

# Trinity “Problems” Supplement

By Chris Darland

God’s Trinitarian nature and the Deity of Christ is the subject of controversy among the world’s religions. The false doctrines out there seem to have a point with some of the texts of the Bible. The Bible says that Christ is the *only-begotten*, the *begotten* of God, the *firstborn*, and that Christ says the *Father is greater than Him*. What are we to do with this?

## Christ is the “only-begotten”

The first issue we need to address in discussion of the Trinity is *Jesus Christ being called “the only-begotten.”*

Critics say that this means “that at some point Christ had a beginning,” and therefore cannot be the eternal, uncreated *God*. The Jehovah’s Witness organization teaches that “Jesus is the only Son that God created by Himself” (taken from “*What Does God Require of You*,” lesson 3). “Begotten” or “only-begotten” means a physical birth or creation, according to the Watchtower.

“Only-begotten” translates the Greek word *monogenees*, word #3439 in Strong’s concordance. It is used 5 times in reference to Jesus Christ, all by the apostle John: John 1:14,18; John 3:16,18; 1 John 4:9.

In order to understand what John meant by using the word *monogenees*, we need to start with another instance of Scripture using *monogenees*, “only-begotten,” in the New Testament that emphasizes *something else entirely* than “beginning point.”

Hebrews 11:17 *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son,*

Here, Abraham is said to be offering his “only-begotten” (*monogenees*) son. This passage refers to Genesis 22:

Genesis 22:2 <sup>1</sup>*Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”* <sup>2</sup>*Then He said, “Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”*

Genesis 22:12 *And He said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”*

Genesis 22:16 *and said: "By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—*

In each of these passages in Genesis 22 (as referred to in Hebrews 11), the phrase "your son, your only son" is repeated. Isaac was Abraham's unique, precious son, *but not his only son*: Ishmael was his son too! But Isaac was unique...the son of promise! *Monogenees* doesn't only mean "the only son you have," or "the only son you begot," like we'd assume in English, expressing some sort of "coming into existence." Biblically, *monogenees* means "the unique one; the special one."

Now look at the usage of *monogenees*, "only-begotten," as it relates to Christ:

John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the **monogenees** of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

John 1:18 *No one has seen God at any time. The **monogenees** Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.*

John's emphasis in the first chapter of his Gospel is that *now we are able to see God better*, and that Christ is *uniquely qualified* to show us the Father. The Son radiated and explained the Father...only the unique Son could do that.

John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that He gave His **monogenees** Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

John's emphasis here seems to be on the *uniqueness* of Christ showing the *depth* of the sacrifice and love. God didn't even spare His very unique, special Son to win us to Himself. *What great love!*

John 3:18 *He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the **monogenees** Son of God.*

John's emphasis seems to be on the *depth of the sacrifice and love*, and the *depth of the offense* of not believing in Christ.

1 John 4:9 *In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His **monogenees** Son into the world, that we might live through Him.*

Again, John's emphasis seems to be on the depth of the sacrifice and love.

All the occurrences of this word in relation to Christ are written by John, both in his Gospel and first epistle. In none of these is he trying to emphasize the thought that Christ is a created being (John's Gospel actually has the *strongest* references to Christ's deity!). Instead he is using the *special-ness* and *uniqueness* of Jesus Christ to communicate the Father's love for us in His desire to *communicate* to us, and His desire to *forgive* our sins.

In John 1, the “only-begotten” Son radiated and explained the Father in a way no one else could: only the **unique** Son could do that!

In John 3 and 1 John 4, the unique and only-one-of-His-kind Son is given for the sins of the world, showing the **depths** of God’s love for mankind.

*These references mark out Jesus Christ as uniquely above all earthly and Heavenly beings. They’re not suggestive of a “beginning point in time,” but rather that Jesus is unique, the only one of His kind, the only example of His category. Monogenees, “only-begotten,” does not express a coming into existence, but rather the uniqueness of the person.*

## Christ is the “begotten”

The second problem that some have with the Biblical concept of the Trinity revolves around the word “begotten” in reference to Jesus Christ.

To the critic, the word “begotten” in reference to Jesus Christ indicates that *Jesus Christ had some kind of beginning*. Monotheistic Muslims interpret “begotten” as being a sexual term: to apply this to God, that He “begot” a Son is blasphemy. It is in fact the greatest sin anyone could commit. Furthermore, to the Islamic mind, “begetting” is an act of creation. No way could Allah create another God; create another Uncreated Being.

*“He begetteth not, nor is he begotten. And there is none like unto Him.” Sura 112:3-4*

“Begotten” is Strong’s word #1080 (Greek *gennao*) and is found in 3 passages relating to Jesus Christ:

Hebrews 1:5 *For to which of the angels did He ever say: “You are My Son, today I have begotten You”? And again: “I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son”?*

Hebrews 5:5 *So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him: “You are My Son, today I have begotten You.”*

Acts 13:32-33 <sup>32</sup>*And we declare to you glad tidings--that promise which was made to the fathers. <sup>33</sup>God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: “You are My Son, today I have begotten You.”*

The only passage of the three wherein the word is used that gives us any kind of *time reference* is Acts 13: this “begetting” happened at Christ’s resurrection. The 2 passages in Hebrews just state the “begetting” as a fact. We have to assume that these 3 passages all refer to the same event, or else we have the Father saying this same sentence to Jesus 3 different times.

So, at the resurrection, God the Father said to Jesus Christ, "You are My Son, today I have begotten You."

In none of these passages is Christ's supposed "creation" at issue: these don't talk about Christ "not-being" one minute, then after God's "begetting," Christ *coming into being*. These passages are each talking about Christ entering a new, publicly-announced-and-authenticated role. And this is the same thing happening in Psalms 2, the passage from which Acts 13, Heb 1 & 5 are quoting.

Ps 2:6-8 <sup>6</sup>"Yet I have set My King  
On My holy hill of Zion."  
<sup>7</sup>"I will declare the decree:  
The LORD has said to Me,  
"You are My Son,  
Today I have begotten You.  
<sup>8</sup>Ask of Me, and I will give You  
The nations for Your inheritance,  
And the ends of the earth for Your possession.

Psalms 2:7 and "today I have begotten You" does not speak of *existence* vs. non-existence; from *not-being* then suddenly created as something spectacular. Psalms 2 is all about the resolve of God to crown His King, despite the opposition from the world and its rulers. The King installed by God in Psalms 2:7 is entering a new, publicly-announced-and-authenticated role. The kings of the earth are urged to make their peace with Him, so that His anger doesn't consume them. "This day have I begotten you" does not mean "*this day I'm creating you and you did not exist before.*" It means, "this day I'm publicly putting you in a new, official role as My representative."

This is the idea in Acts 13 and Hebrews 1 & 5 as well:

- Acts 13:32-33 is part of a sermon Paul gave in Pisidian Antioch in a synagogue on the Sabbath (Acts 13:14-41). *You used to listen to Judges (v20), then King Saul (v21), then King David (v22). Now you are to listen to Jesus Christ, Whom God raised from the dead to verify Him as messenger.*
- In Hebrews 1, Christ is the "radiance of God's glory" and the "exact representation of His being" (Heb 1:3), the One through Whom we can know the Father. Christ was this when He was incarnated (John 1:18 "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only ["the Only-Begotten"], who is at the Father's side, has made him known."), but people doubted that all His audacious claims were true. At His resurrection, all doubts should have been laid aside, *because God wouldn't raise a liar from the dead!*

- In Hebrews 5:5, Christ becomes our new High Priest.

Being *publicly announced and authenticated as God's representative* is the idea presented in a number of other passages regarding the resurrection as well.

John 16:8-10 *When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: ...<sup>10</sup> in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; ...*

The resurrection (Christ going to the Father, with us seeing Him no more) was a convicting/convincing of righteousness, *because God wouldn't raise a liar from the dead!* If Christ rose from the dead, it must mean that all those great claims He made about Himself were true!

Romans 1:4 *and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The resurrection was the public declaration that Jesus Christ was the Son of God

***In conclusion, the "begetting" of Christ in Acts 13, and Heb 1 & 5 does not refer to a supposed creation of Jesus Christ, Who supposedly did not exist before this. It refers to Christ being publicly announced and authenticated. This is the idea present in Psalms 2 as well.***

## **Christ is the "firstborn"**

The next issue we need to address in dealing with certain apparent problems with the Trinity is the idea of "firstborn." This word (Strong's #4416) is used in relation to Jesus Christ 5 times: Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15,18; Hebrews 1:6; and Revelation 1:5. Those denying the Trinitarian nature of God and the Deity of Christ will say *"if firstborn relates to Christ, it must imply that he had a beginning in time."*

Certainly the predominant Biblical idea for "firstborn" is obviously *"the first one I birthed,"* or *"my first son."* But there's also the idea that firstborn means, *"the most important to me, and should be to you."* A number of Bible verses express this...

Deuteronomy 21:15-17 <sup>15</sup> *If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons but the firstborn is the son of the wife he does not love,* <sup>16</sup> *when he wills his property to his sons, he must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn, the son of the wife he does not love.* <sup>17</sup> *He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him.*

The *firstborn* was “the first sign of his father’s strength” in an earthly sense. A father might count a certain son of a more favored wife to be his favorite son, and want to give him the *right of the firstborn* (v16). In this sense, that son would be considered the “firstborn,” but the Law didn’t allow this.

This man can’t really go back and make this son the “first one he fathered.” This man actually wanted to honor this son as “the most important” (*in this sense, Isaac also could be considered to be the “firstborn” of Abraham: most important, as well as “unique”*).

Jeremiah 31:7-9 <sup>7</sup> *This is what the LORD says: "Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the **foremost of the nations**. Make your praises heard, and say, 'O LORD, save your people, the remnant of Israel.'* <sup>8</sup> *See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return.* <sup>9</sup> *They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my **firstborn** son.*

Two ideas are being “rhymed” in this poetic piece of prophecy by Jeremiah (Hebrew poetry rhymes ideas, not words): Jacob being the foremost of the nations (v7), and Ephraim being His firstborn (v9). Both refer to Israel. Israel (Ephraim) wasn’t the first nation in existence, but it was the most important, the “foremost of nations.”

In Psalms 89 the writer is praising God for His covenant with David (according to Ryrie). In v19-37 God is speaking, saying what He has done or will do for this king (David) whom He has chosen.

V27: *I also shall make Him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.*

Again we have two ideas being rhymed in this Psalm: “firstborn” and “highest of the kings.” The emphasis here is on status and preeminence. Could God all of a sudden make David the first child He had? No. This must mean something else. “*Firstborn*” in this passage talks of David’s *status* in comparison with the other kings in the earth.

In looking, then, at the five reference to “Christ being the firstborn,” in the NT, we’ll see that two of them are relating to Christ’s resurrection unto a new kind of existence. Three of the references, however, carry the OT idea just examined: that of status and relative importance.

Revelation 1:4-6 <sup>4</sup> *John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne,* <sup>5</sup> *and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,* <sup>6</sup> *and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

This reference (v5) of Christ being the “firstborn” is in relation to Christ being the first one raised from the dead to eternal life (all others that had been resurrected before were destined to die again in that life)

Col 1:15-18 <sup>15</sup>*He is the image of the invisible God, the **firstborn** over all creation. <sup>16</sup>For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the **firstborn** from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*

The statement made here in v15 is about Christ’s *status* compared with the creation: He is *over* all creation. The reference in v18 is again related to Christ being the first One raised from the dead to eternal life (cf Revelation 1:4-6).

Rom 8:28-29 <sup>28</sup>*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the **firstborn** among many brothers.*

Old Testament ideas behind *firstborn* are either “first one I birthed” and/or “the most important one to me.” Is Paul trying to emphasize in Romans 8 the idea that Christ was a created being, not eternal, and not God? This seems to say instead that Christ’s *status* is “the most important one” and *prototype* that all others will look like in some way.

Hebrews 1:6 <sup>6</sup>*And again, when God brings his **firstborn** into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him.”*

Again here in Hebrews, *status* is being emphasized, that Christ is better than all the angels, and deserves their worship (this is a major idea in Hebrews: that *Christ is better* than everything else). Throughout the Bible, God doesn’t let anything be rightfully worshipped but Him alone.

*A side note here:* the phrase “let all God’s angels worship Him” is thought to be a quote from a variant in the Septuagint, either from Deuteronomy 32:43 or Psalms 95:7. The emphasis in Deuteronomy 32: 39 is on the only God, with Whom there is no other: *this* is the one God Who would make atonement for His land and people (32:43), and *this* is the God the angels are commanded to worship (32:43, variant). The writer of Hebrews, in ascribing this to Jesus Christ in 1:6, is actually making a very clear attestation to Christ’s Deity!

***When critics and anti-Trinitarians say that the “firstborn” in reference to Christ implies that Christ had a beginning in time, they are wrong. In light of all the other Biblical data and evidence regarding Christ’s eternity, and not being created, and the deity of Christ, and God existing as a Trinity, as well as the context of verses where a Biblical writer is referring to Jesus Christ as the “firstborn,” it seems that “Jesus being the firstborn” in the New Testament means “the most important,” and thus emphasizes status.***

## **What does it mean when Christ says, “The Father is greater than I”?**

In coming to earth, it's obvious that Christ “laid aside” certain things about His divinity (“independent use” of His inherent glory, omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, etc). He *limited* Himself in some way; “*emptied*” of Philippians 2. In relation to Christ's earthly, incarnate position, the Father was greater.

Francis Beckwith: *“When God became man in Christ Jesus God the Son did not “give up” his divine attributes, but simply took on a human nature and denied his human mind access to his divine mind. Consequently, when he said he did not know something he was speaking truly since in the incarnation he willingly gave up access to omniscience, though he remained omniscient, since God cannot give up any of his attributes and still remain God. Therefore, when Jesus said “the Father is Greater than I” (John 14:28), he was referring to his current incarnate position in relation to the first person of the Trinity. This also counts against Oneness, because to say that the “Father” is greater than “I” is to imply two different persons. If they were the same person, one could not be greater than the other; they would be equal.”*

## **What does it mean that the Holy Spirit “is sent” by the Father and the Son?**

A few passages talk about the Holy Spirit being “sent” by the Father or the Son (John 14:26 (the Father), John 16:7 (the Son)). The critic says this denotes inferiority of the Holy Spirit, and thus He's not Deity, *thus there is no Trinity!*

“Being sent,” though, refers to the relationship of the Father and Son sending the Spirit: it denotes *relationship*, not *inferiority*.