

## Word Magazine # 56: Text Note: John 1:18

### “only begotten Son” or “only God”?

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#### The Issue:

The textual issue here is of Christological significance. Should it read “the only begotten Son [*ho monogenes huios*]” (as in the TR) or “only God [*monogenes theos*]” (as in the modern critical text)?

Compare the KJV and ESV translations:

KJV John 1:18 No man hath seen God at any time; **the only begotten Son**, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared *him*.

ESV John 1:18 No one has ever seen God; **the only God**,<sup>[a]</sup> who is at the Father's side,<sup>[b]</sup> he has made him known.

ESV Footnotes:

- a. John 1:18 Or *the only One, who is God*; some manuscripts *the only Son*
- b. John 1:18 Greek *in the bosom of the Father*

#### External Evidence:

The TR reading [*ho monogenes huios*] is supported by the following Greek mss: Codices A [Alexandrinus], C [Ephraemi, 3<sup>rd</sup> corrector], Kappa, Gamma, Delta, Theta, Psi, family 1, family 13, etc. It is the reading of the Majority Text. With regard to versions it is the reading of the Old Latin, the Curetonian Syriac, and the Harklean Syriac.

The modern critical text reading [*monogenes theos*] is supported by the four Greek mss: p66, Sinaiticus [original hand], Vaticanus, and C [original hand]. Among the versions, it is the reading of the Peshitta Syriac and a marginal reading in the Harklean Syriac.

A variation of the modern critical text reading includes the article: *ho monogenes theos*. This reading is found in three Greek mss: p75, the first corrector of Sinaiticus, and 33.

In his *Commentary*, Metzger notes that with the acquisition of p66 and p75, the modern reading is “notably strengthened” (this and all citations below, p. 198). Even this, however, is a reminder that the TR reading was abandoned in the nineteenth century modern text of Westcott and Hort primarily on the basis of the twin heavyweight uncials Sinaiticus and Vaticanus.

### **Internal Evidence:**

Which reading fits best and makes most sense within the context of John?

Metzger assumes that the “Son” reading “undoubtedly is easier” than “God” here. He suggests it is “the result of scribal assimilation to Jn 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9.”

One wonders, however, why he does not conversely consider that the TR reading may be distinctively Johannine given the usage in John 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9.

With regard to the alternative reading found in p75, Metzger argues that if the article were original then there is no good reason it would have been deleted. He suggests that the anarthous use of *theos* (as in John 1:1) “appears to be more primitive.” He suggests the article was only added as “Son” began to replace “God.”

We should note that in Metzger’s *Commentary*, this reading is given only a {B} reading. It also includes a minority report from Alan Wikgren, one of the five members of the UBS Greek NT committee. Wikgren asserts that the modern text reading is “doubtful” He suggests it “may be a primitive, transcriptional error in the Alexandrian tradition” due to confusion over *nomina sacra* where “Son” would have been abbreviated as *upsilon sigma* and “God” as *theta sigma*. Wikgren says “at least a D decision would be preferable.”

### **Christological concerns:**

This text difference is important due to the use of a Christological title for Jesus. Did the original refer to Jesus as “the only-begotten Son” (as in the TR) or as the “only God” (as in the modern critical text). Note: Some have suggested that the modern critical text could be translated as two terms [the only one, who is God] rather than one [the only God].

One might even suggest that the modern critical text is a valuable reading in support of the deity of Jesus, as he is explicitly described as *theos* (much as defenders of the TR wish to retain the reading “God” in 1 Tim 3:16).

On the other hand, the Majority Text’s tenacious retention of the reading “Son” rather than “God” might well argue for its originality, perhaps indicating that the tradition was so committed to the preservation of the original text that it was unwilling to alter it even for what might seem to be a Christological “improvement.”

Hills, following Burgon, suggests that the modern reading might be traced back to the heretic Valentinus who wanted to deny that the “Son” was the “Word” (see Hills, *The KJV Defended*, pp. 133-134. If this is true the *theos* reading, far from being intended to affirm the deity of Jesus, might have been intended to deny it!

### **Conclusion:**

The traditional reading has ancient and widespread attestation. It was the prevailing reading of the Majority Text. The modern reading has ancient support, but it is limited to a handful of Alexandrian (Egyptian) mss. Wikgren has provided a reasonable transcriptional possibility for the modern reading due to confusion over the *nomina sacra*. The change might also have its roots in Christological controversy the terms of which are not longer clear to us. There is no compelling reason to abandon the confessional text of John 1:18.

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