

Bible Study: Is Jesus the Begotten Son of God?

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

-Nicene Creed

Perhaps the most oft quoted scripture of the Bible is John 3:16, and perhaps the most well remembered version of it is "For God so loved the world that he sent His only *begotten* son ..." But the word "begotten" is not in the original Greek. It was added later on. The Greek word that is in this place in the oldest known versions of the Gospel is "monogenus", which, within its immediate context, properly translates to only son. Of course, this addition has resulted in some "purists" claiming that some Churches are manipulating the scriptures to fit their own perverted form of Christianity. It is the Catholic (as well as most traditional Protestant Churches) belief that Jesus *was* the only begotten son. It is the newer forms of Christianity that seem to have a problem with it, claiming that for Jesus to be "begotten" suggests He had a beginning, and therefore could not be God. They claim that "monogenus" is better translated as "one of a kind" or "unique."

I, for one, fail to see how any Christian worthy of calling themselves that could deny the uniqueness of Jesus' relationship with God. Jews, Muslims and Pagans likewise believe this much by describing Jesus as a prophet of God. Even Atheists who recognize the historical life of Jesus will acknowledge a certain uniqueness to Him as a "wise man." But this over simplified answer to what "monogenus" means just begs for the next question: special in what way?

But first, we must clarify what begotten and what creation means. Both imply something new comes into being, but to beget something means to make something with one's own Essence while creation means to make something with other material. A sculptor may beget a son, but he creates statues. The son is of the same Essence the sculptor, the statues are not.

Now let us look some more at the gospel of Saint John. We don't have to look too hard to see that God the Son is properly called begotten of the Father. In the first verse of the first chapter, we see: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word *was with* God, and the Word *was* God. (italics mine) This does not completely answer the matter, but it goes a long way. There is no doubt here that the Word is the Essence of God and that God is made of multiple persons (this is the only way the Word can be both "with" and "was with"). If we skip a few verses ahead to 14, we pretty much put an end to the matter of the God the Father begetting the only Son: *And the Word became flesh* and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of *the Father's only Son*, full of grace and truth. (italics mine). Right from the beginning of the gospel account, we see that Jesus is of the same Essence as the Father and that there is only one Son. So, to add the word "begotten" at 3:16 does not change the meaning of the gospel message, but rather reinforces what has already been taught.

And this was not just a random phrase of wording that Saint John used once and then moved on. The idea that Jesus was not really begotten was a popular heresy in the 1st Century and Saint John's works seem tailored to combat this grave misunderstanding. We see Jesus calling Himself "I Am" no less than eight times in the gospel (suggesting it was He who spoke to Moses at Mount Horeb), and the longest prayer Jesus makes (the whole of chapter 17) speaks of the unity between Father and Son. The "anti-Christ" Saint John mentioned in his letters were these early heretics preaching against Jesus as being begotten.

Yet despite Saint John's efforts, the heresy remained. It was the first heresy the early Church addressed formally after Christianity was no longer illegal. The Council of Nicea was open to every Bishop in Christendom and as many as 316 bishops attended. Furthermore, each bishop could (and nearly all did) have up to five additional clergy accompany him, making attendance at the Nicene Council at about 1,800. Countless uninvited clergy also attended on their own initiative. This council was put together by orders of Emperor Constantine, the Emperor who legalized Christianity. It was perhaps the first time the whole Church could come together and organize itself since the time the Apostles spoke in tongues at the Pentecost (Acts of the Apostles chapter 2). The primary purpose of this meeting was to address the Arian Controversy, which denied the triune God (and, by extension, Jesus being begotten). As can be seen the Nicene Creed, Christendom rejected Arianism for the triune God. In the end, only 2 of over 300 bishops voted *against* the triune God. Clearly, the early Church had great faith in the triune God.

And yet this matter still keeps coming up. It appears to be focused on the difficulty in accepting that the Word of God was born approximately 2,000 years ago, and therefore finite. This, they argue, cannot happen if He is God and eternal. The main problem here is a failure to understand the dual nature of Jesus as both human and divine. The divine nature of Jesus *is* the Word of God, and was eternal. The human nature of Jesus did have a finite beginning as Saint John attested to in 1:14 (above). It is proper to say the Word created the world because the Word always was, but it is not proper to say Jesus created the world because Jesus had a human nature that was not possible yet.

But there are those who might accept the dual nature of Jesus yet still think the problem has not really gone away. If the Father begat the Son, does that still not suggest the Father existed before the Son, and therefore the Son is still finite? This is a fair question, and the answer lies in the reality that Jehovah exists in. If we limit our thinking to time and space, then yes, we do have a problem. But Jehovah created time and space, therefore He transcends (rises above) time and space. All moments are the same moment, and all places are the same place. This can be hard to grasp, but if one wishes to speak of eternity, then one must think outside mortal limits. This is, of course, a mystery as our finite

minds can never fully grasp this reality, but we can use a metaphor to at least understand a shadow of this reality. All metaphors break down at some point, but some are better than others.

And perhaps the best metaphor developed came from Saint Aquinas, who looked at the phrase "God is love" from 1 John 4:8. He noted that love can only exist by the will of the lover (the Father), and when it exists there must needs be a beloved (the Son) and the love itself (the Holy Spirit). Since God is love and God is eternal, all three persons must be present and for all eternity. This may be the best understanding we can have short of the Beatific Vision.

In summary, to identify Jesus as the only *begotten* son is indeed a literary addition to original scripture, yet it is not a deceitful one. It is a clarification of the Church's teachings of exactly what relationship the "Father" had with Jesus. This position is strongly supported when taken in context of the whole New Testament. It was a virtually universal belief among the Christians at the time the faith was decriminalized. It was specifically included as a safeguard against the heresies of Docetism, Arianism and similar false teachings as soon as the Church could properly organize itself publicly.

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