first epistle (1Jn 4:9). In Revelation John uses *prōtotokos* in reference to Christ (Rev 1:5). Additionally, *prōtotokos* is translated "firstborn" five times in reference to Christ (Mat 1:25; Luk 2:7; Rom 8:29; Col 1:15,18).

In this study we will consider the meaning of the word "begotten" as it is translated from the corresponding three Greek words and applied to Christ. In any of these various instances, does "begotten" mean that Christ was literally begotten by the Father prior to the incarnation, in eternity? If so, this would mean that the Father precedes the Son in existence, and Christ had a beginning somewhere in eternity past. It would also mean that Christ would be perpetually subordinate *by nature* once he was "begotten".

Or, when we examine context and compare Scripture with Scripture, do we find support for understanding the word "begotten" in a metaphorical sense? If so, what is the significance of the figurative use of this word as it is applied to Jesus?

## The Meaning of "gennaō"

The first instance in Scripture where the word "begotten" is used in reference to Christ is in Psalm 2:7. The Hebrew word translated to the Greek *gennaō* in the New Testament references to this verse is *yâlad*, which has the meaning "to bear, bring forth, beget", "to be born".

Psalm 2 begins by asking questions about why nations, kings, and rulers are plotting and rebelling against the Lord and His anointed.

Psa 2:1 Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?

Psa 2:2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying,

Psa 2:3 Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.

That this Psalm is Messianic is clear from verse 2, as the word "anointed" is "Messiah" in Hebrew. Young's Literal Translation says, "...Against Jehovah, and against His Messiah."

The term "anointed" is also an allusion to the custom of anointing kings or priests with oil when setting them apart to office, or consecrating them to their work (Exo 30:30; Lev 8:12; 1 Sam 10:1,6; 16:3,13; 2Kin 9:3-6).

The Psalm is describing sinners who are arrayed in opposition to God's government, who refuse to have Him rule over them, and who attempt to devise schemes to overthrow God's plans - especially with respect to His Anointed. It is likely that Satan used similar arguments to sway the angels under him to participate in his rebellion. Thus, the context of Psalm 2 is that of the great controversy involving the government of God and the authority of His Anointed. The rest of the Psalm describes how God is going about to deal with these challenges.

Psa 2:4 He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.

The Psalmist uses human language in describing God 's response to this scheming: He laughs at their plotting - meaning He is not disturbed or agitated by their efforts, but will go calmly on in the execution of His purposes. God's response to the rebels will utterly confound their futile efforts, and make them instruments in carrying out His own plans.

Psa 2:5 Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure.

Psa 2:6 Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.

God addresses them in His righteous indignation, stating that He has set His king, His Anointed, into office, the "holy hill of Zion" being the seat of his throne. This verse thus sets the context as a kingly coronation. This is particularly important in understanding verse 7, as this verse is parallel to God's declaration in verse 6.

Psa 2:7 I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.

In verse 7 God affirms the installation of the new king, and gives us the time frame for His decree. It is at a time of determined attack upon Christ by earthly rulers. This happened both at the time of His birth, with the slaying of the infants, and at the crucifixion, so we can expect that God's response would relate to these two events.

That the act of "begetting" spoken of in Psalm 2:7 is clearly metaphoric is supported by the following reasoning:

- a) The new king was not born the day of installation into office. The newly installed king pre-existed this begetting into kingship. To suggest that this begetting is literal would mean that the king could not exist prior to that day, and thus the king would be a newborn installed into office to act immediately in subduing the rebellious nations (described in verses 9-12). Clearly a newborn would be incapable of performing kingly functions, and this rules out a literal begetting of the king.
- b) It was common in that era for a ruling nation to use the language of birthing and adoption when installing a vassal into office. Modern culture likewise makes metaphoric use of the language of birthing, such as the birth of a nation or saying that an idea was born. The Psalmist is using this contemporary idea in this text. The intended meaning is that a capable adult was being installed into office, yet is told he is becoming the king's son.
- c) In verse 7 the Anointed One is speaking, and He interprets God's declaration in verse 6. In declaring the Anointed One as His Son, God decrees that Jesus is appointed to His office as

Messiah. In other words, the decree that Jesus is the begotten Son of God is parallel to Him being installed into royal office as King.

Thus, the literary context of Psalm 2:7 does not support the understanding of the statement of begetting as literal. It is clearly a metaphor for installing a new king into office, and this new king existed prior to his being begotten into that position. There is no indication of bringing a new person into existence.

## New Testament References to Psalm 2

Passages from Psalm 2 are quoted in several places in the New Testament:

Act 4:25 Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things?

Act 4:26 The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his **Christ**.

Act 4:27 For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both **Herod**, and **Pontius Pilate**, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together,

Act 4:28 For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.

These verses clearly apply the uprising of the kings of the earth to the crucifixion of Jesus. This agrees with the concept of the next passage referring to Psalm 2:

Act 13:29 And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a sepulchre.

Act 13:30 But God **raised him from the dead**:

Act 13:33 God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath **raised up Jesus** again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, **this day have I begotten thee**.

Act 13:34 And as concerning that he **raised him up from the dead**, now no more to return to corruption, he said on this wise, I will give you the sure mercies of David.

In Acts 13, Paul is preaching in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia in his first evangelistic encounter with the Jews there. He is seeking to establish Jesus as the promised Savior and Messiah. After establishing the role of the Jewish leaders in asking Pilate to execute Jesus, he then proclaims the Resurrection as God's way of fulfilling the messianic promise to Israel. He then proves this point by quoting Psalm 2:7: "Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee."

Paul's application of Psalm 2:7 is used in reference to the risen Christ, not to some prehistoric event in eternal eons. This parallels his statement in Romans 1:4 that Christ was "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead". It is clear that Paul was applying Psalm 2:7 to an event he believed to be after the Resurrection - to the installation of Christ into the office of High Priest and King, as the following passages in Hebrews will show. In so doing, Paul exactly mirrors the installation theology already seen in Psalm 2.

In Hebrews 1, Paul gives three arguments as to why Christ is superior to angels, and he presents his arguments in reverse chronological sequence.

His logic begins with the most recent event - the installation of Christ into His Kingly-Priestly office after the Resurrection. Paul introduces Jesus as the incarnate Son through whom God spoke to humankind. This son is the express image of God's nature and co-sustainer of the world (vss. 1,2). After making purification for our sins - an obvious reference to the death of Christ - Christ sat down at the right hand of God (vss. 3,4). Paul's first "proof" of Christ's superiority is quoting Psalm 2:7.

Heb 1:5 For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, **this day have I begotten thee**? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?

He asserts that God never told any angels they were sons and begotten. It seems obvious that Paul is again applying Psalm 2:7 to the seating of Christ at God's right hand. Thus, his use of Psalm 2:7 is clearly one of the installation of Christ to regal power after the Resurrection.

Paul's second argument is that angels were called to worship Christ when He was brought as the "firstbegotten" into the world at the incarnation:

Heb 1:6 And again, **when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world**, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.

Finally, God is said to declare and affirm the Son as Creator in verses 8-12.

Thus the literary context has set the Son's superiority to angels in the theological setting of the ascended Christ being seated at God's right hand after the Resurrection, going backwards in time to the incarnation, and finally back to the creation. The evidence is that Hebrews 1:5 is applying Psalm 2:7 in the same way as Acts 13:33 to the post-Resurrection installation of Christ into His Kingly-Priestly office.

Hebrews 5:5 expresses this point even more clearly. Paul is introducing the priesthood of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary. He argues that the earthly priests did not take the honor of priesthood for themselves, but they had to be called by God (vs. 4). Paul continues in verse 5 by arguing that in like manner,

Heb 5:5 So also **Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest**; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, **to day have I begotten thee**.

Here is an unequivocal testimony connecting the appointment of Christ to His high priestly office with the begetting of Psalm 2:7. Paul uses Psalm 2:7 and its language of begetting in the sense of coronation or installation into priestly office, which is precisely parallel to the coronation motif in the psalm, an installation into office. Hebrews 5 thus agrees with Acts 13 and Hebrews 1 in applying Psalm 2:7 to a point in history that is after the resurrection of Jesus in A.D. 31.

When Scripture is used to interpret Scripture, all the New Testament references to Psalm 2:7 apply the "begetting" to the installation of Christ into His Kingly-Priestly office after the Resurrection in 31 A.D. No New Testament reference applies the text to some kind of begetting of the Son back in eternity. The psalm itself likewise shows from the literary form and context that the begetting in verse 7 is metaphoric, referring

to the inauguration of a king into His duties and office and was never intended to connote the origination of a new life.

## Anointings of Christ

Jesus Christ performed three functions (or "offices"): that of **Prophet**, in which Christ served as the mouthpiece of God, speaking and teaching the Word of God (Joh 14:24; 17:4; Act 2:22; Mar 6:4; Luk 4:43; 7:16; 24:19); of **Priest**, in which He offered Himself as the sacrifice for humanity (e.g. Mat 20:28; Joh 10:15; Eph 5:2; 1Co 5:7; Heb 10:12; 1Pe 2:24) and serves as High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 7-10); and that of **King** (Mat 26:64; Php 2:9-11; 1Ti 6:14-15; Rev 17:14; 19:16).

In the Old Testament, the appointment of someone to any of these three positions was sanctioned by anointing him by pouring oil over his head. Just as prophets, priests, and kings were anointed for their respective offices, we should expect that Christ would be anointed to all three of these offices as well. And just as the Holy Spirit was poured out upon those who were anointed for these offices, we should expect that the Holy Spirit would be poured out when Christ is anointed for these offices as well.

Melchisedec, a type of Christ, was both a king and a high priest. The lesson of Melchisedec is that the royal priesthood belonged to Christ from the beginning as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13:18). The priesthood has been His from before the entrance of sin on earth. But Scripture refers to a certain day when this role was especially manifested and confirmed: "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee." (Psa 2:6,7).

What day is this referring to? At what point in time do we see Christ crowned as both King and Priest, not only of humanity but of the universe?

King David, like Melchisedec, was a type of Christ. Significantly, David was crowned twice (1Sa 16:13; 2Sa 5:3). David's first anointing was a "now and not yet" kingly coronation, for Saul claimed to be the king and David could not officially be king until his adversary was defeated. Once Saul was dead then David was anointed for the second time and officially reigned as king. Significantly, David received the Holy Spirit at the same moment that he was anointed. The same with Aaron, Saul, and others (Lev 8; 1Sa 10:6).

Christ was anointed for His earthly ministry at His baptism, and at that moment the baptism of the Holy Spirit fell upon Him (Joh 1:32-33; c.f. Luk 4:18; Act 10:37,38). Christ was anointed as High Priest during Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the apostles empowering them to take the gospel to the then-known world (Act 2:32-36; Lev 8:1-12; Heb 1:8,9; Psa 133). And Christ will be anointed as King of Kings at the time of the latter rain when again the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon God's end-time people for the same purpose (Rev 18:1-4; 19:11-16).

At Pentecost, when He was glorified after He ascended to heaven, the early rain was given. Pentecost marked the dividing line in human history, the paradigm shift from the historical Old Covenant to the New, from the Levitical priesthood to the Priesthood of Christ. It was marked in heaven at Pentecost by Christ's enthronement at the right hand of the majesty of God. It was at this time that Christ was signally honored of heaven (see Psa 24:7-10; Rev 5:8-14). He was glorified by the Father, and in honor of His supreme sacrifice the Spirit was poured out abundantly on the church (Act 2:1-4).

Great as that event was, the greatest crowning event and the final glorification of Christ is still future. It is described in Revelation 19. When this occurs Christ is crowned once again with *many* crowns, that is, with full power, honor, glory and royal majesty, and the latter rain is poured out. Christ rides forth in majesty on a white horse as King of Kings leading the all-powerful armies of heaven in His train. Speaking of this grand event, the Psalmist says:

Psa 45:1 My heart is inditing a good matter: I speak of the things which I have made touching the king: my tongue is the pen of a ready writer.

Psa 45:2 Thou art fairer than the children of men: grace is poured into thy lips: therefore God hath blessed thee for ever.

Psa 45:3 Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most mighty, with thy glory and thy majesty.

Psa 45:4 And **in thy majesty ride prosperously because of truth and meekness and righteousness; and thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things.**

Psa 45:5 Thine arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies; whereby the people fall under thee.

Psa 45:6 **Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: the sceptre of thy kingdom is a right sceptre.**

Psa 45:7 **Thou lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness: therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.**

The same scene is pictured for us in Psalm 110:

Psa 110:1 The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, **until I make thine enemies thy footstool.**

Psa 110:2 The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: **rule thou in the midst of thine enemies.**

Psa 110:3 Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth.

Psa 110:4 **The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.**

Psa 110:5 The Lord at thy right hand shall **strike through kings in the day of his wrath.**

Psa 110:6 He shall judge among the heathen, he shall fill the places with the dead bodies; he shall wound the heads over many countries.

Psa 110:7 He shall drink of the brook in the way: therefore shall he lift up the head.

In the books of Acts and Hebrews, the apostles cite sections from both these passages indicating that at Pentecost Christ was crowned "Lord and Christ", that is, like Melchisedek, King and Priest of the Most High (Act 2:30-36; Heb 1:1-9). But the greater fulfillment is clearly future to this when Christ is once again glorified and rules in the very midst of his foes (Psa 110:2).

The themes of anointing, kingship and rulership, and victory over God's enemies in these Psalms bring us back to Psalm 2, which involves these same themes.

Psa 2:1 Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?

Psa 2:2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and **against his anointed**, saying,

Psa 2:3 Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.

Psa 2:4 He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.

Psa 2:5 Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure.

Psa 2:6 **Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.**

Psa 2:7 I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, **Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.**

Psa 2:8 Ask of me, and **I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.**

Psa 2:9 **Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.**

Psa 2:10 Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth.

Psa 2:11 Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.

Psa 2:12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.

The coronation of Christ as King in Psalm 2 is how God wins the great controversy. But Christ could not be King until He was raised from the dead (Act 13:33), and His sacrifice was accepted by the Father and He was seated at the Father's right hand (Heb 1:3-5), and has served as our High Priest (Heb 5:5). When His High Priestly ministry is completed, the subjects of His kingdom are made up, and He can return as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev 19:16).

The outpouring of the latter rain is the final event in earth's history when Christ is glorified most powerfully with full majesty as both Priest and King. This stands to reason: if Christ was "begotten" when He was confirmed King and High Priest at Pentecost and the early rain was given, how much more will Christ be glorified at the outpouring of the latter rain. This awesome event is described in the Psalms and in other Scriptures (Joel 2:23; Hosea 6:3; Zechariah 10:1), but the most vivid description is in Revelation 19:

Rev 19:11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.

Rev 19:12 His eyes were as a flame of fire, and **on his head were many crowns**; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself.

Rev 19:13 And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God.

Rev 19:14 And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.

Rev 19:15 And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

Rev 19:16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

Rev 19:19 And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army.

This is where the hosts of heaven engage in battle with the beast during the latter rain. The law of God and His people are trampled and the beast through Babylon thinks to change times and the Law, and to finally overthrow the government of God. Continuing:

Rev 19:20 And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.

Rev 19:21 And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh.

The final anointing and coronation of Christ as sovereign that Psalm 2, 45, and 110 along with Revelation 19 talk about, is what heaven is waiting for.

## The Meaning of "monogenēs"

The Greek word translated "only begotten" in the KJV is *monogenēs*. According to the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (BAGD, 3rd Edition), *monogenēs* has two primary definitions. The first definition is "pertaining to being the only one of its kind within a specific relationship." The second definition is "pertaining to being the only one of its kind or class, unique in kind."

John is the only biblical writer to use the Greek word *monogenēs* in reference to Christ:

Joh 1:14 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.

Joh 1:18 No man hath seen God at any time; the **only begotten** Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

Joh 3:16 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.

Joh 3:18 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.

1Jn 4:9 In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his **only begotten** Son into the world, that we might live through him.

What did John mean, and why did he choose to use this word?

The word *monogenēs* is made up of two other words, *monos* and *genos*. *monos* is the normal word for "only" (e.g. Mat 24:36; Luk 4:8; Rev 15:4; etc), but is frequently translated "alone" (e.g. Mat 4:4; John 8:29; Heb 9:7; etc).

*genos* has a range of meanings, including "offspring", "family", "race/nation", and "kind". Here are listed all of the New Testament uses organized according to these meanings:

### Offspring

Act 17:28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his **offspring**.

Act 17:29 Forasmuch then as we are the **offspring** of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

Rev 22:16 I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the **offspring** of David, and the bright and morning star.

### Family

Act 4:6 And Annas the high priest, and Caiaphas, and John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the **kindred** of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem.

Act 7:13 And at the second time Joseph was made known to his brethren; and Joseph's **kindred** was made known unto Pharaoh.

Act 13:26 Men and brethren, children of **the stock** of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God, to you is the word of this salvation sent.

### Race/Nation

Mar 7:26 The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician **by nation**; and she besought him that he would cast forth the devil out of her daughter.

Act 4:36 And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and **of the country** of Cyprus,

Act 7:19 The same dealt subtilly with our **kindred**, and evil entreated our fathers, so that they cast out their young children, to the end they might not live.

Act 18:2 And found a certain Jew named Aquila, **born** in Pontus [lit. of Pontus by race], lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them.

Act 18:24 And a certain Jew named Apollos, **born** at Alexandria [lit. an Alexandrian by race], an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus.

2Co 11:26 In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own **countrymen**, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

Gal 1:14 And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own **nation**, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.

Php 3:5 Circumcised the eighth day, of **the stock** of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee;

1Pe 2:9 But ye are a chosen **generation**, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light:

### Kind

Mat 13:47 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every **kind**:

Mat 17:21 Howbeit this **kind** goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.

Mar 9:29 And he said unto them, This **kind** can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.

1Co 12:10 To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers **kinds** of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues:

1Co 12:28 And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, **diversities** of tongues.

1Co 14:10 There are, it may be, so many **kinds** of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification.

In none of the above verses, with the exception of the two poorly translated verses referring to Aquila and Apollos, is there any reference to birth. When properly translated, they, like the rest, use *genos* to mean a kind or group of things or people, such as family or race, etc.

So where does the idea of "begetting" in the word *monogenēs* come from? It comes incorrectly from a closely related family of words:

*gennaō* ("to beget", "to be born"); e.g. Mat 1:2 "Abraham **beget** Isaac",

*gennēsis* ("birth"); e.g. Luk 1:14 "...many shall rejoice at his **birth**"

*genesia* ("birthday"); e.g. Mat 14:6 "But when Herod's **birthday** was kept..."

*gennētos* ("begotten"); e.g. Mat 11:11 "Among **them that are born** of women..."

*genetē* ("birth"); e.g. Joh 9:1 "...blind from his **birth**"

There are two different, but closely related families of words: one related to birth, and the other to a kind or class of people or thing. *monogenēs* is related to the latter, and not to the group having to do with birth. This distinction was not always made, and *monogenēs* came to mean "only begotten" when applied to Christ.

The first translations of the Bible into English were made from Jerome's Latin Vulgate (c. 383). In passages of theological interest, Jerome seems to have used theological considerations rather than his knowledge of the Greek language, including his translation of *monogenēs* as *unigenitum* ("only begotten") rather than *unicus* ("only"). These translations therefore read "only begotten Son" in John 3:16 and similar passages. This set the pattern for English speaking Christians which has proved difficult to alter. And because his translation became the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church, it had a controlling influence on subsequent translations into other languages.

What is the correct meaning of the word *monogenēs* that has been incorrectly translated as "only begotten"? Taking the meaning of *monos* as "only" and the meaning of *genos* as "kind" or "class" would give *monogenēs* the meaning "only one of its kind". This is the meaning that is implied in these verses. William Tyndale, the first translator of the New Testament from Greek to English, endeavored to return to the original meaning of *monogenēs*. His 1534 translation of John 3:16-18 did not include the word "begotten", rendering *monogenēs* as "only sonne".

Many newer translations of the Bible also do not include the word "begotten" in the translation of *monogenēs*, including the 2016 CSB ("one and only Son"), 2011 CEB ("only Son"), 1998 CJB ("only and unique Son"), 1995 CEV ("only Son"), 2006 ERV ("only Son"), 2001 ESV ("only Son"), 2011 EXB ("one and only Son"), 1995 GW ("only Son"), 1992 GNT ("only Son"), 1999 HCSB ("One and Only Son"), 1986 ICB ("only Son"), 1960 PHILLIPS ("only Son"), 2012 LEB ("only Son"), 1993 MSB ("his Son, his one and only Son"), 2011 MOUNCE ("one and only Son"), 2011 NOG ("only Son"), 2010 NABRE ("only Son"), 1960 NASB ("only Son"), 2019 NCB ("only Son"), 2005 NCV ("one and only Son"), 1996 NET ("one and only Son"), 1995 NIRV ("one and only Son"), 1973 NIV ("one and only Son"), 1969 NLV ("only Son"), 1996 NLT ("one and only Son"), 2016 NMB ("only Son"), 1989 NRSV ("only Son"), 2011 NTE ("only, special son"), 2017 TPT ("only, unique Son"), 1946 RSV ("only Son"), 2015 TLV ("one and only Son"), 2012 VOICE ("only Son"), 2000 WEB ("one and only Son").

The footnote to *monogenēs* in John 3:16 in the New English Translation is instructive:

Although this word is often translated "only begotten," such a translation is misleading, since in English it appears to express a metaphysical relationship. The word in Greek was used of an only child (a son [Luke 7:12; 9:38] or a daughter [Luke 8:42]). It was also used of something unique (only one of its kind) such as the mythological Phoenix (1 Clement 25:2). From here it passes easily to a description of Isaac (Heb 11:17 and Josephus, Ant. 1.13.1 [1.222]) who was not Abraham's only son, but was one-of-a-kind because he was the child of the promise. Thus the word means "one-of-a-kind" and is reserved for Jesus in the Johannine literature of the NT. While all Christians are children of God (τέκνα θεοῦ, tekna theou), Jesus is God's Son in a unique, one-of-a-kind sense. The word is used in this way in all its uses in the Gospel of John (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18)

*monogenēs* is found four times in the New Testament other than the previously listed references to Christ. In none of them is there any direct references to the birth of the individual. The emphasis is on the idea of "only" in a special way:

Luk 7:12 Now when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the **only** son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her.

Luk 8:41-42 And, behold, there came a man named Jairus, and he was a ruler of the synagogue: and he fell down at Jesus' feet, and besought him that he would come into his house: For he had **one only** daughter, about twelve years of age, and she lay a dying. But as he went the people thronged him.

Luk 9:38-40 And, behold, a man of the company cried out, saying, Master, I beseech thee, look upon my son: for he is mine **only child**. And, lo, a spirit taketh him, and he suddenly crieth out; and it teareth him that he foameth again, and bruising him hardly departeth from him. And I besought thy disciples to cast him out; and they could not.

Heb 11:17 By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his **only begotten** son,

All three passages in Luke have just the word "only" as a translation of *monogenēs*. There is no mention of "begotten". If in these verses "only" is a correct translation, why make a difference when translating those verses which apply *monogenēs* to Jesus? Why introduce the concept of "begotten"?

In Heb 11:17 Paul refers to Isaac as Abraham's "only begotten son". We know Abraham had more than one son, but Isaac was the special son he had by Sarah, the miracle son, the son of promise. Therefore, it is the uniqueness of Isaac among the other sons that allows for the use of *monogenēs* in that context. This helps us to understand that *monogenēs* does truly mean *special, precious, unique*.

While Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Peter used the word *agapētos* - "beloved" - combining words and ideas from Psa 2:7 and Isa 42:1 (Mat 3:17; 17:5; Mar 1:11; 9:7; Luk 3:22; 9:35; 20:13; 1Pe 1:17), John was primarily concerned with demonstrating that Jesus is the Son of God (Joh 20:31), and he uses *monogenēs* to highlight Jesus as uniquely God's Son - sharing the same divine nature as God - as opposed to believers who are God's sons and daughters by adoption (Eph 1:5).

It can be seen that the word *monogenēs* as applied by John to Christ gives no support to the concept that He had a beginning at some point in the remote past, for the term does not mean anything to do with a begetting or a birthing process. John chose to use *monogenēs* to bring out Jesus' "one and only" uniqueness. He was very special, very precious, the only one of His kind in the whole universe.

## The Meaning of "prōtotokos"

In Col 1:15 Paul describes Jesus as "the firstborn of every creature" (KJV). In Rev 1:5 Jesus is referred to as the "first begotten of the dead" (KJV). The Greek word translated "firstborn" and "first begotten" in these verses is *prōtotokos*, which refers to first in birth order (*prōtos* = "first", "chief"; *tiktō* = "forth", "delivered", "brought", "born").

The New Testament usages of the word *prōtotokos* are as follows:

Mat 1:25 And knew her not till she had brought forth her **firstborn** son: and he called his name JESUS.

Luk 2:7 And she brought forth her **firstborn** son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Rom 8:29 For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the **firstborn** among many brethren.

Col 1:15-18 Who is the image of the invisible God, the **firstborn** of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the **firstborn** from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

Heb 1:6 And again, when he bringeth in the **firstbegotten** into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.

Heb 11:28 Through faith he kept the passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the **firstborn** should touch them.

Heb 12:22,23 But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the **firstborn**, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,

Rev 1:5 And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the **first begotten** of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood,

Two of the nine instances of *prōtotokos* in the above passages do not refer to Christ (Heb 11:8 and Heb 12:23, the latter instance is in the Greek plural and thus cannot refer to Christ, referring instead to believers). It can be seen from these texts that there is a wide variety of meaning associated with the word *prōtotokos* as applied to Christ:

- The firstborn son of Mary (Mat 1:25; Luk 2:7)
- The Creator of all (Col 1:15)
- Before all things (Col 1:17)
- The firstborn from the dead (Col 1:18; Rev 1:5)

The use of the word firstborn applied to believers in Heb 12:23 shows that there was some meaning intended other than "the first one born". Jesus is the "firstborn among many brethren" (Rom 8:29), but they are also "firstborn", so Jesus is the firstborn of the firstborn. In Col 1 the key thought is preeminence as verse 18 tells us.

The reason why there is such an emphasis on the concept of the firstborn to express this preeminence has to do with the Old Testament meaning and use of this word. In biblical times, including in the first century

when these passages were written, birth order had to do with rank and status. The firstborn son was given special privileges and responsibilities. He was the head of the extended family in spiritual and temporal matters, and received a double inheritance (e.g. Deu 21:16,17).

The group of Hebrew words translated firstborn, firstfruits, etc. are based on the word *bâkar* which has the meaning of being first, either first in point of time but also first in importance. Examples of the latter meaning include the following:

Exo 4:22 And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my **firstborn**:

Job 18:13 It shall devour the strength of his skin: even the **firstborn** of death shall devour his strength.

Psa 89:27 Also I will make him my **firstborn**, higher than the kings of the earth.

Jer 31:9 They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my **firstborn**.

Psa 89:27 is of particular significance as the subject of the passage is David, who is prophetic of Jesus. This verse helps to explain the New Testament emphasis of Jesus as the firstborn.

The Greek word *prōtos*, which forms the first part of the word *prōtotokos*, is defined by Strong as "foremost (in time, place, order, or importance)". The meaning of *prōtos* as "first in importance" is illustrated in the following New Testament passages:

Mat 20:27 And whosoever will be **chief** among you, let him be your servant:

Mar 6:21 And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and **chief** estates of Galilee;

Mar 10:44 And whosoever of you will be the **chiefest**, shall be servant of all.

Luk 15:22 But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the **best** robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

Luk 19:47 And he taught daily in the temple. But the **chief** priests and the scribes and the chief of the people sought to destroy him,

Act 13:50 But the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the **chief** men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts.

Act 16:12 And from thence to Philippi, which is the **chief** city of that part of Macedonia, and a colony: and we were in that city abiding certain days.

Act 17:4 And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the **chief** women not a few.

Act 28:7 In the same quarters were possessions of the **chief** man of the island, whose name was Publius; who received us, and lodged us three days courteously.

1Ti 1:15 This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am **chief**.

This meaning helps us to appreciate the significance of the word *prōtotokos* (firstborn, first begotten) as applied to Christ.

Col 1:15 says that Jesus is "the firstborn of every creature." What did Paul mean by this? The next verse says "For by him were all things created". The Greek word translated "for" is *hoti*, and it has the meaning of "because", "seeing that", "since". Thus, what Paul is really saying is that Jesus is the firstborn because He is the Creator. The passage provides additional reasons for why Jesus is the firstborn:

- Jesus "is before all things". He has existed prior to all things, and thus has authority over all.
- "By him all things consist." Jesus is not only the Creator, He is the Sustainer of all.
- Jesus "is the head of the body, the church"

Note that Paul does not say that Jesus is the firstborn because He was begotten or created by the Father, or anything remotely resembling that.

Paul wrote this passage to demonstrate that in all things Jesus has "the preeminence". The concept of the firstborn as one who is chief, first in rank, and highly distinguished figures prominently in this. Christ's position is unique, authoritative, and absolute. He has been entrusted with all prerogatives and authority in heaven and earth.

The phrase "firstborn of the dead" or "first begotten of the dead" occurs in Col 1:18 and Rev 1:5, alluding to the *significance* of Christ's resurrection, not the timing of the resurrection. Lazarus, the daughter of Jairus, and the son of the widow of Nain, among many others were begotten from the dead before Christ in point of time. But the Savior's resurrection was the condition of the salvation of all other resurrected saints. Their resurrections would have been void without His. Paul calls Him also the "firstfruits of them that slept" (1Cor 15:20,23). The resurrection of Jesus was different than that of any other Being in that he alone had life in Himself to rise from the dead (Joh 10:17,18). Jesus demonstrated His authority over all things by defeating even death. Because of this event, Jesus is the "firstborn amongst many brethren" (Rom 8:29). Thus, the Greek word *prōtotokos* in this context also has the meaning of "preeminence".

## Conclusion

From the study above, it can be clearly seen that Scripture does not support the doctrine that Jesus was literally "begotten" by God the Father at some point in ages past. All three Greek words translated as "begotten" or "firstborn" in the KJV as applied to Christ have meanings that highlight different aspects of Christ's role as Saviour of the world.

The use of *gennaō* in Psalm 2:7 is clearly a metaphor for the installation of a new king into office. The New Testament references to this Psalm point to Christ's anointing as our High Priest and King.

John used the word *monogenēs* to portray Christ as very precious and totally unique in all the universe.

And both Paul and John used the word *prōtotokos* to emphasize Christ's preeminence.

The plan of salvation was formed in eternity past (Tit 1:2), and as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8), foreordained as the Saviour of the world before the world was created (1 Pet 1:19-20), Christ has been the "begotten" Son of God for all eternity.

Col 2:9 says "For in him [Christ] dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily." If Christ was not a being from eternity, this statement was a falsehood. The fulness of the Godhead was in Christ before the Incarnation when He was "in the form of God," (Php 2:6; c.f. Joh 1:1, Joh 1:18;), during the Incarnation when "He became in the likeness of men" (Php 2:7), when the Word became flesh (Joh 1:14, Joh 1:18; 1Jn 1:1-3), and the fullness of the Godhead dwells in His glorified humanity in heaven. The indwelling of the divine fullness in Him is characteristic of Him as Christ, from all ages and to all ages.