**Only Begotten Son**

The Bible calls Jesus the “only begotten son” in John 3:16. Theologians have been debating what this means for centuries. Everyone seems to agree that the Greek word used by John is *monogenes* which is translated as begotten but also unique or one of a kind. To say that Jesus is unique and one of a kind is the understatement of all time. Some modern translations have even taken begotten out of the passage in an attempt to make the verse more “understandable”. But no matter how you cut it, there is this Father Son relationship that cannot be avoided.

One might ask, “why, if GOD is monolithic, do the Christians insist on GOD being three persons”. That’s a good question, but if not, then how do we explain GOD’s plan for salvation without a Son and a Holy Spirit. Interestingly, there are at least eight heresies about Christ’s divinity [(1)](https://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/heresies.html) ranging from Sabellianism, which believed that the three persons were just modes of the one God and not distinct persons, to Adoptionism that teaches that Jesus was born as a man and latter divinely adopted by GOD.

But the Bible claims that there is GOD the Father who begat GOD the son. What does that really mean? It certainly implies that the Father came first and that the Son is dependent on the Father for his vary existence, and this is exactly what many, over the years, have erroneously taught.

**Most challenging heresy**

The most significant challenge to Christ’s divinity came in the 4th century with a man named Arius. He came up with idea that the Son is a created being ex nihilo (out of nothing) just like the rest of creation. He supported his position by referring to Proverbs 8:*22* ***“The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works,[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs+8%3A22-31&version=NIV#fen-NIV-16625a)***] before His deeds of old”.***The “me” here is Jesus as the Wisdom of GOD that is also found in 1st Corinthians **1:*24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*.**

None of Arius’ writings have survived other than quotes used by historians or detractors who sought to condemn him. The following quote attributed to Arius is from Socrates of Constantinople who was a Trinitarian historian of the 5th century. *"if the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: and from this it is evident, that there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows, that he [the Son] had his substance from nothing."*

This created a furor in the Church that lasted 80 some years until the Council of Constantinople that was held in 381 (25 years after Arius’ death). Arius’ heresy split the Church and caused decades of back a forth persecution of both Arian adherents and his opponents. The Creed that came out of the 2nd Council was the final pronouncement for the Church and remains so to this day. However, Arianism never completely died out as it still exists with the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Unitarian Universalists and even in Evangelical circles as well [(2).](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/september-web-only/state-of-theology-evangelical-heresy-report-ligonier-survey.html)  Interestingly, there is a pantheon of Arian adherents through the centuries that includes Isaac Newton, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Webster, Rod Serling, Ray Bradbury, Susan B. Anthony and many, many more and there are a number of current theologians who maintain that Jesus was created. It doesn’t seem that Arianism is going away any time soon.

**God and Eternity**

So, what does only begotten son actually mean. First off, if you believe that GOD is eternal, that means that He has no beginning. GOD made that very clear while speaking with Moses in the dessert when He said, “I am the great I am”. He just is; no beginning, no end but “is”. There are, of course, other verses that claim that GOD is eternal; Romans 16:26 and Genesis 21:33 are two examples.

The supposition is clear that GOD is eternal so we could make the following syllogism:

GOD is eternal

GOD is triune and exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Jesus is the Son

Therefore:

Jesus is GOD and he is eternal

So, if Jesus is eternal then he could never have been created. One of the mind-boggling thoughts is to consider the Big Bang AKA start of the universe. It is the reigning theory in modern physics that attempts to explain how the universe came into being. It was a point in time, according to current science, some 14.5 billion years ago. I realize that young earth adherents reject this idea but what I am about to say applies to both a young and old earth.

If there was a “start” of the universe as we know it, then what came before? Christian theology teaches us that GOD is eternal and non-contingent, so he was there at the beginning. Was there even time before creation? According to Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity, time and space are intrinsically linked and one can’t exist without the other, so if there was no creation, how could there be time? Think about it, GOD created the material world out of nothing (Ex Nihilo). How can we even begin to understand this?

Philosophers have been pondering why there is something as opposed to nothing for millennia. Atheists believe that religion came about because man has always wondered about that and has tried to explain why we are here in the first place. I fully get their point. The problem is that they don’t have a better solution. Saying that the universe just is (does this sound familiar?) doesn’t tell us anything about where it came from and how it came into being. **Remember GOD never came into being because he is eternal.**

**Begotten defined**

So, what does it mean to be begotten? Here is a quote from Dr. Allen Ross a professor of the OT and Hebrew.

***2. The “Only Begotten Son” Language.***The second piece of evidence we must examine is the expression “only-begotten.” It is the Greek word “*monogeneis.”*This is not simply “begotten,” for that expression can be applied to all believers, those who have been begotten or born again by the Spirit. This is a unique expression for a unique person, the only-begotten Son of God. The expression appears in John 1:14, 3:16, and 3:18. It would literally mean the “only generated one.” This is the key expression for the doctrine of “the eternal generation of the Son,” meaning, he always was the only begotten Son. The expression does not refer to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, because he is the Son from eternity past.

Begotten implies having the same essence. I have two children and four grandchildren. They are all humans. They are no more nor no less human than I. My children came out of me and my wife, our union created these humans. They were begotten from us; two humans. They are the same essence as we are. So too, is Jesus of the same essence as God the Father. If Jesus is the “only begotten Son” then that makes him very special, but even more so it means he is equally GOD as in “GOD from GOD. Light from light, true GOD from true GOD”. GOD is eternal and is a singular being with three persons; therefore Jesus, the Son, having GOD’s full essence is also eternal and not created.

Getting back to time and space we can see that before creation, regardless of how you view it, our eternal GOD existed. Since eternal GOD means that GOD has never not existed and since we believe that He is three persons, then even if we imagine that the Father somehow came first, which is impossible, it doesn’t make any difference because the Son is eternal as well. If the full GOD is eternal, then Jesus, the Son, is also eternal and being such must have been there at the start as “In the beginning GOD created…” John 1:1. So it is really a circular argument, and an a priori if you will. GOD is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal, how could one come before the other? How could there even be a beginning of GOD’s existence? How could there be a beginning of eternity?

**What the early Church Fathers thought**

The early Christian writers grappled with this problem and here are a few quotes from them commenting on Proverbs 8:22 which is one of the verses used most by the Arians/unitarians

**Athenagoras** (133-190) *says: “That we are not atheists, therefore, seeing that we acknowledge one God, uncreated eternal, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible, illimitable, who is apprehended by the understanding only and the reason, who is encompassed by light, and beauty, and spirit, and power ineffable, by whom the universe has been created through His Logos, and set in order, and kept in being―I have sufficiently demonstrated. [I say “His Logos”], for we acknowledge also a Son of God. Nor let anyone think it ridiculous that God should have a Son. For though the poets, in their fictions, represent the gods as no better than men, our mode of thinking is not the same as theirs, concerning either God the Father or the Son. But the Son of God is the Logos of the Father, in idea and in operation; for after the pattern of Him and by Him were all things made, the Father and the Son being one. And, the Son being in the Father and the Father in the Son, in oneness and power of spirit, the understanding and reason [nous kai logos] of the Father is the Son of God. But if, in your surpassing intelligence, it occurs to you to enquire what is meant by the Son, I will state briefly that He is the first product of the Father, not as having been brought into existence (for from the beginning, God, who is the eternal mind [nous], had the Logos in Himself), being from eternity instinct with Logos [logikos]); but inasmuch as he came forth to be the idea and energizing power of all material things, which lay like a nature without attributes, and an inactive earth, the grosser particles being mixed up with the lighter.”*

Origen a.d. 185-254

*“How, then, can it be asserted that there once was a time when He was not the Son? For that is nothing else than to say that there was once a time when He was not the Truth, nor the Wisdom, nor the Life, although in all these He is judged to be the perfect essence of God the Father; for these things cannot be severed from Him, or even be separated from His essence. And although these qualities are said to be many in understanding, yet in their nature and essence they are one, and in them is the fulness of divinity. Now this expression which we employ—” that there never was a time when He did not exist”—is to be understood with an allowance. For these very words “when” or “never” have a meaning that relates to time, whereas the statements made regarding Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are to be understood as transcending all time, all ages, and all eternity. For it is the Trinity alone which exceeds the comprehension not only of temporal but even of eternal intelligence; while other things which are not included in it are to be measured by times and ages. This Son of God, then, in respect of the Word being God, which was in the beginning with God.*

Just as the Father is not a human father so Jesus is not a human son. GOD uses these terms to give us something to relate to. Begotten Son is simply the creative wisdom from which the Word emanates from all eternity as part of this mysterious and wonderful trinity. All three entities reside in the true GOD head.

**Eusebius** (Died 339) has this to say with regards to Proverbs 8:22

Even if he says that he was created*,”* ***he does not mean this in the sense of passing from non-existence into existence,*** *not that he too, like all the other creatures, was made out of nothing, as some have supposed in error; but rather that he subsists and lives, being before and existing before the creation of the whole world, having been ordained to rule over all things by the Lord, his Father.*

*Therefore, when the Son of God says: “The Lord possessed (ektēsato) me as the beginning of his ways for his works”, he was declaring both his pre-existence and his unique relationship to the Father, and at the same time the value and necessity of his own personal care and control of his Father’s works*.”

**Equal with different roles**

If the Son is equal to God in every way, then why is He called the only begotten son? Why is it that he came to earth in a human body, suffered, died and rose again? It would seem that He is subordinate to God the Father in some way.

The early church father Origen, believed that Christ was the Wisdom of God and that the Logos came from that Wisdom as did all the other names of the Son. He is called the way, the truth and the life; He is the light of the world, He is Emmanuel, God with us, our councilor, our mighty God; He is a King, a lion and a lamb; He is the bread of life and the vine; He is the first born of the dead; He is our redeemer and our propitiation for sin; He is the Son of man, our savior, the high priest, the anointed and the stone the builders rejected; He is conquer, servant, the chosen shaft, the resurrection and the good shepherd; He is the image of the invisible God and word made flesh; He is the alpha and the omega and the great I am; He stands at the door and knocks; He is the second Adam who came to reconcile the world to God. He is all these things and they all come from the wisdom of our eternal God.

Origen concludes. “*The saying then stands, first, "In the beginning was the Logos;" we are to place that full in our view; but the testimonies we cited from the Proverbs led us to place wisdom first, and to think of wisdom as preceding the Word which announces her. We must observe, then, that the Logos is in the beginning, that is, in wisdom, always. Its being in wisdom, which is called the beginning, does not prevent it from being with God and from being God, and it is not simply with God, but is in the beginning, in wisdom, with God. For he goes on: "He was in the beginning with God." He might have said, "He was with God;" but as He was in the beginning, so He was with God in the beginning, and "All things were made by Him," being in the beginning…”*

So, there is a delineation of roles in the Trinity. Clearly, all three (and I’ve hardly mentioned the Holy Spirit) are fully God, but each has a specific function and it appears that the Son is, in some way, subservient to the Father at least in time and space which is the reality in which we live.

**The Jesus fully God and fully man**

If Christ is truly Emmanuel, God with us, then, by definition He must be fully God. If He is not God then His promises cannot be counted on. A mere man will say things then later change his mind, but God is unchangeable, He will never go back on a promise. This, Jesus being fully God, was the dagger in the heart of the Arian heresy. If Jesus was just a man, then our salvation is not assured.

But, our salvation is assured because Jesus is God “He who has seen me, has seen the Father” John 14:9, and this came about due to the miraculous, virgin birth.

When a child is created, it takes both the mother and the father. The mother provides the egg and the father provides the sperm. When they unite, a new being is created. In the case of the conception of Jesus, it was between a temporal, created woman and the eternal, uncreated God. The Word made flesh. It was the point where eternity and time joined together. Every cell in Jesus’ body contains both Mary’s natural, created chromosomes and God’s eternal, supernatural chromosomes. Never before nor since has such a person existed. This was a singularity that happened only once, and this is the birth that we are about to celebrate.

**The Mystery will eventually be explained**

To say that this all is a mystery is a laughable understatement; the mind of God is light years beyond our understanding. We have no idea how he created life out of nothing. We cannot conceive of a God who has always been or what eternity really is. But we are never abandoned as we have *faith which is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen* (Heb. 11:1), and that assurance is, *now we see but a dim reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.* (1 Cor. 13:12).