

Dear Mr. James Ayars, minister of the SDA Church,

I am writing in response to the letter that you wrote disputing the meaning of the Greek word “monogenes” as it appeared in a letter written by Mr. Terry Hill. You have not received a letter from me before, so please allow me to introduce myself.

My name is Harry Foundalis, and our common acquaintance, Mr. Hill, has been writing to me since 2017, asking my help in translating various excerpts from the New Testament as it appears in its original language, Ancient (Koine) Greek. I happen to be educated in Classic Greek, and because my native language is Modern Greek, I am in a position to read fluently and understand excellently the New Testament, the Septuagint, or any other text written in Koine Greek. I can also read, with an occasional help from a dictionary, Herodotus (4th C. BC). When it comes to more “academic” texts, like those of Aristotle or Plato (also 4th C. BC), the use of a dictionary becomes a necessity for me. Going further back in time, to the poems of Homer or Hesiod (8th – 7th C. BC — which are relevant in what follows), my understanding without a dictionary is akin to a modern native English speaker’s understanding of Chaucer. It is worth noting that there is not a single extant Greek text, no matter how ancient, which is as linguistically distant from Modern Greek as the poem “Beowulf” is from Modern English.

I also have a double Ph.D. in computer science and cognitive science. Although these two disciplines might appear unrelated to the study of ancient texts, actually they are not. On one hand, through computer science I have developed unique tools to analyze texts of the ancestor language of my own native one, including the New Testament. On the other hand, cognitive science includes linguistics as one of its foundational disciplines; and linguistics, as you will soon realize, is very relevant in the discussion that follows. Every student of cognitive science, at least in the U.S. where I received my tertiary education, is required to complete a number of prerequisite courses in linguistics; and I did more than just passing courses: I wrote a paper, published in a respectable linguistics-related academic forum, that is still regularly referenced by linguists.

The above paragraphs describe roughly my educational background, at least the part of it that is relevant in our discussion. I should also add that I am not a believer but an atheist. This, in my experience, at first causes a negative reaction to believers. It is part of human nature to show reticence and a feeling of rejection to the “outsider” who is “not of our community – not one of us”. But actually, the fact that I am an atheist *adds value* to my response, which you are about to read. For, as an atheist, I am guaranteed to lack a religious agenda, which otherwise I could be accused of trying to impose. I am totally indifferent to religious dogmas, and look at words from a purely linguistic perspective, having zero interest in what the implications might be for this or that religious belief. This is actually the reason why Mr. Hill, time and again, has asked for my help. He wants *objective* translations, free from preconceived ideas that might bias the translator.

I shall soon proceed to examine the evidence that will shed some light on the meaning of the word “monogenes” (μονογενής) in both Ancient Greek and its translations into Latin. But first I feel I must put forth something like “the rules of the game”:

Notice please that when we examine evidence in science (contrary to religion), *we never ever end up with absolute certainties*. We do not form “dogmas”. This is *absolutely forbidden* in science, and is a consequence of scientific theories relying on data. For, if we formulate a theory today (such as that “monogenes” means “X”), and new evidence arrives tomorrow that contradicts our current theory (such as that ancient author A tells us explicitly that “monogenes” means “Y” in his native language), then *we must reject our current theory* and create a new one (perhaps a modification, an enhanced version of our former theory). Religious people might see this as a weakness of science, because — they think — nothing is certain in the minds of scientists; there is no hard and immovable belief upon which to rely and feel “intellectually safe”. And yet, this is precisely the *strong point* of science, and the reason why today we rely heavily on it in our everyday lives: because it causes scientific theories to be flexible, adaptable to an ever-changing, evolving, and complex reality. The physical world is changing, evolving all the time; that is why our tool for understanding it, i.e., science, must also be flexible and evolving.¹

Notice also that the issue: “what ‘monogenes’ meant in Ancient Greek” *belongs squarely to the physical world*. It is **not** a matter of theology! You, the reader, being a religious person, might see some theological consequences if the word meant X or Y. But the word itself meant *something* to the ancient speaker of Greek, and that something is a definite *fact*, scientifically investigable by evidence. We must separate the fact of what the word meant from the reactions it causes to us if we have this or that religious worldview. (And, as I stated earlier, to me it causes zero reactions because I lack a religious worldview.)

Last, but not least, among the “rules of the game” is that the evidence might sometimes contradict our preconceived ideas. So be it. If we play by the rules of science, *we must be prepared to be disappointed sometimes* with what we discover. If what we discover makes us sad, we don’t turn a blind eye to the discovery, pretending it does not exist because it doesn’t suit us. We take a deep breath, maybe drink some tea with soothing effects, and move on in our lives with the new discovery in mind (always with a less-than-100% certainty regarding it). And if the discovered thing hurts our arrogance, may I remind you that arrogance is a vice that your religion is adamantly against — and I wholeheartedly congratulate your religion on that aspect, especially when I compare it with other ones. That’s why, as scientists, we learn to be *humble*: because often, upon further investigation, what we believed to be true turns out to be wrong.

I apologize for the length of my introduction, but I believe it was necessary because we come from entirely different educational upbringings and backgrounds. Without further ado, I shall now proceed to examine the evidence for the meaning of “monogenes” in Ancient Greek, also its translations into Latin. From now on, unless I qualify the word with the adjective “Modern”, whenever I say “Greek” I shall mean “Ancient Greek”.

¹ In our defense, I should add that our beliefs are not eternally changing from X to Y, and back to X or even to Z, without pattern. There are things for which we have *nearly-100%* certainties, such as that if I let go of a pen that I hold in my hand, here on Earth, it will move downward, will not poke my eye. For other things we have an inferior certainty; say, 95%; such as that there is no significant amount of water on the Moon. In general, we have *degrees of certainty*, which sometimes reach very high values — but *never* 100%.

1. Greek

1.1 Appearances of “monogenes” in Greek Texts

Let us start by being *agnostic* about the meaning of “monogenes” in Greek. That is, let us rid ourselves of every preconception that we might have about the meaning of this word, examine the Greek texts that include it, and then try to derive its meaning from the context each time the word is used. In other words, I am asking you to adopt the scientific attitude: *no theories before the data is examined*. Note please that the previous suggestion applies to me, too: I have to make an effort to rid myself of the meaning of “monogenes” in Modern Greek where it means “only-begotten” — I can assure you of this as a native speaker. It is a well-known fact in linguistics that words, over the centuries as language evolves, may change their meaning. For all I know, this word (monogenes) might be one of them. It may have changed its meaning in the course of time as my ancestor language has evolved to my present native one. So let’s examine the evidence.

1.1.1 Hesiod (8th – 7th C. BC)

Hesiod uses the word “monogenes” twice in his “*Theogony*”, the poem that describes the origin of the Greek gods, from which many of the stories of ancient Greek mythology originate. Note please that the word “theogony” is made of two parts: “theo-” + “-gony”, meaning: “of gods” “birth”. The constituent “-gony” shares a common root with “-genes” that appears in the word that concerns us; more, in the section on etymology (§1.2).

- *Theogony* 426: “οὐδ’ , ὅτι μουνογενῆς, ἦσσαν θεὰ ἔμμορε τιμῆς καὶ γεράων”

My translation: “nor [is it the case that], because she [the goddess Hecate] is an **only** child (mounogenes), does she receive less honor and privileges”

Here, we have two competing possibilities for the meaning of “mounogenes”²: it could mean “only child”, or it could mean “unique”. The second possibility seems implausible: if Hecate was unique (in whatever unknown way), she should receive *more* honor and privileges, not less. In contrast, an only child in ancient Greek culture was not the best thing that a family could hope of having. This is because a possible death of the only child would mean that the family would be left heirless. Back then, this was seen in a negative light. (It was a common attitude in many ancient cultures, including the ancient Jewish one, in which “to multiply” was seen as eminently important.) Thus, Hesiod tells us, *even though* Hecate is an only child, she should not receive less honor.

- *Theogony* 448–449: “οὕτω τοι καὶ μουνογενῆς ἐκ μητρὸς ἐοῦσα / πᾶσι μετ’ ἀθανάτοισι τετίμηται γεράεσσι.”

² It is “mouno-” and not “mono-” because Hesiod (as well as Herodotus) uses the Ionic dialect of Greek. The form “mono-” is in the Attic dialect, of which Koine, the dialect of the N.T., is an offspring.

This is a repetition of the same idea as in #426. It says: “thus, although she is the **only** child of her mother, she has been honored among the immortals with all the privileges.” Nothing new here; the word “although” (τοι καί) gives away the meaning: “only child”.

The word “mounogenes” appears once only in Hesiod’s “Works and Days”:

- *Works and Days* 376–378: “**μουνογενῆς** δὲ πάις εἶη πατρώιον οἶκον / φερβέμεν· ὥς γὰρ πλοῦτος ἀέξεται ἐν μεγάροισιν· / γηραιὸς δὲ θάνοι ἕτερον παῖδ’ ἐγκαταλείπων.”

My translation: “May you have an **only** boy-child to be taking care of your household; / for, in this way the wealth will be increased in your home; / and may you leave a second boy-child behind before you die of old age.”

Here, without any doubt, the translation “unique” for “mounogenes” must be rejected. How would being unique (and in which sense?) help a child increase the wealth of a household? On the contrary, an *only* child (a boy, πάις) would take care of his father’s wealth *without competition from any brothers*. But, true to the idea that a family should not be left heirless, Hesiod suggests to have a second child before a person dies of old age. The contrast between second and first child is another clue that gives away the only possible interpretation for “mounogenes”: “only child”, without siblings; literally, an “only-born”.

1.1.2 Herodotus (4th C. BC)

Herodotus, the “Father of history” (who, in fact, is responsible for the word “history” in most European languages) uses the word “mounogenéa” (accusative of the Ionic form “mounogenéus”) twice in his work:

- *Histories*, Book 2 §79: “ἔφασαν δὲ μιν Αἰγύπτιοι τοῦ πρώτου βασιλεύσαντος Αἰγύπτου παῖδα **μουνογενέα** γενέσθαι, ἀποθανόντα δὲ αὐτὸν ἄνωρον θρήνηοις τούτοις ὑπὸ Αἰγυπτίων τιμηθῆναι [...]”

My translation: “And some Egyptians told me that he [a person called Maneros] was the **only** son of the first king of Egypt, and upon his untimely death he was honored by the Egyptians with these mournful songs [...]”

(Herodotus, here, expresses his astonishment for finding that a certain mournful song was sung in the same way in Egypt as in Greece, Cyprus, Phoenicia, and other places.)

Does it make sense to translate “mounogenéa” as “unique”? Here, as in most other cases, we should note that to call someone “unique” we must have given some specific reason or reasons for which the person is unique. If, for example, I say “I lost my unique guitar”, the person hearing this expects me to explain in which way this was a unique guitar; what property did it have that made it “one of a kind” in the world? Instead, if I say, “I lost my only guitar”, this requires no explanation: I had not two but one guitar, and I lost it. In a similar vein, the above excerpt of Herodotus is understood perfectly if we assume that the first Egyptian king had only one son, whom he lost, and so the Egyptians would sing the

described mournful song in the son's honor. If this was a "unique son", we expect some explanation for why he was unique, which is absent from Herodotus' text.

- *Histories*, Book 7 §221: "[Μεγιστίας], φανερός ἐστι Λεωνίδης ἀποπέμπων, ἵνα μὴ συναπόληται σφι. ὁ δὲ ἀποπεμπόμενος αὐτὸς μὲν οὐκ ἀπέλιπε, τὸν δὲ παῖδα συστρατευόμενον, ἔόντα οἱ **μουνογενέα**, ἀπέπεμψε."

My translation: "[Megistias, a certain Spartan seer], clearly received orders by Leonidas [king of Sparta] to depart, so that he would not die with them [the 300 Spartans, getting ready to fight the Persian army]. And he, although ordered to depart, did not leave; but his son who was a member of the army unit, being an **only son**, he did send away."

Once again, the context allows only the meaning of "only son". For, to say that Megistias had a "unique son" begs the question: why was he unique? On the contrary, Herodotus tells us that Megistias' son was just one of the soldiers of the unit — anything but unique. But because he was an only son (and recalling the ancient Greeks' aversion to the idea that a family should remain heirless), he was released from duty by his father who decided to fight in his son's position.

1.1.3 Euclid (4th C. BC)

Euclid is the one who gave us the "*Elements*", a textbook of geometry (the "Euclidean geometry") that lasted until Einstein's time (for 2,300 years!). In his work, Euclid does not use the word "monogenes", but he does something else that is important for our subject. In mathematics, it is common to claim that a certain mathematical object, or property, is *unique*; it might be the diameter of a circle, a chord, a hypotenuse, a prime number, etc., which is "one of a kind". This is because no other object/property satisfies some given conditions. Indeed, in his Book 10, Euclid uses the word "unique" (actually the adverb "uniquely") in the proof of one of his lemmas³:

- *Elements*, Book 10, Lemma after proposition 41: "Ὅτι δὲ αἱ εἰρημέναι ἄλογοι **μοναχῶς** διαιροῦνται εἰς τὰς εὐθείας, ἐξ ὧν σύγκεινται ποιουσῶν τὰ προκείμενα εἶδη δειξομεν ἤδη προεκθέμενοι λημμάτων τοιοῦτον"

Translation by Richard Fitzpatrick: "We will now demonstrate that the aforementioned, irrational (straight-lines) are **uniquely** divided into the straight-lines of which they are the sum, and which produce the prescribed types, (after) setting forth the following lemma:"

It is beyond any doubt that with the word "monachōs" Euclid means that the given straight lines are divided uniquely, i.e., that their division yields an integer quotient and leaves no remainder.

Why is this excerpt important? For two reasons:

1. It tells us that *there was* a word in Greek to express the concept of "unique": it was the adjective "monachós" (μοναχός, masc.; μοναχή, fem.; μοναχόν, neut.),

³ A "lemma" is a sort of theorem that is used as an auxiliary tool for the proof of a "major" theorem.

from which the adverb “monachōs” (μοναχῶς) is derived. Euclid didn’t tell us that the straight lines are divided “monogenōs” (μονογενῶς), which would be the adverb from “monogenes”.

2. This is the only example among the ones of Classic Greek that is *unrelated to the concept of birth or creation*. We see that when a birth (begetting, procreation, creation) is *not* involved, then the root –gen– (as in “genesis”, “genus”) is absent.

1.1.4 Plato (4th C. BC)

The word “monogenes” appears a few times in the works of Plato, arguably one of the most famous philosophers of all times. Let us examine each one of them.

- *Laws*, Book 3, 691e: “θεὸς εἶναι κηδόμενος ὑμῶν τις, ὃς τὰ μέλλοντα προορῶν, δίδυμον ὑμῖν φυτεύσας τὴν τῶν βασιλέων γένεσιν ἐκ **μονογενοῦς**, εἰς τὸ μέτριον μᾶλλον συνέστειλε.”

My translation: “Watching over you [all] there is some god who, foreseeing the future events, changed the royal ancestry line from **single** to twofold, decreasing the royal power to a more moderate one.”

The context here is not a direct birth-event, but a succession of births yielding an ancestry line. Plato, or rather “an Athenian” who speaks in this dialogue, says that a god must have intervened and changed the royal ancestry line from single to double, thus reducing the power of an otherwise single king. Does it make sense to interpret this appearance of “monogenous” (genitive case of “monogenes”) as “unique”? Clearly not; an ancestry line, unless compared with some other one, is not normally said to be “unique” or “one of a kind”. Here we don’t have a comparison of two ancestry lines but the *bifurcation* of a single one: from a prior single king, some people ended up with two kings, perhaps because of a twin-birth event. (The word δίδυμον means “twin”.) The concept here is one of *birth*. As such, it is appropriate to use the adjective “monogenous” in Greek, meaning “of a single-birth event” in this case.

- *Critias*, 113c–d (Critias speaking): “οὕτω δὴ καὶ τὴν νῆσον Ποσειδῶν τὴν Ἀτλαντίδα λαχὼν ἐκγόνους αὐτοῦ κατώκισεν ἐκ θνητῆς γυναικὸς γεννήσας ἓν τινὶ τόπῳ τοιῶδε τῆς νήσου. πρὸς θαλάττης μὲν, κατὰ δὲ μέσον πάσης πεδίων ἦν, ὃ δὴ πάντων πεδίων κάλλιστον ἀρετῇ τε ἰκανὸν γενέσθαι λέγεται, πρὸς τῷ πεδίῳ δὲ αὖ κατὰ μέσον σταδίου ὡς πεντήκοντα ἀφεςτὸς ἦν ὄρος βραχὺ πάντη. τούτῳ δ’ ἦν ἔνοικος τῶν ἐκεῖ κατὰ ἀρχὰς ἐκ γῆς ἀνδρῶν γεγονότων Εὐήνωρ μὲν ὄνομα, γυναικὶ δὲ συνοικῶν Λευκίππῃ: Κλειτῶ δὲ **μονογενῆ θυγατέρα** ἐγεννησάσθη.”

Translation by Benjamin Jowett: “And Poseidon, receiving for his lot the island of Atlantis, begat children by a mortal woman, and settled them in a part of the island, which I will describe. Looking towards the sea, but in the centre of the whole island, there was a plain which is said to have been the fairest of all plains and very fertile. Near the plain again, and also in the centre of the island at a distance of about fifty stadia, there

was a mountain not very high on any side. In this mountain there dwelt one of the earth born primeval men of that country, whose name was Evenor, and he had a wife named Leucippe, and they had an **only daughter** who was called Cleito.”

We see that Jowett, quite expectedly, uses “only daughter”. The concept is one of birth of a child, Cleito, for whom there is no indication, in any sense, that she was “unique” or “one of a kind”. Rather, she was the only child of Evenor and Leucippe. This, by the way, is an excerpt from the famous story of Atlantis, by which Plato (inadvertently) initiated a legend about a “lost continent” — a legend that has survived to our times.

The word “monogenes” appears twice in Plato’s *Timaeus*, in virtually the same phrasing:

- *Timaeus*, 31b: “ἵνα οὖν τόδε κατὰ τὴν μόνωσιν ὁμοιον ἦ τῷ παντελεῖ ζῳῷ, διὰ ταῦτα οὔτε δύο οὔτ’ ἀπείρους ἐποίησεν ὁ ποιῶν κόσμους, ἀλλ’ εἷς ὅδε **μονογενῆς** οὐρανὸς γεγονὼς ἔστιν καὶ ἔτ’ ἔσται.”

Translation by Benjamin Jowett: “In order then that the world might be solitary, like the perfect animal, the creator made not two worlds or an infinite number of them; but there is and ever will be one **only-begotten** and created heaven.”

- *Timaeus* 92c: “καὶ δὴ καὶ τέλος περὶ τοῦ παντὸς νῦν ἤδη τὸν λόγον ἡμῖν φῶμεν ἔχειν: θνητὰ γὰρ καὶ ἀθάνατα ζῳα λαβὼν καὶ συμπληρωθεὶς ὅδε ὁ κόσμος οὔτω, ζῳον ὀρατὸν τὰ ὀρατὰ περιέχον, εἰκὼν τοῦ νοητοῦ θεὸς αἰσθητός, μέγιστος καὶ ἄριστος κάλλιστός τε καὶ τελεώτατος γέγονεν εἷς οὐρανὸς ὅδε **μονογενῆς** ὢν.”

Translation by Benjamin Jowett: “We may now say that our discourse about the nature of the universe has an end. The world has received animals, mortal and immortal, and is fulfilled with them, and has become a visible animal containing the visible and the sensible God who is the image of the intellectual, the greatest, best, fairest, most perfect and the one **only begotten** heaven.”

Jowett uses “only begotten” because the concept is one of creation. He was a theologian and an Anglican cleric of the 19th C., so he might have been influenced by translations of religious texts in his rendering “monogenes” as “only begotten”. So let us examine the situation without relying on Jowett’s translation:

First, we observe that the author is Plato, the same person who wrote *Critias* and (later) the *Laws* (see earlier excerpts). The same person is expected to have and use the same vocabulary, usually for a lifetime. But we examine the possibility that “monogenes” might have a second meaning; namely, “unique”. To say that the heaven is unique does indeed make some sense: it is one-of-a-kind.⁴ Therefore, *both* interpretations are possible in the above two excerpts. I would say that “only begotten” is *slightly* more plausible, both because this is an event of creation and because we expect Plato to be consistent in the use of his vocabulary.

⁴ Strictly speaking this is not true, as every planet has its own heaven; but the ancients did not possess this knowledge.

1.1.5 The Septuagint (3rd C. BC)

In the Septuagint, there are a number of appearances of “monogenes”. Fortunately, because they are very easy to interpret, they only need commenting on briefly.

- *Judges* 11:34: “Καὶ ἦλθεν Ἰεφθάε εἰς Μασσηφὰ εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἡ θυγάτηρ αὐτοῦ ἐξεπορεύετο εἰς ὑπάντησιν ἐν τυμπάνοις καὶ χοροῖς· καὶ αὕτη ἦν **μονογενής**, οὐκ ἦν αὐτῷ ἕτερος υἱὸς ἢ θυγάτηρ.”

My translation: “And Jephtha came to Massephá near his home, and lo! His daughter came out to meet him [accompanied] by drums and dances; and she was an **only daughter**, he did not have another son or daughter.”

The meaning is made clear by the explanatory phrase: “he did not have another son or daughter”. She was the *only* child. This is called a *disambiguating phrase* (see below).

- *Tobit* 3:15: “καὶ οὐκ ἐμόλυνα τὸ ὄνομά μου οὐδὲ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρός μου ἐν τῇ γῆ τῆς αἰχμαλωσίας μου. **μονογενής** εἰμι τῷ πατρί μου, καὶ οὐχ ὑπάρχει αὐτῷ παιδίον, ὃ κληρονομήσει αὐτόν, οὐδὲ ἀδελφὸς ἐγγύς οὐδὲ ὑπάρχων αὐτῷ υἱός, ἵνα συντηρήσω ἐμαυτὴν αὐτῷ γυναῖκα.”

My translation: “And I did not besmirch my name, nor my father’s name in the land of my captivity. I am my father’s **only daughter**, and he has no child who will inherit him, nor brother of close kin, nor is there a relative of his so that I may maintain myself by him as a woman.”

Clearly, the person speaking (Sara, daughter of Raguel) cannot be saying that she is her father’s “unique” child. This is because in this excerpt, taking into consideration the sentences that follow “monogenes”, we see that they *disambiguate*, explaining very clearly that the sense is one of “only daughter”. (The word “daughter” is implied by the speaker’s gender.)

- *Tobit* 8:17: “εὐλογητὸς εἶ ὅτι ἠλέησας δύο **μονογενεῖς**: ποιήσον αὐτοῖς, δέσποτα, ἔλεος [...].”

My translation: “Blessed are you for you showed mercy to two **only-children**; give them, lord, mercy [...].”

No room for any notion of “uniqueness” here. This is about two children (boys, their gender is revealed by αὐτοῖς). Each was an only child.

- *Psalms* 21:21: “ρῦσαι ἀπὸ ῥομφαίας τὴν ψυχὴν μου, καὶ ἐκ χειρὸς κυνὸς τὴν **μονογενῆ** μου.”

My translation: “save from the spear my soul, and from the hand of dog my **only-begotten** [life?].”

It is not clear what is asked to be saved “from the hand of dog”, but most probably it is the life of the implorer. “My only-given (life) by birth” seems to be the most fitting interpretation. A person calling his life “unique” would be rather odd, unfitting to an implorer, because it borders on arrogance.

- *Psalms 24:16*: “ἐπίβλεψον ἐπ’ ἐμὲ καὶ ἐλέησόν με, ὅτι **μονογενῆς** καὶ πτωχός εἰμι ἐγώ.”

My translation: “Look after me and have mercy on me, for I am an **only-begotten** and a poor [person].”

Here, the interpretation “only-begotten” is compulsory. An implorer asking God to save him because he is “unique” is something conceptually incongruous.

- *Wisdom of Solomon 7:22*: “ἡ γὰρ πάντων τεχνίτις ἐδίδαξέ με σοφία. Ἔστι γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ πνεῦμα νοερόν, ἅγιον, **μονογενές**, πολυμερές, λεπτόν, εὐκίνητον, τρανόν, ἀμόλυντον, σαφές, ἀπήμαντον, φιλάγαθον, ὀξύ, ἀκώλυτον, εὐεργετικόν”

My translation: “for wisdom, the maker of all things, taught me. For there is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy, **unique**, manifold, subtle, mobile, great, pure, clear, invulnerable, good-loving, sharp, irresistible, beneficent”

This is the first instance among the Koine Greek texts where the translation “unique” for “monogenes” seems more fitting. There is no notion here of birth. However, there is the alternative interpretation of “as precious as an only child”. In English, we have to resort to a circumlocution like the previous one for this interpretation; but when I read the text in Greek, I sense the entire mentioned circumlocution with a single word: “monogenes”. Nonetheless, I would say that in this particular context the word “unique” is *slightly* more plausible. **Note**: the Wisdom of Solomon is generally dated to the mid-1st C. BC.⁵

1.1.6 Cornutus (1st C. AD)

Lucius Annaeus Cornutus was a Roman Stoic philosopher. The following phrase appears in his work on Greek Theology:

- “εἷς καὶ **μονογενῆς** ὁ κόσμος ἐστί.”

My translation: “the world is one and **singly-created**”

Although the concept is one of creation, here the meaning “unique, one of a kind” seems quite plausible. However, we should be cautious in every case in which there is the notion of creation. If I, for example, construct an algorithm (as I often do as part of my research in cognitive science), and there is no other algorithm in the world that looks like mine (which, given the complexity of algorithms, is very often the case), I may claim that my algorithm is “monogenes”. What do I mean by that? That it is unique, one of a kind? Or that it is singly-created, a product “born” of my intellect, which has no peer to it, no

⁵ Jennifer Mary Dines, *The Septuagint*. A&C Black, p. 19: “usually assigned to the late first century BCE”.

other algorithm that also came from my mind and looks like “brother” to it? Actually, with “monogenes” I would mean *both*, a *blend* of the two ideas. It is quite possible that users of the word “monogenes”, even 2000 years ago, had the same blend of concepts in their minds when they used the word in the context of creation: a “monogenes” is something created, which has no peer, and is thus unique in its category, but is also “born” from (created by) a creator.

1.1.7 Clement of Rome (1st C. AD)

Clement, when he was the pope of Rome, sent an epistle to the Christians of Corinth. This is just as St. Paul had done earlier. Clement, in his epistle, giving an example of resurrection, discusses the rebirth of the bird called “Phoenix”:

- *1st Epistle to Corinthians*: “1. Ἴδωμεν τὸ παράδοξον σημεῖον τὸ γινόμενον ἐν τοῖς ἀνατολικοῖς τόποις, τουτέστιν τοῖς περὶ τὴν Ἀραβίαν. 2. ὄρνεον γάρ ἐστιν, ὃ προσονομάζεται φοῖνιξ· τοῦτο **μονογενὲς** ὑπάρχον ζῆ ἔτη πεντακόσια, γενόμενόν τε ἤδη πρὸς ἀπόλυσιν τοῦ ἀποθανεῖν αὐτό [...]”

My translation: “1. Let us consider the strange sign that happens in the eastern places, specifically those near Arabia. 2. For there is a vulture, which is called Phoenix; this, **being the only one of its kind** in existence, lives for 500 years, and when it is about to die [...]”

The meaning here is quite clear: the bird Phoenix (a mythological creature) was believed to be “the only one of its kind”. What we call “kind” today was “γένος” in ancient Greek, which passed into Latin as “genus”. Thus, a “mono”–“genus” was one that had a single ancestry line. (Cf. earlier Plato’s *Laws*, Book 3, 691e: “monogenous” = “of a single ancestry line”.) Phoenix was believed to die in flames in a “sepulcher” that it built for itself before dying, and its offspring would come out from the ashes and grow to a new Phoenix — in a never-ending 500-year-long cycle.

A question could be whether “monogenes” here might be translated as “singly born”. But the following word, “hyparchon” (“in existence”), *disambiguates* this meaning. This is because “singly born in existence” does not really make sense, thus this possibility is eliminated.

So we see that “monogenes”, at least sometimes in Greek texts, *can* have the meaning of “unique”, “one of a kind”.

Overall so-far Observations:

1. The most ancient texts use “monogenes” in a single sense: “only child”, “only begotten”.
2. As time goes by, entering the first century before Christ, we encounter uses of “monogenes” that can be interpreted as “one of a kind”, “unique”.

3. Whether the sense is “unique” or “only begotten”, authors seem compelled to *disambiguate* the meaning, adding an extra word or phrase after “monogenes”. This was the case in Clement’s text where the author added the word “hyparchon”. We shall see later that disambiguation is a very important device, present in the most important (for your religious purposes) text: the Nicene Creed.

As well as the above, it is important to maintain a mental sense of *statistics*: meaning, how many times we find “monogenes” to have the first of the above senses, and how many times the second one.

1.1.8 The New Testament (1st C. AD)

Several instances of “monogenes” exist in the N.T., all of which are easy to interpret:

- *Luke 7:12*: “ὡς δὲ ἤγγισε τῇ πύλῃ τῆς πόλεως, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐξεκομίζετο τεθνηκῶς υἱὸς **μονογενῆς** τῇ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ, καὶ αὕτη ἦν χήρα, καὶ ὄχλος τῆς πόλεως ἱκανὸς ἦν σὺν αὐτῇ.”

My translation: “And as soon as He [Christ] reached the gate of the city [Nain], lo! A dead person was brought out, an **only son** of his mother; and she was a widow, and plenty of multitude of the city was with her.”

Little to be said here: “only son” is the only possible interpretation. A “unique son” would sound very strange. It would even lead to asking, “Why was her son unique”? If the idea of “only born” or “only begotten” is removed from “monogenes”, then no explanation is available as to why the son is referred to as unique.

It is interesting, however, to mention at this point a paper produced by the SDA Church, which was brought to my attention by Mr. Hill. It is written by Mr. Ángel Rodríguez, who, according to Mr. Hill, was once the director of your Biblical Research Institute. The paper, commenting on the use of “monogenes” in Luke 7:12, says the following:

“Monogenēs is used to designate the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:12). He is “the only son [monogenēs] of his mother.” At first one could conclude that he is the only begotten son of the widow, but contextually that does not seem to be the case. That piece of information is not provided to establish a genealogical connection between the two, but to describe the desperate situation of this lady. She was already a widow and now she lost her only child; for her there is no other like him. The usage intensifies her pathos and invites those ready to sympathize with her. The same applies to the daughter of Jairus who is described as “his only [monogenēs] daughter” (Luke 8:42) [see next]. She is unique in the family because she is the only daughter and consequently her death would be a great tragedy.” (Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “Christ as Monogenēs: Proper Translation and Theological Significance”)

Firstly, I would like to highlight the contradiction that Mr. Hill pointed out to me in the above excerpt. Its author says that “monogenes” does not mean “only begotten”. He says that this “does not seem to be the case” (line 3). But three lines below that he admits: “now she lost her only child” (line 6). Was he, or was he not an only child?

And secondly, the author twists the meaning of the word “unique”. Having admitted that the lost son was an only child (line 6), he concludes that the son was *unique*. (Ditto for the daughter of Jairus: “She is unique”, line 9.) Well, following this way of thinking, a person who rubs his nose rubs a “unique nose”. We don’t call “unique” every item in our possession of which we have a single instance. For something to be called “unique”, it must be the only item in a “universe” larger than the personal one of its possessor.

But the reason I quoted the above was neither to show the folly of contradictions, nor to merely point out the twisting of the meaning of a word. It was because it offers us a very good justification of the reason for which I stated what I called “the rules of the game” (see page 2). The author of the above starts with the assumption that the son and the daughter are “unique”, because that is what the word “monogenes”, in the author’s religious dogma, *must* mean; otherwise he feels that this particular detail of the theology he has committed himself to is in danger. After all, justifying his particular theology is more important to him than logic and the facts of this world. But this attitude makes him oblivious both to his inconsistency and to his attribution of the false meaning: “every singly-owned item is a unique item” to the word “unique”.

Scientific reasoning does not work that way. We don’t start with the conclusion and then try to squeeze and distort the data so as to match them to our conclusion. We look at the data objectively, without preconceptions, and mark the evidence *both pro and* against whatever theory we might form *after* looking at the data. And we don’t fall into the trap of black-and-white thinking. The meaning of a word can be sometimes this, and other times that. It doesn’t have to be *unique* — in the sense of “only one” — pun not intended.

- *Luke 8:41–42*: “[41] Καὶ ἰδοὺ ἦλθεν ἀνὴρ ᾧ ὄνομα Ἰάειρος, καὶ αὐτὸς ἄρχων τῆς συναγωγῆς ὑπῆρχε· καὶ πεσὼν παρὰ τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Ἰησοῦ παρεκάλει αὐτὸν εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ, [42] ὅτι **θυγάτηρ μονογενῆς** ἦν αὐτῷ ὡς ἐτῶν δώδεκα καὶ αὕτη ἀπέθνησκεν.”

My translation: “[41] And lo, a man whose name was Jairus came, and he was a chief of the synagogue; and falling at Jesus’ feet he was begging him to enter his home, [42] for he had an **only daughter**, up to twelve years of age, and she was dying.”

Again, “only daughter” is the only possibility. I feel I should add that saying, in Greek, “thygater monogenes” (who was dying) causes to me a much stronger feeling of pity for the imploring father than the somewhat dry “only daughter” in English. That though might be simply a consequence of my native language being Modern Greek.

- *Luke 9:38*: “καὶ ἰδοὺ ἀνὴρ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὄχλου ἀνεβόησε λέγων: «Διδάσκαλε, δέομαί σου ἐπίβλεψον ἐπὶ τὸν υἱόν μου, ὅτι **μονογενῆς** μοί ἐστιν.»”

My translation: “And lo, a man among the multitude shouted, saying: ‘Teacher, I implore you, look upon my son, for he is an **only child** to me.’ ”

There is nothing new here: “only son” is the sole option. Notice please how many times we encounter the case of a family losing their only son or daughter, *implying that the*

family would remain heirless — now not in the Greek but in the Jewish culture. This is not said explicitly because it was well known in antiquity that it was an unspeakable tragedy for parents to lose their only son or daughter. Today, these ancient feelings are hard to understand. This is because, in our day and age, it is very uncommon for our children to die before us; but back then, child mortality was high. That is the context in which Abraham’s attempted sacrifice, of his only legitimate son Isaac, was considered astonishing to a much higher degree than can be perceived by us today. *Anyone* (person or deity) sacrificing an only child of a marriage was looked upon with awe.⁶ But note that later, when we examine Hebrews 11:17, we shall see an added element in the meaning of “monogenes” (see p. 14).

- *John* 1:14: “Καὶ ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς **μονογενοῦς** παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας.”

My translation: “And the Word became flesh, and encamped among us, and we observed his glory, glory as of an **only begotten** by a father, full of grace and truth.”

The Greek syntax here gives us a strong indication that the meaning of “**monogenoûs**” is “**only begotten**”.⁷ The reason is the preposition “parà” (παρὰ), corresponding to English “by”. A person can be begotten “by a father”; in Greek: “*parà patrós*”. If the meaning of “monogenoûs” was “unique”, then instead of “parà” we should see another preposition, such as “eis”. Try it: “...glory as of a **unique** by a father” makes as much sense in Greek as it makes in English. In other words, it makes no sense — either in Greek or in English.

A few verses below the previous one, we have another appearance of “monogenes”:

- *John* 1:18: “Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακε πώποτε· ὁ **μονογενῆς** υἱὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς, ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.”

Translation by Robert Young (“Young’s Literal Translation” – YLT): “God no one hath ever seen; the **only begotten** Son, who is on the bosom of the Father — he did declare.”

Again: the interpretation “the **unique** Son” makes very little sense. In fact, it would be bad writing style. This is because the reader would expect an explanation for why that Son is unique — but none is provided.

- *John* 3:16: “οὕτω γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν κόσμον ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν **μονογενῆ** ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται, ἀλλ’ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.”

Translation by Robert Young (YLT): “for God did so love the world, that His Son — the **only begotten** — He gave, that every one who is believing in him may not perish, but may have life age-during.”

⁶ In Greek mythology there is a child-sacrifice case parallel to that of the Abraham–Isaac case: in *The Iliad*, Agamemnon, commander of the Greek fleet, sacrifices Iphigenia, his only daughter, to appease the gods. And — at least according to some versions of the legend — at the last moment Iphigenia is replaced by a deer on the altar by the goddess Artemis.

⁷ “monogenoûs” is the genitive case of nominative “monogenes”.

Recall my comment in *Luke 9:38*: to give an only child for sacrifice (my understanding is that this is what John implies by “He gave”) was looked upon with great awe. The phrase loses its punctuated feeling of awe if understood as: “He gave His unique Son”.

- *John 3:18*: “ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν οὐ κρίνεται· ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων ἤδη κέκριται, ὅτι μὴ πεπίστευκεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ **μονογενοῦς** υἱοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ.”

Translation by Robert Young (YLT): “he who is believing in Him is not judged; but he who is not believing hath been judged already, because he hath not believed in the name of the **only begotten** Son of God.”

Not much to add here, except that it is very improbable that in *John 3:16*, John had the concept of “only begotten” in mind, and then two verses later, in *John 3:18*, switched to “unique”. As a cognitive scientist I would say that such sudden shifts in the meaning of the same word within just two sentences (verses) are rather implausible.

- *Hebrews 11:17–18*: “[17] Πίστει προσενήνοχεν Ἀβραὰμ τὸν Ἰσαὰκ πειραζόμενος, καὶ τὸν **μονογενῆ** προσέφερον ὁ τὰς ἐπαγγελίας ἀναδεξάμενος, [18] πρὸς ὃν ἐλαλήθη ὅτι «ἐν Ἰσαὰκ κληθήσεται σοι σπέρμα»,”

Translation by Robert Young (YLT): “[17] By faith Abraham hath offered up Isaac, being tried, and the **only begotten** he did offer up who did receive the promises, [18] of whom⁸ it was said — ‘In Isaac shall a seed be called to thee;’ ”

In this verse, Paul is commending the faith of Abraham for being willing to obey God by sacrificing his son Isaac. Why though, seeing that Abraham had other sons, does Paul refer to Isaac as Abraham’s “monogenes”, if that meant “only begotten”? This requires knowledge in religion that I lack. The following rationale was offered to me by Mr. Hill:

“When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God described Isaac as Abraham’s ‘only’ son (see *Genesis 22:2* and *22:16*). God knew that Isaac was not Abraham’s only biological son, so He could not have been referring to him as such. It can only be concluded that God recognised Isaac, not Ishmael, as the ‘only’ son through whose seed the world would be blessed (*Genesis 12:1-3, 21:12*). It was through Isaac’s genus (line of descent) that the promise would be fulfilled (*Genesis 17:19-21*). Paul, in *Hebrews 11:17*, was doing the same as did God when He referred to Isaac as Abraham’s ‘only’ son. Paul referred to Isaac as Abraham’s ‘monogenes’ (one and only) son.”

- *1 John 4:9*: “ἐν τούτῳ ἐφανερώθη ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν, ὅτι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν **μονογενῆ** ἀπέσταλκεν ὁ Θεὸς εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα ζήσωμεν δι’ αὐτοῦ.”

Translation by Robert Young (YLT): “In this was manifested the love of God in us, because His Son — the **only begotten** — hath God sent to the world, that we may live through him.”

Here, too, the interpretation “the only begotten” is more plausible than “the unique one”.

⁸ I find that Young’s choice of “of whom” is a poor one. The Greek text says: “to whom”.

1.2 Etymology

The etymology of a word does not always reveal its meaning. It might even be unrelated to it. For example, if we were a non-English speaking people of the future and tried to understand what the word “understand” meant in English ca. 2000 by analyzing its parts, “under” + “stand”, we would have little to no clue. “Monogenes”, however, is not such an extreme case. Its parts, “mono” + “genes” are indeed strongly related to its meaning. Specifically, the prefix “mono-” is trivially easy: it means “single”, “only”, and appears in English loanwords (from Greek), such as “monophonic” (with a single audio channel), “monochromatic” (single-colored, i.e., light of a single frequency), “monogamous” (person married or attached to a single woman), “monopoly” (exclusive control of selling a commodity by a single brand or group), “monotheistic” (of belief in a single god/God), “monologue” (a literary soliloquy), and many more. The prefix “mono-” is thus quite transparent. It is the second part, the suffix “-genes”, that concerns us below.

The suffix “-genes” (in Greek: “-γενής”) consists of two parts:

- the root “-gen-” (“-γεν-”)
- and the ending “-es” (“-ής”)

The role of the ending “-es” is to make the word an adjective in the masculine or feminine gender.

The root “-gen-” is more interesting. It comes from the aorist root of the verb “ginomai” (in its Koine Greek version; its Classic Greek version has an extra gamma: “gignomai”), meaning: “I become” and “I am born to”. For instance, the opening line of Xenophon’s “Anabasis” reads as follows:

- Xenophon’s *Cyrus’ Anabasis*: “Δαρείου καὶ Παρυσάτιδος γίγνονται παῖδες δύο,...”

My translation: “Two children **are born** to Darius and Parysatis,...”

“Gign-” is the present tense root of the word. The root of the aorist (or: simple past) tense is “gen-”. And from the aorist-tense root we get a fair number of words (from Greek, to Latin, to English) associated with the concept of generation, birth, or creation:

- generate, generation (as in creation), generator
- genesis (origin, the coming into being, birth)
- gene (the biological unit by which rebirth is achieved)
- genetic (“of genes”)
- genus (a group of entities born from a common source)
- genocide (systematic extermination of an entire genus of people)
- general (derived from gener-, i.e., “something that creates”)
- generic (descriptive of an entire group; that from which the rest is created)
- genius (having extraordinarily creative power)
- progenitor (a direct ancestor)
- progeny (offspring, born of or derived from someone or something)

All of the above words (with the exception of “genius”) have direct analogues in Greek, spelled in very similar ways, only in the Greek alphabet. Thus, wherever the root “gen-” is present, not only in English but in Greek as well, the meaning is one of generation, birth, and creation.

Let us see now specific examples of how the entire suffix “-genes” is used in Greek words, and what the meaning of those words is. Like “monogenes”, these are all adjectives:

- *homogenes* (ὁμογενής): someone who was born together (“homo-”) with others: “of the same race or family”. Today, this word is used to mean those Greeks who were born outside of Greece (e.g., in the USA, Australia, Russia, or wherever else in the world) but belong to the Greek nation due to their ancestry.
- *heterogenes* (ἑτερογενής): the opposite of homogenes: born of a different (“hetero-”) race or family.
- *eugenes* (εὐγενής): born of noble ancestry, hence: a noble, an aristocrat. This is the origin of the word “eugenics”, the study of hereditary improvement of the human race by controlled selective breeding.
- *agenes* (ἀγενής): the opposite of eugenes: of unknown ancestry, hence: ignoble, rude, crass, impolite, bad-mannered. The “a-” is the negating prefix found in the word “atypical”, corresponding to “in-” or “un-”.
- *endogenes* (ἐνδογενής): someone or something that has been generated from within (“endo-”) some greater whole; endogenous, inherent, intrinsic. A common use in Greek is in “endogenes aitia”, meaning: “intrinsic cause”.
- *engenes* (ἐγγενής): similar to endogenes, it means “intrinsic”; from the preposition “en” = “in”. Again, we can talk of an “engenes aitia”: “intrinsic cause”.
- *thnisigenes* (θνησιγενής): someone or something destined to die (“thnisi-”) no sooner than he/she/it is born. A thnisigenes child is one that is born but has such serious medical problems that he or she cannot hope to avoid death. More often, this word is used metaphorically, e.g., for an agreement: a thnisigenes symphonía (θνησιγενής συμφωνία) is an agreement destined to collapse soon after it is made.
- *diogenes* (διογενής): born/sprung from Zeus. The true root of the word “Zeus” is “Dio-” (e.g., in the genitive case: Dios = of Zeus; a cognate of Theos = God, and of Latin Deus). This adjective was used as a flattering title for kings and princes. This was the origin of the name “Diogenes” (Διογένης).
- *protogenes* (πρωτογενής): born originally, the initially born entity or cause.
- *gegenes* (γηγενής): born in the land (ge-, γῆ = gaea), a native of the land.

Adding to the above list, we could write:

- *monogenes* (μονογενής): born as an only son or daughter, lacking siblings.

We should exercise some caution, however, because as we saw in the excerpts from Greek texts that include the word “monogenes”, it *is* indeed possible to obtain the meaning of “unique, one-of-a-kind”. In this discussion, the role of etymology is to help us understand, without us being native speakers of Greek,⁹ *what concepts come to the mind of a native speaker of Greek*. Specifically, when a fair number of words that contain the suffix “-genes” are all related to the concepts of generation, birth, begetting, or creation, inevitably the mind makes a connection between the suffix and those concepts. That’s how language works. Thus, upon seeing (or hearing) the word “monogenes”, the native speaker of Greek would, *unavoidably* and at a subconscious level, bring to mind the said concepts (birth, etc.). (Such a conclusion can be proven in the discipline of psycholinguistics, in the laboratory, by experimenting on the reactions of people.) Thus, even in the rare instances in which “monogenes” was used with the sense of “unique”, the etymology of this word is guaranteed to bring (subconsciously) to the mind of a native speaker the concepts of birth, generation, and creation. I could cite a long list of references from cognitive science and psycholinguistics to back up that claim, but it is so basic that it is even hard to locate the original articles in the previous century.

1.2.1 A Problem with “Genus”

The English word “genus”, directly transferred from Latin, is a derivative of the Greek “γένος”. Even if we cannot read Greek, we can see that the two words, “genus” and “γένος”, letter for letter directly correspond to each other.¹⁰ This may cause the wrong impression that “γένος” and “genus”, being *cognates*, mean the same thing. This is not quite right. We shall encounter the notion of how cognates can trick us into drawing the wrong conclusions in the section on Latin (§2), but for now let us note the following:

The Greek “γένος” has two main meanings: one is the notion of grammatical gender; but the other one, the more common and only relevant one in our discussion, is the *kinship*. Thus, in Greek, τὸ ἐμὸν γένος means “my kin”, the people of my extended family with whom I share a lot of genes. But English “genus” means: “a class, kind, or group marked by one or more common characteristics” (from Merriam Webster’s Dictionary). That’s not the Greek “γένος”, and I think that is at the crux of a misunderstanding. A “γένος” (besides the grammatical gender) is not just any class/group/kind, but a *set of people* who are relatives of each other. A very telling derivative word is “genocide” (in Greek: “γενοκτονία”). A genocide is the extermination of not just a group of related things but of *people* who are related by blood. The notion of kinship by a sequence of birth events is inherent in “γένος”. Non-native speakers of Greek probably miss this point.

⁹ None of us is a native speaker of Greek, not even the author. I am a native speaker of Modern Greek. When it comes to Ancient Greek, however, I consider myself in a position analogous to a native speaker of Modern English who reads the English of Shakespeare (←Koine Greek) or Chaucer (←Classic Greek).

¹⁰ The Greek ending –ος has always been transferred into Latin as –us.

The lesson that we should draw from this observation is that we must not allow cognates to trick us into drawing wrong conclusions regarding their meanings. We shall see how important this observation is in the very next section.

2. Latin

In the letter to which I am responding, it was mentioned that Latin translations of the word “monogenes” in *The Apostles’ Creed*, from 391 and beyond, used mostly the word “unicum”. It was also mentioned (p. 3) that the use of “only begotten”) was essentially a “Semi-Arian compromise” between the heads of the Nicene Council on one hand, and followers of Arius on the other hand, who insisted that Christ was the “first created”. So, in 325 AD — at least according to Mr. Ayars’ letter — it was a “key innovation” (a new idea) at Nicaea to say that Christ was the “only begotten” Son of God.

At this point I must say that Mr. Hill (the direct recipient of Mr. Ayars’ letter) pointed out to me that Mr. Ayars’ above-described claim is, to put it politely, all wrong. This is a theological dispute, or rather a history-related dispute with theological consequences, whereas my expertise is in Greek and linguistics. So I don’t feel qualified to argue for or against such matters. However, for the sake of an impartial presentation, I feel compelled to report what Mr. Hill told me. He supported his claim with references to ancient texts, but I must be very brief, otherwise I will venture off-topic. So, in one paragraph:

Mr. Hill explained that the controversy at the Council at Nicaea in AD 325 had nothing to do with whether Christ was begotten or not. He said that from the beginning of the Christian era, it was the norm of early Christian writers, both Greek and Latin, to speak of Christ as the “only-begotten” of God, also of God the Father as the begetter. Mr. Hill said that in his research into early Christian history, he has found none of the early Christian writers who said that Christ was not begotten (unbegotten) — although he did make clear that his research is ongoing. Essentially, according to Mr. Hill, everyone at Nicaea (Arians included) *agreed that Jesus was begotten*. He says this was not the issue. The issue he says was over whether Christ was eternally (everlastingly) begotten of God, or begotten at a point in eternity — a point that is beyond the human mind to even imagine let alone comprehend. This debate finally resulted in the much-debated “homoousion” (ὁμοούσιον) belief (the “consubstantial” belief) being accepted by the majority of bishops. Mr. Hill says that it was this belief — the consubstantial belief — that was the innovation (new idea) at Nicaea; not as Mr. Ayars suggests, that Christ was begotten of God. It was because of the adoption, by the majority of bishops, of this consubstantial belief, that Arius and those who had sympathy with his beliefs were eventually declared heretics; although according to Mr. Hill, the idea of “consubstantial” cannot be supported by the Bible. I repeat: this is a dispute of a purely historical and theological nature on which I can have no opinion. The reader is kindly asked to request from Mr. Hill to supply the evidence with the references for what I just described. Now, after this parenthetical paragraph, I will have to return to the linguistic issues.

A table with dates, sources, and translations in Latin was given in Mr. Ayars’ letter (pp. 3–5), *parts of which only* (because it spans three pages) I copy below. The phrase of the

Creed in Latin (3rd column) is the one that corresponds to, in English: “And in Christ Jesus, His **monogenes** Son, our Lord”:

Table (abbreviated) of references to translations of “monogenes” in Latin

Date	Source	Text
391	Augustine, Bishop of Hippo	Et in Iesum Christum, Filium eius unicum , Dominum nostrum
b. 397	Ambrose, Bishop of Milan	Et in Iesum Christum, Filium eius unicum , Dominum nostrum
c. 404	Tyrannius Rufinus, Priest of Aquileia	et in Christum Iesum filium eius unicum , dominum nostrum
c. 404	Tyrannius Rufinus, Priest of Aquileia	Et in Christo Iesu, unico Filio eius, Domino nostro
c. 460	Faustus, Bishop of Riez	Credo et en Iesum Christum, Filium eius unigenitum , Dominum nostrum
c. 532	Fulgens, Bishop of Ruspen	Credo et in Iesum Christum, Filium eius unicum , Dominum nostrum
c. 685	Antiphonal Benchorene, Bangor, Ireland	Credo et in Ihesum Christum Filium eius unicum , dominum nostrum, Deum omnipotentem
7 th C.	Ancient Missal	Credo et in Iesu Christo, Filium eius unigenitum sempiternum
8 th C.	Swainson Codex	Et in Iesum Christum, Filium eius unicum , Dominum nostrum
10 th C.	Old Roman Order	et in Iesum Christum, Filium eius unicum , Dominum nostrum
13 th C.	Psalter of Pope Gregory	et in Iesum Christum, Filium eius unicum , Dominum nostrum
16 th C.	Council of Trent	et in Iesum Christum, Filium eius unicum , Dominum nostrum

From the preponderance of the translations of “monogenes” as “unicum” (accusative of “unicus”), rather than as “unigenitum”, we are urged to conclude that rather than “only begotten”, the correct translation was “unique”. Specifically, in the letter it is said: “There are thirty-six examples here, [...] Of these, all but four of the Latin versions used the word UNICUS (‘unique’) instead of UNIGENITUS (‘only begotten’).”

And yet, the idea that the Latin word “unicus” meant exactly what we mean in English by “unique” is a misunderstanding, the origin of which is the almost farcical tricks that cognates can play on us.¹¹

Latin “unicus” and English “unique” are *cognates*; which means that they are related in origin, having a common source. (In this case, it is the Latin word.) But *they are not identical in meaning*. Specifically, whereas the English “unique”, as we all very well know, has the meaning of “the only one of its kind” and “without an equal, unparalleled”, the Latin “unicus” also had the meaning of “sole, only”, which is not the same as “unique”. For example, an “only son” is not necessarily a “unique son”.

We may consult Latin-to-English dictionaries to verify that this is the case. For example:

- Here is an online one: <https://dictzone.com/latin-english-dictionary/unicus> where we see “sole” as one of the senses of “unicus”.
- Here is another one: <https://www.wordhippo.com/what-is/the-meaning-of/latin-word-73cbddced3b61a94d5ed447b153c4a4e88a52f93.html> where we see “only” as the first and most important sense of “unicus”.

But there is further evidence from modern languages.

Latin is a “dead language” (i.e., lacking native speakers), but it left several descendant languages that survive to our times. Let us take the phrase “my **only** son” and translate it in five major descendant languages of Latin; namely: French, Italian, Spanish, Catalan, and Portuguese.

English	my only son
French	mon fils unique
Italian	il mio unico figlio
Spanish	mi único hijo
Catalan	el meu únic fill
Portuguese	meu único filho

(Note: we get identical translations if we use “sole” instead of “only”.) If native speakers are unavailable, one may try the above, for example, in Google Translate™. The author verified the above with native speakers in Spanish (his wife) and Portuguese.

One wonders: how can it be that *five major descendant languages* of Latin use variations of the root “unic-” to express the sense of “only”, “sole”, whereas supposedly Latin itself did *not* include this sense?

¹¹ For example, in Spanish, “actual” means “current”. In German, “rot” means “red”. And in Modern Greek, “pathetic” means “passionate”, “graphic” means “picturesque”, and a “sycophant” is a “slanderer”.

Given that I have a native speaker of Spanish next to me almost all of the time, namely my dear wife, I took advantage of this fact and asked her what she understands by the Spanish version of the Nicene Creed (the “Credo”, in Spanish), at the sentence that concerns us here:

- *English*: I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *monogenes* Son of God
- *Spanish*: Creo en un solo Señor Jesucristo, Hijo *único* de Dios

Upon asking her what she understands by the phrase “Hijo *único* de Dios”, my wife (a Catholic in religion) replied what was plainly obvious to her: that she believes “in a single Jesus Christ, who is the **only** Son of God.” She assured me that all native speakers of Spanish understand the same thing — naturally; they know their language.

And I suppose that over one billion people in the world, speakers of Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, etc., would agree with her. They believe that Jesus Christ is the **only** Son of God. How could it happen that, if the word “unicus” in Latin had *only* the sense of “unique”, it ended up with the sense of “only” in all its descendant languages?

The only reasonable explanation is that “unicus” already had the sense of “only” in Latin; and that it inherited that sense in all its descendant languages.¹² Therefore, the phrase “Filius eius unicus” meant: “His only Son”. Clearly, an “only son” is a very different concept from a “unique son”.

But the deeper question concerns the notion of “begotten”. Does the Nicene Creed, in its original Greek wording, say simply “His only Son”, or “His only-begotten Son”?

The notion of *disambiguation*, mentioned earlier, comes to clarify the answer for us.

3. Disambiguation in the Nicene Creed

The original Nicene Creed of 325 AD, which I happen to know in Greek by heart,¹³ reads as follows in its introductory sentences:

Original Greek:	Πιστεύω εἰς ἕνα Θεόν, Πατέρα, Παντοκράτορα, ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς, ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀορατῶν.
My literal translation:	I believe in one God, Father, Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

¹² Another descendant of Latin is Romanian, in which “my only son” is translated as “singurul meu fiu”. The word “singurul” means “only”.

¹³ Although an atheist, I can recite the entire Nicene Creed by heart in its original Greek language. That is because in Greece we are taught to learn it by heart from the elementary-school age — I believe it was Year 5 when I learned it.

Original Greek:	Καὶ εἰς ἓνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ , <u>τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα</u> πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων·
My literal translation:	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the monogenes Son of God, <u>the one begotten from the Father</u> before all ages.
Original Greek:	φῶς ἐκ φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, <u>γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα</u> , ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί, δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο.
My literal translation:	Light from light, true God from true God, <u>begotten, not made</u> , of the same substance with the Father, through whom all was created.

(Please note: I consulted no English translation before writing anything. The above is my English, corresponding to my Greek. I apologize if believers will find that my English does not match exactly what they know as their Creed. However, I did my best in rendering faithfully and *literally* the original Greek wording. Of course, I avoided translating “monogenes”, since that is the crux of the present discussion.)

The parts that I underlined and put in italics are there for *disambiguation*. In other words:

Even if we insist to translate “monogenes” as “only” (and not as “only-begotten”) — as indeed people who speak Spanish, French, etc., do — the underlined phrases do not leave any room for ambiguity. They say very clearly: “the one begotten from the Father”; and: “begotten, not made”. Notice please that although in English you are accustomed to read: “begotten from the Father”, the Greek text says: “**the one** begotten from the Father”. Or, in a more wordy translation: “**him who is** begotten...”. This comes immediately after “monogenes” and is a *disambiguation* of it — a disambiguation that is *lost* in the English translations that I see available. Further, the phrase “begotten, not made” is also there to eliminate any doubts as to the origin of Jesus Christ. That is in the original Greek. How much clearer could the Nicene text make it that “monogenes” does not mean merely “only”, but “only-begotten”?

Why are those phrases put there for disambiguation?

It is because, as we learned from the over-two-dozen excerpts from Greek, by the 1st C. BC, the word “monogenes” had already started acquiring the alternative meaning of “unique”. It did not *switch* to “unique”, but it acquired that parallel meaning, *in addition* to its original one, which was “only-begotten”. It thus became imperative for the Council of Nicaea to clarify the meaning of the word. Phrases such as “the one begotten from the Father” (“τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα”), immediately following “monogenes”, are there to make it clear: “We don’t mean the sense of ‘unique’ for ‘monogenes’, which the hearer might think of, but the sense of ‘only-begotten’ — the original and mainstream sense of this word.” If you were Greek, and could think as a Greek, you would realize immediately that the word “monogenes” requires disambiguation. This is the obvious purpose of the added phrases that I underlined.

In spite of not being a believer, I have received some information about the Nicene Creed. I have read that the Council at Nicaea made an enormous effort to clarify and disambiguate the text, which, indeed, was not well written in its previous version or versions (“The Apostles’ Creed”). And, honestly, if you could read and understand the Nicene Creed in Greek, you would find that it is beautiful; not only crystal-clear and unambiguous, but also beautifully flowing, like a piece of poetry.

I would like to point out to readers who are familiar with English translations of the Nicene Creed that the concept of “begotten” appears *three times* in the Greek text: twice *explicitly*, as the word “begotten” (gennethenta – γεννηθέντα); and once *implicitly*, in the word “monogenes”.

One final question might be: why then, when translating the Greek into Latin, did some translators choose the word “unigenitus”, if the word “unicus” meant “only” in addition to “unique”?

My answer is: most probably for disambiguation. The word “unicus” was ambiguous in Latin. It meant both “unique” and “only”. A few authors, among those listed in the table, felt that “unicus” did not do a good job of translating “monogenes”, which has the sense of birth in it; so, as a more accurate translation of “monogenes”, they chose “unigenitus”.

4. Summary and Conclusions

1. Starting from the earliest Greek literature of the 8th – 7th C. BC, and moving well into the Hellenistic times (3rd – 1st C. BC), we encountered uses of “monogenes” that could mean *only* “only-begotten”. Not a single one of them seems to comply with the interpretation “unique”. Here, it is interesting to quote a demonstrably very incorrect paragraph from the letter to which I am responding:

“MONOGENES [μονογενής] was an ancient Greek word the use of which may be traced from the 6th century B.C. [**wrong: Hesiod lived ca. 8th–7th C. BC**] to modern times. We also have clear, unequivocal evidence that its original meaning truly was ‘unique’ or ‘only one of a kind.’ The first time the meaning of the word changed to ‘only-begotten’ was in the 4th century during the trinitarian controversies” (page 2)

The history of the Greek language does not start at the Trinitarian controversies, nor is the meaning of Greek words determined by them. This was amply demonstrated by the references I offered, which start ~1200 years before the Trinitarian controversies. Thus, I cannot avoid but wonder: if the word “monogenes” can be traced back to the time of Hesiod, where is the supposedly “clear, unequivocal evidence that its original meaning truly was ‘unique’ or ‘only one of a kind’” that escapes my knowledge? I hereby make the rather bold claim that the excerpts I listed from Hesiod, Plato, Herodotus, and the Septuagint *contain all the occurrences of “monogenes” that are known from ancient (BC) Greek literature*. There seem to be no more. If the author of the previous paragraph knows any further texts, I would be happy to examine them. But classicists who have delved

deeply into the matter report no more occurrences of this word. Perhaps the author of the above paragraph assumed, apparently wrongly, that Greek is “all Greek” to the readers of his letter, who would not be in a position to check the veracity of his statements. Well — wrong assumption.

As I already suggested, another wrong claim in the previously quoted paragraph is: “The first time the meaning of the word changed to ‘only-begotten’ was in the 4th century during the trinitarian controversies”. Of course not — quite the contrary: the first time the meaning of “unique” was *added* to the initial one of “only-begotten” seems to have been in the 1st C. BC, as indicated by its occurrence in the book *Wisdom of Solomon*, of the Septuagint. Previous to that time, as it would continue to be so for centuries to follow, “monogenes” was regarded as only-begotten, often denoting an only child (a child without siblings). There is not a single record, prior to the 1st C. BC, indicating that the additional meaning of “unique” was associated with “monogenes”. We must therefore conclude that the statement on page 10 of Mr Ayars’ letter, saying of “monogenes”: “Any notion of ‘onlybegotten’ is foreign to the word prior to the 4th century trinitarian controversies”, has, with an extremely high degree of confidence, been shown to be historically incorrect.

2. We saw the etymology of “monogenes”, which points to “single” + “born, created”; or “begotten” as one would say in more archaic language. We noticed that every single Greek word that contains the suffix “-genes” (“-γενής”) refers to someone or something born or created.

We also noted that the word “genus” does not correspond exactly in meaning with Greek “γένος”. The former may refer to categories of objects, whereas the latter refers always to people who are relatives of each other (with one exception: the grammatical gender).

3. We saw that the Latin word “unicus” did not mean exclusively “unique” — a trap for English speakers created by the fact that the two words are cognates. “Unicus” also meant “only, sole” in Latin, as confirmed by dictionaries. This is the sense in which its derivative words are understood in modern languages that descend from Latin. “Only son” is the way the Nicene Creed is understood to refer to Christ in all the said descendant languages of Latin, spoken by over one billion people in the world today.
4. Finally, we noticed that the wording of the Nicene Creed makes the disambiguation of the word “monogenes” an important part of it. It includes phrases that clarify, beyond any reasonable doubt, what is meant by the word “monogenes”. Specifically, the Creed states explicitly that Jesus Christ is “the one begotten from the Father”, and this immediately follows the word “monogenes”. It also says of Jesus: “born, not created”. It is quite apparent to every person who understands Greek that the authors of the Nicene Creed were painfully aware of the alternative meaning of “unique” for “monogenes” (which, however, was in no way the dominant one), and wanted to disambiguate the Greek adjective.

5. We surmised that the choice of “unigenitus” in Latin translations of the Nicene Creed might be due to a similar effort at disambiguation. “Unicus” had the alternative meaning of “unique” (besides “only, sole”), so some translators into Latin, such as Josephus, might have thought that “unigenitus” is more accurate than “unicus”. This, of course, remains at the level of assumption.

Concerning the previous paragraph, I would also like to add the following question, intimated to me by Mr. Hill after reading this letter: although I explained what “unicus” meant in Latin, the various Creeds (Nicene, Apostles’) were written in Greek, not Latin. Why are the Latin translations important for Mr. Ayars? That was Mr. Hill’s question.

Mr. Hill, I can only explain Mr. Ayars’ adherence to Latin translations by his inability to understand Greek. This also explains his factually wrong claim that the original meaning of “monogenes” “truly” was “unique”. One should (a) always have studied the sources on which one bases any bold claims that one makes, and (b) never underestimate the knowledge and/or intelligence of one’s audience. Also important is: (c) not to fall in the trap of black-and-white thinking, leading one to believe that a word cannot have multiple meanings. But, in my humble opinion, the most important rule is: (d) never form theories before examining the evidence. Ignoring this rule leads one to form *preconceived ideas* that often conflict with reality. Subsequently, sticking to those ideas in spite of evidence to the contrary is interpreted by disinterested parties as a sign of *arrogance*, which — as I mentioned elsewhere — is reproachable not only by Christians, but also by every self-respecting and humble person of this world.

Respectfully,



Harry Foundalis