

Is Jesus God in John 1.18?

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Bible versions are based on a Hebrew or Greek text which textual critics compile from extant, ancient manuscripts (MSS) that were hand-copied by professional scribes. Many Bible versions occasionally provide alternate readings a footnote. These show that a word or phrase in the Hebrew or Greek text can be translated differently than what the translators have put in their version. Sometimes, these alternate readings concern textual variants because the MSS disagree. This is the case with John 1.18.

The Gospel of John begins with a prologue consisting of 18 verses. The last verse, John 1.18, reads as follows in the New American Standard Bible (NASB), “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.” The New Revised Standard Version translates similarly and provides a footnote regarding the second clause which reads, “Other ancient authorities read *It is an only Son, God, or It is the only Son.*” The first alternate reading in this footnote indicates that some ancient MSS (and perhaps patristic writings that quote this text) have both *huios* (Son) and *theos* (God) in this clause. The second alternate reading indicates that some MSS have only *huios*. This second alternative is reflected in the King James Version (KJV), which reads, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” Thus, the NASB and most modern versions call Jesus “God” in John 1.18, whereas the KJV does not.

Since this textual variance is complex, especially for those who do not know New Testament (NT) Greek, we can only highlight the major points of this issue.

The NRSV’s “only” in John 1.18 translates *monogenes* in the Greek text, whereas the other two versions render it “only begotten,” which is a traditional translation that goes back to church father Jerome in his Latin Vulgate (*unigenitus*). Many scholars rightly accuse him of not being objective in doing so, alleging that he did it to support the orthodox doctrine of eternal generation and thereby oppose Arianism.

C.S. Lewis reflects this traditional translation, and therefore the notion of eternal generation, in his popular book *Mere Christianity*. As did church fathers, he reasons metaphysically by saying, “What God begets is God; just as what man begets is man.” The fallacy of this reasoning is that God is not a physical being.

Monogenes does not mean “only begotten,” but literally “one-of-a-kind.” There was a Greek word for “only begotten,” which was *monogenetos*. When *monogenes* appears in the NT with *huios*—in John 3.16, 18; 1 John 4.9—it means “one-of-a-kind Son.”

The following reasons support *monogenes theos* as the authentic text in John 1.18:

1. *Theos* has superior attestation in all three classes of witnesses: Greek MSS, patristic writings, and ancient Bible versions.
2. *Theos* is the more difficult reading. A principle of textual criticism is that the more difficult, complex, or harsh variant is likely the original, since scribes more likely supplanted *theos* with *huios* to achieve greater simplicity and smoothness.
3. *Theos* is the more suitable climax to the prologue by corresponding to John 1.1c: “and the Word was God.” But this traditional translation of this clause is questionable.

The following reasons deny that *monogenes theos* is the correct text in John 1.18:

1. Manuscript (MS) attestation for *monogenes theos* is mostly in only one of the five MS families—Alexandrian—but *ho monogenes huios* is widespread in all MS families.
2. During the ante-Nicene era, Alexandria, Egypt, was the center in the Roman Empire of belief that Jesus was fully God. Consequently, non-professional scribes living in Alexandria may have purposely changed *huios* to *theos* due to their Christology.
3. The visible Jesus being God is incompatible with no human ever seeing God.
4. *Monogenes theos* does not appear anywhere else in the entire NT.
5. *Monogenes theos* “in the bosom of the Father” is strange and nowhere else in the NT.
6. *Monogenes theos* is too developed as a theological concept to occur this early.
7. *Monogenes theos* is incompatible with the purpose of this gospel (John 20.31).
Reasons for *ho monogenes huios* being correct in John 1.18 are as follows:
 1. *Monogenes huios* conforms to Johannine usage (John 3.16, 18; 1 John 4.9).
 2. *Theos* is likely a scribal error due to the similarity in abbreviations of it and *huios*.
 3. A scribe could mistakenly have substituted *theos* for *huios* due to the immediately preceding proximity of *theou*.
 4. Being “in the bosom of the Father” is a Semitic idiom reflecting the child-father relationship, suggesting *huios*. The Son in the Father links to the repeated Father-Son motif and their mutual indwelling (John 10.38; 14.10-11, 20).
 5. A corollary Johannine theme is that the Son declares, explains, or makes the Father known by speaking and acting on his behalf (John 3.11-13; 5.19; 14.9-11; 15.15).

The three external witnesses and modern scholarship clearly favor *monogenes theos* (“[the] only God”) as the original text in John 1.18, in which Jesus is called “God.” On the other hand, modern English versions and the internal evidence of this gospel support *ho monogenes huios* (“the only Son”), in which Jesus is not called “God.”

In conclusion, the arguments are about evenly divided for either variant. But the following point is decisive: if John 1.1c, 5.18, 10.30-38, and 20.28 are interpreted as not calling Jesus *theos* (“God”), then John 1.18 cannot be linked to any corresponding text in this gospel. And linkage is the prologue’s purpose. Since *ho monogenes huios* clearly links to John 3.16 and v. 18, the authentic Greek text of John 1.18 most likely is not *monogenes theos* but *ho monogenes huios*, so that it does not call Jesus “God.”