

## The true meaning of the term μονογενής according to the Coptic rites

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### Abstract:

**Background:** The most well-known usage of the term μονογενής is in the spiritually admired hymn ΟΜΟΝΟΣΕΝΗΣ ΥΙΟΣ ΚΕ ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΩ ΘΕΩ and the most frequently used clergy blessing, 'Ϛ'ϙΑΡΩΟΥΤ 'ΝΞΕ ΠΕϚΜΟΝΟΣΕΝΗΣ 'ΝΨΗΡΙ. It has been noticed that in many of the liturgical books that have been written in Arabic, μονογενής is often translated as 'the only race' *وحيد الجنس*, which does not reflect the essence of the term μονογενής.

**Methods:** We hereby provide biblical, Old Testament and New Testament, liturgical books and common prayer book (Agpya) evidence for the exact meaning of the term μονογενής with its Greek references. These quotations prove that the accurate meaning of the term μονογενής is the Only Begotten which is *الوحيد*.

**Conclusion:** The term μονογενής means the Only Begotten and not race, as translated in Arabic. Such accurate translation has important theological meaning hence should be adhered to.

### French:

**Contexte:** L'utilisation la plus connue du terme μονογενής se trouve dans l'hymne spirituellement admiré ΟΜΟΝΟΣΕΝΗΣ ΥΙΟΣ ΚΕ ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΩ ΘΕΩ, et dans la bénédiction du clergé la plus fréquemment utilisée, 'Ϛ'ϙΑΡΩΟΥΤ 'ΝΞΕ ΠΕϚΜΟΝΟΣΕΝΗΣ 'ΝΨΗΡΙ. Il a été remarqué que dans de nombreux livres liturgiques écrits en arabe, μονογενής est souvent traduit par 'de race unique' *وحيد الجنس*, ce qui ne reflète pas l'essence du terme μονογενής.

**Méthodes:** Nous fournissons ici des preuves bibliques, de l'Ancien Testament et du Nouveau Testament, des livres liturgiques et du livre des prières communes (Agpya) de la signification exacte du terme μονογενής avec ses références grecques. Ces citations prouvent que la signification exacte du terme μονογενής est le Fils Unique, qui est *الوحيد*.

**Conclusion:** Le terme μονογενής signifie le Fils Unique et non la race, comme traduit en arabe. Une telle traduction précise a une signification théologique importante et doit donc être adoptée.

### German:

**Hintergrund:** Die bekannteste Verwendung des Begriffs μονογενής findet sich in der geistlich bewunderten Hymne ΟΜΟΝΟΣΕΝΗΣ ΥΙΟΣ ΚΕ ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΩ ΘΕΩ und dem am häufigsten verwendeten klerikalen Segen 'Ϛ'ϙΑΡΩΟΥΤ 'ΝΞΕ ΠΕϚΜΟΝΟΣΕΝΗΣ 'ΝΨΗΡΙ. Es wurde festgestellt, dass in vielen

liturgischen Büchern, die in arabischer Sprache verfasst wurden, μονογενής oft mit "die einzige Rasse وحيد الجنس" übersetzt wird, was dem Wesen des Begriffs μονογενής nicht gerecht wird.

**Methodik:** Wir liefern hiermit Beweise aus biblischen Texten, liturgischen Bücher und dem gemeinsamen Gebetsbuch (Agpya) für die genaue Bedeutung des Begriffs μονογενής mit seinen griechischen Referenzen. Diese Zitate beweisen, dass die genaue Bedeutung des Begriffs μονογενής der Einziggeborene Sohn ist, الوحيد.

**Schlussfolgerung:** Der Begriff "μονογενής" bedeutet "der Einziggeborene" und nicht "Rasse", wie es im Arabischen heißt. Diese genaue Übersetzung hat eine wichtige theologische Bedeutung und sollte daher beibehalten werden.

### Italian:

**Background:** L'uso più noto del termine μονογενής è nell'apprezzato inno spirituale ΟΜΟΝΟΣΕΝΗΣ ΥΙΟΣ ΚΕ ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΩ ΘΕΩ e nella benedizione del clero più frequentemente usata.

‘ε΄αρωτ ‘νε περμονοσενης ‘νωρη. È stato notato che in molti libri liturgici scritti in lingua araba μονογενής è spesso tradotta in ‘unico nel genere’ وحيد الجنس, il quale non corrisponde all'essenza del termine μονογενής.

**Metodi:** con il presente studio forniamo delle evidenze bibliche, dall'antico e dal nuovo testamento, dai libri liturgici e dal comune libro delle preghiere orarie (Agpya) per il significato preciso del termine μονογενής con i riferimenti in lingua greca. Queste citazioni attestano che il significato accurato del termine μονογενής è Unigenito vale a dire الوحيد.

**Conclusioni:** il termine μονογενής significa Unigenito e non genere, come tradotto in Arabo. Tale traduzione accurata ha un'importante significato teologico e deve essere pertanto adottata.

**Keywords:** μονογενής, Only Begotten, Coptic

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## Introduction

According to Coptic tradition, the most well-known usage of the term μονογενής is in the spiritually admired hymn ΟΜΟΝΟΣΕΝΗΣ ΥΙΟΣ ΚΕ ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΩ ΘΕΩ - O Only begotten Son, the Word of God, which is solemnly chanted during Good Friday prayers and during the ordination/enhronement of the patriarch. The term μονογενής is also mentioned in the most frequently used clergy blessing, ‘ε΄αρωτ ‘νε περμονοσενης ‘νωρη - Blessed is Your Only Begotten Son ...’<sup>1</sup>. The latter shows the absolute

<sup>1</sup> Gerges F. The Holy Euchologion of St Basil. Al Tawfiq Publisher, Cairo 1904, page 26.

significance of the meaning of the term μονογενής in Coptic liturgical services. Therefore, the accurate meaning of the term μονογενής should be known, adhered to, and taught at different levels, from clerical schools to Sunday school.

μονογενής is a Greek word, the exact meaning of which is the only begotten, or, as said in non-literary language, “the only offspring”. It is one of the many Greek words that have been preserved by the Coptic church and that are frequently used because of their meticulous and unique meanings, such as **ΑΣΙΟΣ, ΚΥΡΙΕ ΕΛΕΗΧΟΝ**, ..., etc. Unfortunately, it has been noticed that in many of the liturgical books that have been written in Arabic, μονογενής is often translated as ‘*the only race*’ **وحيد الجنس**, which does not reflect the essence of the term μονογενής. In the Arabic language, race does not apply to individuals and refers to a group of nations. Therefore, a sole individual ‘Lord Jesus’ should not be described as being of one sole or unique race. The term μονογενής is derived from the verb γεννάω, which means beget or engender. Γεννάω—Ghen-nah’-o, or beget is a variation of procreate, and literally means of the father but by extension of the mother and figuratively means to regenerate or to bear. Beget means to be born or to bring forth as well as to conceive, deliver, or to create offspring<sup>2</sup>. A clear biblical example of the use of the Greek and English forms of μονογενής is:

**Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren. Matthew, 1:2-16**

Ο Αβραάμ εγέννησε τον Ισαάκ, ο Ισαάκ εγέννησε τον Ιακώβ, ο Ιακώβ εγέννησε τον Ιούδα και τους αδερφούς αυτού.

It seems that those who take this word to mean “sole kind” or “the one and only” have considered the word μονογενής to consist of two words, μονο, which means one, and γένος, which means race, and have overlooked the fact that the word γένος is derived from the verb γεννάω, which means to give birth to or to beget.

**Biblical references about The Lord Jesus Christ as the only begotten, μονογενοῦς**

1. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. *John 1:14*

Και ο Λόγος σάρξ εγένετο και εσκήνωσεν εν ημίν, και εθεασάμεθα την δόξαν αυτού, δόξαν ως μονογενοῦς παρά πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος και αληθείας.

2. No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared Him. *John 1:18*

Θεόν ουδεὶς εώρακεν πώποτε, μονογενής θεός ο ὢν εις τον κόλπον του πατρός εκείνος εξηγήσατο.

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

Οὕτως γαρ ηγάπησεν ο θεός τον κόσμον ὥστε τον υἱόν αυτού τον μονογενή έδωκεν, ίνα πας ο πιστεύων εις αυτόν μη απολήται αλλά έχη ζωήν αιώνιον.

4. He who believes in Him is not condemned: but he who believes not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. *John 3:18*

Ο πιστεύων εις αυτόν ου κρίνεται, ο δε μη πιστεύων ήδη κέκριται ότι μη πεπιστεύκεν εις το όνομα του μονογενοῦς υιού του θεού.

5. In this was manifested the love of God towards us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. *1 John 4:9*

Εν τούτω εφανερώθη η αγάπη του θεού εν ημίν ότι τον υἱόν αυτού τον μονογενή απεστάλκεν ο θεός εις τον κόσμον ίνα ζήσωμεν δι αυτού.

**μονογενής in the New Testament**

**1. Only son of his mother**

Now when He came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and many people of the city were with her. *Luke 7:12*

<sup>2</sup>

<https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/14075/could-cebcbcfcebdceb3ceb5cebdceacf82-mean-simply-unique/31935#31935>.

Ὡς δε ἤγγισεν την πύλη της πόλεως και ιδού εξεκομίζετο τεθνηκώς υἱός μονογενής τη μητρί αυτού και αυτή την χήρα και ὄχλος της πόλεως ικανός συν αυτή.

### 2. *One only daughter*

For he had one only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she was dying. But as He went, the multitudes thronged Him. *Luke 8:42*

Ὅτι θυγατήρ μονογενής ην αυτό ως ετών δώδεκα και αυτή απέθνησκει εν δε τω υπάγειν αυτόν οι ὄχλοι συνέπιγον αυτόν.

### 3. *For he is my only child*

Suddenly, a man from the multitude cried out, saying, Teacher, I implore You, look on my son: for he is my only child. *Luke 9:38*

Και ιδού ανήρ από του ὄχλου ανεβόησε λέγων, διδάσκαλε, δέομαι σου, επίβλεψον επί τον υἱό μου, ότι μονογενής μοί ἔστι.

### μονογενής in The Old Testament (The old Greek Septuagint Translation)

#### 1. *Your son, Your only. (Isaac, Abraham's only son)*

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, he offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son. *Hebrews 11:17*

Πίστει προσενήνοχεν Αβραάμ τον Ισαάκ πειραζόμενος, και τον μονογενή προσέφερεν ὁ τὰς επαγγελίας αναδεξάμενος.

Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you'. *Genesis 22:2*

Και ειπε, Λάβε τώρα τον υἱόν σου τον μονογενή, τον οποίον ηγάπησας, τον Ισαάκ, και υπαγε εις τον τόπον Μόρια και πρόσφερε αυτόν εκεί εις ολοκαύτωμα, επί ενός των ορέων, το οποίον θέλω σοι ειπεί.

The Lord called out to him from the heaven, 'Abraham! Abraham!' 'Here I am' he replied. 'Do not lay a hand on the boy,' he said. 'Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.' *Genesis 22:12*

διότι τώρα εγνώρισα ότι συ φοβείσαι τον Θεόν, επειδή δεν ελυπήθης τον υἱόν σου τον μονογενή δι' εμέ.

#### 2. *Only child, beside her he had neither son nor daughter (Jephthah's daughter)*

And Jephthah came to Mizpah unto his house, and behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances; and she was an only child, beside her he had neither son nor daughter. *Judges 11:34*

Και ήλθεν ο Ιεφθάε εις Μισπά προς τον οἶκον αυτού και ιδού, η θυγάτηρ αυτού εξήρχετο εις συνάντησιν αυτού μετά τυμπάνων και χορών, και αυτή ήτο μονογενής, εκτός αυτής δεν είχε ούτε υἱόν ούτε θυγατέρα.

#### 3. *My darling (From the Book of Psalms)*

Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of dogs. *Psalms 22:20*

Ελευθέρωσον από ρομφαίας την ψυχήν μου την μεμονωμένην μου από δυνάμεως κυνός.

How long, Lord will you look on. Rescue me from their ravages, my precious life from these lions. *Psalms 35:17*

Κύριε, πότε θέλεις ιδεί. Ελευθέρωσον την ψυχήν μου από του ολέθρου αυτών, την μεμονωμένην μου εκ των λεόντων.

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. *Psalms 25:16*

Επίβλεψον επ' εμέ και ελέησόν με, ότι μονογενής και πτωχός ειμί εγώ

*Note: It is noteworthy that the chanter did not say 'For I am from a sole race.'*

From the Book of Acts: 'For in Him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring."' *Acts 17:28*

*Here, it is noticeable that this verse was translated into Coptic as ΔΗΝΗ ΠΕΥΣΕΝΟC. 'We are his offspring', instead of 'we are his own nature.'*

### μονογενής in the official prayers of the Orthodox Church

1. *The Orthodox Creed*: ‘We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only Begotten.’<sup>3</sup>

2. *Thanksgiving prayer*: ‘And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one, by the grace, compassion, and love of humankind, of Your Only Begotten Son.’<sup>4</sup>

#### 3. Agpeya Prayers:

*Matins Prayer*: ‘Through the grace, the compassion, and the love of humankind, of Your Only Begotten Son.’<sup>5</sup>

*The Great Gloria*: ‘God the Father, the Almighty; O Lord, the one and Only Begotten Son.’<sup>6</sup>

*The Sixth Hour Absolution*: ‘You have made the times of the passion of Your Only Begotten Son’ as well as ‘we may stand before the fearful and just throne of Your Only Begotten Son Jesus Christ.’<sup>7</sup>

*The Ninth Hour*: ‘So that when we leave this body today, we will be counted with the worthy worshipers of the sufferings of Your Only Begotten Son.’<sup>8</sup>

*The Twelfth Hour*: ‘By the grace, compassion, and love of humankind, of Your Only Begotten Son.’<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. μονογενής in the Holy Euchologion

O Lord who sent His true light, His only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ the True Word.<sup>10</sup>

O Master, Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son God.<sup>11</sup>

O Master Lord and God, the Father who sent His only Begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

The love of God, and the grace of His Only Begotten Son.<sup>13</sup>

O Lord, this is the command of Your Only Begotten Son.<sup>14</sup>

This is the life-giving Flesh that Your Only Begotten Son.<sup>15</sup>

## Discussion

In view of the above biblical, ecclesiastical, and liturgical sources and references, the accurate translation of the Greek term μονογενής is the ‘Only Begotten’. This description is of a higher order and far from the earthly and limited extent of the commonly used word ‘race’. The term μονογενής describes the unique relationship between the Second Hypostasis and God the Father, which, to a great extent, is beyond our human ability to fully comprehend. Hence, we are not entitled to degrade or lessen such unparalleled uniqueness to our materialistic understanding through the use of limited human classifications of nature on earth and purely based on acknowledged scientific basic principles.

It is universally understood that the translation of the *Holy Bible* was critically achieved by a stipulated linguistic institution. Those who have revised the translations of the bible have been very careful in the terms that they use in different languages in order to keep the original meaning of the scripture without causing slight deviations in its meaning. In doing so, they follow the example of Simeon the Elder and his translation of the word ‘virgin’ in the book of Isaiah when he considered changing it to ‘woman’. He was then told in a dream not to change it and that he would live until he witnessed such miracle, which he did when the baby Jesus was carried to the altar. He described the Born Baby as ‘The Lord’s salvation’ when he said ‘my eyes have witnessed Your salvation which You prepared for all nations’, *Luke 2 :30*

Based on this biblical experience, the fathers of the church take the matter of translation very seriously because of their unique theological conception. The examples from the ecclesiastical and liturgical books

<sup>3</sup> Gerges F. The Holy Euchologion of St Basil. Al Tawfiq Publisher, Cairo 1904, page 137.

<sup>4</sup> Gerges F. The Holy Euchologion of St Basil. Al Tawfiq Publisher, Cairo 1904, page 38.

<sup>5</sup> Nadian JB. (Fr).Book of Agpeya. Page 12.

<sup>6</sup> Nadian JB. (Fr).Book of Agpeya. page 49.

<sup>7</sup> Nadian JB. (Fr).Book of Agpeya. Page 117.

<sup>8</sup> Nadian JB. (Fr).Book of Agpeya. Page 154.

<sup>9</sup> Nadian JB. (Fr).Book of Agpeya. Page 196.

<sup>10</sup> Farag Gerges. The Holy Euchologion of St Basil. Al Tawfiq Publisher, Cairo 1904, page 313.

<sup>11</sup> Euchologion, St Basil Liturgy according to the Script Vatican Coptic 17 (1288), page 10.

<sup>12</sup> Gerges F. The Holy Euchologion of St Basil. Al Tawfiq Publisher, Cairo 1904, page 317.

<sup>13</sup> Gerges F. The Holy Euchologion of St Basil. Al Tawfiq Publisher, Cairo 1904, page 56.

<sup>14</sup> Gerges F. The Holy Euchologion of St Basil. Al Tawfiq Publisher, Cairo 1904, page 219.

<sup>15</sup> Gerges F. The Holy Euchologion of St Basil. Al Tawfiq Publisher, Cairo 1904, page 275.

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above illustrate that approach. In fact, searching the liturgical Coptic prayers of the seven sacraments clearly demonstrates the correct meaning of the term *μονογενής* in more than one prayer in each sacrament liturgy. Despite such a wealth of Orthodox heritage, some of the existing songs that have found their way into the praise books, particularly those written in Arabic by uncertified authors, may carry questionable material that needs to be critically reviewed in order to preserve the precious heritage of the Coptic church. Perhaps this is a gentle plea to the Holy Synod of the Coptic church to consider investigating this matter, to preserve the accurate, and to correct and remove these inaccuracies, lest our heritage be criticised externally from non-members of the church or, if not, internally from the coming enlightened generations.

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<sup>16</sup> Henein, M.; Takla, H.N.; Azer, S. TEACH-JCS Policy. *TEACH J. Christ. Stud.* 2021, 1, page 1.