

Does JOHN 1:18 call Jesus "God"?

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~ The Issue ~

Several leading English translations render JOHN 1:18 in such a way that Jesus is referred to as "God" (Greek, *theos*) while other versions indicate something different. Note the following examples:

(King James Version) "No man hath seen God at any time; **the only begotten Son**, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him."

(New International Version) "No-one has ever seen God, **but God the One and Only**, who is at the Father's side, has made him known."

(New American Version) "No man has seen God at any time; **the only begotten God**, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him."

(Revised Standard Version) "No one has ever seen God; **the only Son**, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known."

(New Living Bible) "No one has ever seen God. But **his only Son, who is himself God**, is near to the Father's heart; he has told us about him."

(New Jerusalem) "No one has ever seen God; **it is the only Son**, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

While each of the above varies in details each employs one of two possible options: a rendering referring to Jesus either as "Son" or "God."

~ The Textual Issue ~

The reason some translations read "son" and others "god" is because of the existence of textual variants in some ancient Greek manuscripts. Several key manuscripts read "the only begotten son" while others have "only begotten god." There is strong manuscript evidence for either reading, which accounts for the differences among English translations of JOHN 1:18. Strong arguments can be made for either reading. To ascertain the correct original reading necessitates evaluating additional criteria.

John's Usage Elsewhere:

JOHN 1:18 is the concluding passage of his gospel's prologue (1:1-18). The clause in VERSE 18 expands on the one found in VERSE 14 ("we beheld his glory, a glory as of an only-begotten from a father, full of grace and truth"). In VERSE 14 John portrays the kind of glory seen in Jesus, glory like that which an "only begotten" has from a father. In VERSE 18 John builds on this with the more specific, "the only begotten Son."

John also uses the phrase "only begotten son" in JOHN 3:16 and 3:18:

(3:16) "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him may not perish, but have everlasting life."

(3:18) "He that believes on him is not judged: but he that believes not has been judged already, because he has not believed on the name of the only-begotten Son of God."

John's use of "only begotten son" elsewhere must be considered when deciding the original reading of JOHN 1:18. One should also note John's same use in his first epistle in 1 JOHN 4:9:

(1 JOHN 4:9) "God has sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him."

Two other passages from John's gospel are relevant. First, in JOHN 5:44 Jesus criticizes his opponents "who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God." Jesus uses the adjective *monos* meaning "only." Second, in JOHN 17:3 Jesus prays to his Father and states, "this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent." In this verse Jesus again uses the adjective "only." The Greek word rendered "true" means "true, real, genuine." Jesus' statement in JOHN 17:3 is clear. He distinguishes between himself and the Father, and clearly describes the Father as "the only true God." By his own logic, whatever Jesus may be, he cannot be "true God" since the Father is "the only true, real or genuine God." If the Father is elsewhere described as "the only true God" how can the Son be called "god" or "only god" in JOHN 1:18? How can both the Father and the Son be separately designated "god" in JOHN 1:18 if there is only one God?

Theological Problems:

Some English versions render 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 interpreted him." This is problematic to monotheism since it refers to two beings or persons as "god," "the Father" and "the only begotten." If anything this becomes an argument for polytheism since at face value the language means there are two separate beings and both are referred to as "god." It is anachronistic to solve the dilemma by reading into this passage Trinitarian formulations and notions from later centuries.

Compounding the problem is the thought of one of the two "gods" being "begotten" by the other. "Begotten" indicates a beginning. Keenly aware of the problem the third-century church father Origen "solved" it with his unique idea of the "eternal generation" of the son, the idea that the son is "being eternally generated" by or from the Father. Not only is this proposal artificial, illogical and confusing, "eternal generation" is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. "Generation" explicitly means a beginning while "eternal" refers to something without end or beginning.

The Greek word rendered "only begotten" is *monogenés*, a compound formed with *monos* ("only") and *genos* ("offspring, progeny, kindred, lineage"). In ancient Greek literature *monogenés* was used in the sense "only born" and commonly referred to an only child by physical descent, an only born child. In the New Testament *monogenés* is used to refer to an only child as in LUKE 7:12, 8:42, 9:38 and HEBREWS 11:17.

To solve the theological problems raised by the literal rendering "only-born" (or "only begotten"), some translations of JOHN 1:18 have introduced paraphrases such as "the one and only god" (*NIV*) or "only unique God." But the clause "one and only" imports words not in the original text and reduces the meaning of *monogenés* from "only born" (or "only begotten") to simply "only." If John meant to say "only god" he would have simply used *monos* or "only" with the word "god" (as he does in JOHN 17:3). Furthermore the rendering "one and only god" only heightens the theological problem since if the son is the "one and only God" then the Father cannot also be "God."

The other proposal, "only unique god," has its own set of conceptual problems. If the Son is the only "unique" God then who or what is the Father, a generic or non-unique god?

If John originally wrote “the only begotten god” (or “the one and only god”) he created an insolvable problem for Christian monotheism. Considering that many significant and large numbers of Greek manuscripts read “only begotten Son,” John’s usage and theology elsewhere in his gospel, and the deep theological problems created by the alternative reading, it is very likely JOHN 1:18 originally read “the only begotten Son.”

As to how the reading “only begotten god” came about, one can only speculate. A common practice among copyists of the third and fourth centuries (when many of the relevant manuscripts were produced) was to abbreviate key theological terms when copying a New Testament text. “God” and “Son” were two such words. Rather than write out the full word it was abbreviated using the first and last letters of the word. “God” would thus be abbreviated the Greek letters theta and sigma. “Son” was abbreviated with the letters upsilon and again sigma (both words end in sigma). There is a difference of only one letter between the abbreviated forms of “god” and “son,” and these two abbreviations were easily and frequently confused with one another. It is conceivable that an early scribe mistook a theta for the letter upsilon, an easy enough mistake to make during the tedious process of copying a text by hand. That error would have subsequently made its way into later manuscripts descended from the one containing the original error.

A Larger Problem:

A basic problem with the idea of the deity of Christ is the lack of many direct references to Jesus as “God” or *theos* in the New Testament. JOHN 1:18 is only one of eight scriptures in the entire New Testament that at first glance appear to explicitly call Jesus “God” (JOHN 1:1, 1:18, 20:28, ROMANS 9:5, TITUS 2:13, HEBREWS 1:8, 2 PETER 1:1, 1 JOHN 5:20). This small number of instances is problematic.

The New Testament provides clear evidence of various controversies in the early church. The books of the New Testament demonstrate the early church’s leadership did not hesitate to confront controversies and other problems (*e.g.*, GALATIANS, 1 CORINTHIANS, JUDE, 1 JOHN). Because Christianity was an outgrowth of the faith of Israel and initially a strictly Jewish movement, it is not surprising that some of the conflicts found in the New Testament reflect the kinds of disputes one would expect to erupt when the Gospel was opened up to non-Jews. This included debates over circumcision, Sabbath keeping and Jewish dietary rules.

One of the key objections raised by Jews to the claim of Jesus’ Messiahship was the fact that he had been crucified. The notion of God’s messiah being executed on a cross by Israel’s greatest enemy, Rome, would have been viewed by many Jews as a contradiction in terms. After all, did not Israel’s own scriptures teach that anyone hung on tree was under God’s curse (DEUTERONOMY 21:23, SEE GALATIANS 3:13)? This objection is reflected in several passages in the New Testament (*e.g.*, 1 CORINTHIANS 1:23, GALATIANS 5:11).

Missing from the New Testament is any indication of conflict over or objection to the claim that Jesus is God or that God became a man. While this is an argument from silence, this silence speaks volumes. Fundamental to the faith of Israel was its strict monotheism. Yahweh alone was God and He alone merited worship. He was most definitely other than human and could not die. Any claim to deity on the part of Jesus or his followers would have been highly problematic. Any claim that in Jesus “God became a man,” let alone died, would have been viewed as blasphemous. If the early church had been actively proclaiming Jesus to be God devout Jews would have fought this message tooth and nail. Conflicts caused by a claim that Jesus is God would have necessitated constant and clear teaching in this regard yet we find no evidence of this in the New Testament.

~ Summary ~

In summary, JOHN 1:18 most likely originally read “only begotten Son,” not “only begotten God.” There is strong Greek manuscript evidence supporting this reading and it is in line with John’s usage elsewhere. The proposed reading “only begotten god” raises serious theological problems that some translators have attempted to solve with paraphrases such as “one and only god” and “unique god.” Each proposed solution only heightens the theological and logical problems.