

TEXTUAL CRITICISM OF JOHN 1:18

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May 15, 2012

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Comparing Translations

NKJV: “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

NIV: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”

NASB: “No one has seen God at any time; God the only Son, who is in the arms of the Father, He has explained Him.”

ESV: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.”

My translation from UBS5

“No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, the one who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed Him.”

Variant readings and implications

1. μονογενὴς θεός- Either refers to the “unique God” or the “only begotten God,” depending on how μονογενὴς is translated. This reading implies that John is writing about either the “one and only God” or the “only begotten God.” Whereas the former would not be unique to the Old Testament ideas of there being only one God, the latter would be an oxymoron since it would refer to a “begotten God.” However, since it refers to Jesus, it could refer to the only God who was born as a human being. This reading stresses Jesus’ deity and eternity.
2. ὁ μονογενὴς θεός- Either refers to “the unique God” or “the only begotten God.” This reading carries the same theological implications as number one above. This reading also stresses Jesus’ deity and eternity.
3. ὁ μονογενὴς υἱός- Either refers to “the unique son” or “the only begotten son.” This reading would refer to Jesus’ humanity and/ or submission to the Father as opposed to the others. If “only begotten” is chosen, then it would imply that Jesus in some way had a beginning.
4. μονογενὴς υἱός θεοῦ- Either refers to the “unique Son of God” or “only begotten son of God.” This reading has the same implications as number four above but merely specifies “of God.”

5. ὁ μονογενής- Either refers to “the unique one” or “the only begotten one.” This reading implies that John is referring to Jesus as simply “the one and only” or “the one and only one.” This would also stress Jesus’ deity and eternity. This reading would best explain the origin of each of the other variations since θεὸς or υἱός could have been added to the end if this is the original reading.

Assessing the external evidence

	μονογενὴς θεὸς	ὁ μονογενὴς θεὸς	ὁ μονογενὴς υἱός	μονογενὴς υἱός θεου	ὁ μονογενὴς
<u>Alexandrian</u>	P ⁶⁶ Ⲛ B C L syr ^p , h ^{meg}	P ⁷⁵ 33 cop ^{bo}	C ³ Δ Ψ 579 892		
<u>Western</u>	geo ²		syr ^c	it ^q	vg ^{ms}
<u>Caesarean</u>			Θ f ^d f ¹³ syr ^{pal} arm geo ¹ 28 565 700		
<u>Byzantine</u>			A W ^{supp} 157 180 205 1006 1010 1071 1241 1243 1292 1342 1505 Byz [E F G H]		

Based on the external evidence, the reading ὁ μονογενὴς υἱός has vastly more textual support than any of the other readings. Some of this support is from earlier Alexandrian texts, but the majority is from the later Byzantine textual family. Collectively, both μονογενὴς θεὸς and ὁ μονογενὴς θεὸς beat out the aforementioned reading according to the earliest and most reliable textual evidence. If the earlier manuscripts are given more weight, then it appears that μονογενὴς θεὸς is most likely the

original reading. If quantity of textual evidence is counted more important than $\acute{\omicron}$ $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$ is original. Probably the first option is correct since earlier manuscript evidence is more likely to be closer to the autograph of John's gospel than later manuscript traditions.

Assessing the internal evidence

At first glance, the reading $\acute{\omicron}$ $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$ would certainly seem to be intrinsically Johannine. Compare $\tau\omicron\nu\ \upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu\ \tau\omicron\nu\ \mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta$ and $\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma\ \upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\upsilon\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ in the Gospel of John 3:16, 18 respectively and $\tau\omicron\nu\ \upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \tau\omicron\nu\ \mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta$ in 1 John 4:9. In these passages it is evident that $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$ usually occurs with $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ in John's writings. However, in John 1:14 the word $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ occurs without $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$, at least showing that $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ can occur without $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$. However, the word is still employed in connection with the concept of sonship, as evidenced by the phrase $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma\ \pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}\ \Pi\alpha\tau\rho\acute{\varsigma}$. Although it seems compelling on the grounds of similarity with John 3:16, 18 and 1 John 4:9 to assume that $\acute{\omicron}$ $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$ is more Johannine than $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ and therefore probably the original reading, this reading could also be explained as a harmonization. Bruce M. Metzger agrees, regarding it as a "scribal assimilation" (Metzger, 1971, 198). Therefore, it remains impossible to reach such a conclusion conclusively.

According to J. Ramsey Michaels, $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ also has intrinsic relation to its context within the first chapter of John's gospel. In John 1:1 "the Word was with God, and the Word was God," and, according to Michaels, verse 18 echoes this assertion, stating that the "One and Only" ($\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$) is both God himself and "right beside the Father" (Michaels, 2010, 92). This is in contrast to W. Robertson Nicoll who states that all of the internal evidence favors $\acute{\omicron}$ $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$ (Nicoll, 1976, 691). M. Zerwick and M. Grosvenor indicates that the use of $\omicron\upsilon\acute{\nu}$ the participle form of $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\mu\acute{\iota}$, is possibly used atemporally to refer to the eternity of the $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ (Zerwick et al., 2010, 287). If so, it would refer to the one who is the $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ —Jesus—as being eternal and therefore God, agreeing with the more difficult reading $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$.

Final evaluation

Based on the above considerations of both the external and internal evidence, $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ is probably the original reading of John 1:18. This reading best explains both the textual evidence and the origin of the other readings since harmonization with other familiar Johannine passages such as John 3:16, 18 remains a possibility. (The external manuscript evidence for $\acute{\omicron}$ $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ is not sufficient to rule it out as a scribal error.) $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ is favored by more of the earlier Alexandrian manuscripts than $\acute{\omicron}$ $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\eta\varsigma$ $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$, and both the internal textual evidence and Johannine theology are easily consistent with this reading.

Bibliography

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