

ABSTRACT

“The Use of *μονογενής* in Gregory of Nazianzus’s Five Theological Orations”—Gregory of Nazianzus, a pivotal figure in 4th-century Trinitarian theology, significantly influenced the development of Christian doctrine. This article focuses on Gregory’s interpretation of the term *μονογενής* (“only-begotten”) as applied to the Son of God within the Trinitarian framework, particularly as articulated in his Five Theological Orations. The analysis reveals that Gregory employed a literal interpretation of *μονογενής*, meaning “originated” and “offspring,” to describe the Son’s relationship with the Father. This interpretation reflects a broader Greek philosophical view of the divine as existing in a non-temporal, incorporeal realm, which Gregory acknowledges as ultimately mysterious and beyond full human comprehension. This framework, while influential, is not explicitly supported by Scripture. Consequently, this article advocates for a re-evaluation of the *μονογενής* concept based solely on Scripture, challenging the presuppositions that influenced the classic Trinitarian doctrine.

Key words: Doctrine of the Trinity, Christology, Patristics, Philosophical presuppositions, Aristotelianism

RESUMEN

“El uso de *μονογενής* en los cinco discursos teológicos de Gregorio Nacianceno”—Gregorio Nacianceno, figura central de la teología trinitaria del siglo IV, influyó significativamente en el desarrollo de la doctrina de la Trinidad. Este artículo se centra en la interpretación que Gregorio hace del término *μονογενής* (“unigénito”) aplicado al Hijo de Dios dentro del marco trinitario, en particular tal como se expresa en sus cinco discursos teológicos. El análisis revela que Gregorio empleó una interpretación literal de *μονογενής*, que significa “originado” o “engendrado”, para describir la relación del Hijo con el Padre. Esta interpretación refleja una visión filosófica griega más amplia de lo divino como existente en un ámbito incorpóreo y atemporal, que Gregorio reconoce como en última instancia misterioso y más allá de la comprensión humana plena. Este marco, aunque influyente, no está explícitamente respaldado por las Escrituras. En consecuencia, este artículo aboga por una reevaluación del concepto de *μονογενής* basado únicamente en la Escritura, desafiando las presuposiciones que influyeron en la doctrina trinitaria clásica.

Palabras clave: Doctrina de la Trinidad, cristología, Patrística, presuposiciones filosóficas, aristotelismo

THE USE OF ΜΟΝΟΓΕΝΗΣ IN GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS'S FIVE THEOLOGICAL ORATIONS

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Introduction

Gregory of Nazianzus¹ is arguably one of the most influential theological exponents of Trinitarian theology in the 4th century AD.² His writings and teachings, along with his important, though brief, role as president of the Council of Constantinople in 381, helped shape Christianity's Trinitarian Dogma for the years to come.³ In this sense, his Five Theological Orations, probably delivered in the Anastasia church of Constantinople in 380 during the period that led up to the Council itself,⁴ are the most representative of his ideas on the subject.⁵

Of special interest for this article is Gregory's understanding of *μονογενής* (Only-begotten) as applied to the Son of God in the Trinitarian frame of thought, specifically in his Five Theological Orations. After all, to consider divinity as "begotten" entails a series of difficult questions that were the cause of great debate throughout the 4th century, especially during the Arian and Neo-Arian debates. And Gregory of Nazianzus provides key insights into how the term *μονογενής* was understood not only by him but also by orthodox Trinitarian Christianity in general.⁶

1. Hereafter, as Gregory.

2. Andrew Hofer, *Christ in the Life and Teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

3. Andrew Louth, "St. Gregory the Theologian and Byzantine Theology", in *Re-Reading Gregory of Nazianzus: Essays on History, Theology, and Culture*, ed. Christopher A. Beeley (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 252–253.

4. John McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: an intellectual biography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), x.

5. Lionel Wickham, "Introduction," in Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, ed. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 15.

6. Christopher Beeley argues that "Gregory Nazianzen was one of the chief architects of the language and concepts used in the Christological controversies that occupied the Church, in increasingly scholastic terms, from the fifth to the eighth centuries." Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 116.

However, before analyzing the use of *μονογενής* in Gregory's Theological Orations, a brief historical and theological background of the Orations is necessary, in order to better understand Gregory's position and arguments regarding the Son as the *μονογενής* of the Father.

Brief historical and Theological Background

Gregory's Five Theological Orations were written in response to the Neo-Arian (or Eunomian) movement of the late 4th century AD. Eunomians believed that the difference of substance, or being, between Father and Son should be maintained. They argued that God's substance is "absolute reality;" He is an underived and ingenerate being whose definition is ingeneracy.⁷ On the other hand, the Only-begotten Son was considered "the supreme offspring and product of the incomparable Father and the perfect image of the divine will: not of the divine substance, for that is by definition unique."⁸

In this sense, the Eunomians did not make a distinction between the term "generated" and "created", since "creation" would simply be "generation" without corporeal implications. Thus, although they considered the Only-begotten Son to be truly God, he was certainly viewed as subordinate to the Father.⁹

In the Five Theological Orations, Gregory addresses these and other points presented by the Eunomians and elaborates on his understanding of the Trinity in detail. The third and fourth Orations especially address his understanding of the Son and the nature of His union and relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

A brief word on the literary style of the Orations is in order. Gregory uses interesting rhetorical techniques to engage his audience (as well as future readers), such as imagined dialogues of questions and answers, in order to express his arguments in a deductive manner, while eliciting attention to what are often complex reasonings. In this, he admirably succeeds, taking the listeners (and readers) into his confidence and inviting them to share his standpoint. It should be noted, however, that his style often comes across as witty, sarcastic, and even poignant, especially towards those he argues against, including but not limited to the Eunomians.

On a side note, it is important to take into account Gregory's own

7. Wickham, "Introduction," 18.

8. Wickham, "Introduction," 18.

9. Wickham, "Introduction," 18–19.

recognition of the limitations of the human mind to understand and explain the nature of God. He candidly expresses that “to know God is hard, to describe him impossible... Mentally to grasp so great a matter is utterly beyond real possibility even so far as the very elevated and devout are concerned.”¹⁰ Further, Gregory will concede that he is “engaged in a struggle to prove that even the nature of beings on the second level [angels] is too much for our minds, let alone God’s primal and unique, not to say all-transcending, nature.”¹¹

In other words, despite their greatest efforts and best arguments, when all is said and done, human beings will always fall short of a full understanding of the Divinity, for it transcends human comprehension.

$\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\acute{\eta}\varsigma$ in the Five Theological Orations

The Greek term $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\acute{\eta}\varsigma$ appears six times in the Five Theological Orations of Gregory: twice in the 3rd Oration (Oration 29, “On the Son”), once in the 4th Oration (Oration 30, also “On the Son”), and three times in the 5th Oration (Oration 31, “On the Holy Spirit”).¹² This is a strong indication that Gregory uses $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\acute{\eta}\varsigma$ not only when speaking of the nature of the Son and His relationship with the Father, but equally in reference and comparison with the nature of the Holy Spirit, as will be seen later.

This section will analyze each occurrence first in its immediate literary context within the Oration and then as it relates to and is informed by Gregory’s general theological thinking as portrayed in all five Orations.

Oration 29, “On the Son” (3rd Oration)

Here, $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\acute{\eta}\varsigma$ appears twice in the same paragraph:

10. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 28: On the Doctrine of God,” in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, 39.

11. Nazianzus, “Oration 28,” 63, 64.

12. The Greek text of the Orations used for this article is Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus*, ed. Arthur James Mason (Cambridge: University Press, 1899). In that edition, the six occurrences of $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\acute{\eta}\varsigma$ are found in pages 99 (x2), 139, 156, 160, and 162. For the English text, Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham’s translation has been used: *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, ed. John Behr. The occurrences in this edition of the English translation are found in pages 85 (x2), 109, 123, 126, and 127.

We, after all, understand and preach the Son's Godhead on the basis of their [the Holy Scriptures] grand and sublime language. What do we mean here: expressions like "God," "Word," "he who is in the beginning," who was "with the beginning," who was "the beginning," "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" and "with you is the beginning" and "who calls it the beginning from the generations of old"? Then he is the Only-begotten [μονογενής] Son: "The Only-begotten [μονογενής] Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him."¹³

From the outset, it is clear that Gregory is striving to explain the Godhead within the linguistic context of Scripture. Μονογενής is, after all, a biblical term, and there is no escaping it. The Son is the μονογενής of the Father. All Christians who take the Scriptures seriously must acknowledge that He is so. Both Eastern and Western Christianity, as well as the Arians and the Eunomians, all affirmed that the Son is the μονογενής of the Father, because the Scriptures plainly say it. But herein lies the first and utmost challenge: What is meant by μονογενής?

It is also clear that the translators have interpreted correctly Gregory's intention of using the word μονογενής to signify "Only-begotten." Furthermore, he refers to the Father as the "parent" or "progenitor" [γεννήτωρ] of the Son, and the Son as the "begotten" or "offspring" [γέννημα] of the Father.¹⁴ The semantic field is more than clear; for Gregory, μονογενής must be taken literally as "Only-begotten", with the connotations of procreation or generation: the single offspring or child of the Father.¹⁵

That being said, it is important to note that, throughout his Theological Orations, Gregory makes abundant use of biblical passages to bolster his arguments. In the quoted paragraph, for example, he cites from John 1:1, Ps 109:3, Isa 41:4, and John 1:18. Interestingly, all these passages contain direct references to the "beginning" (Gr. ἀρχή), thus linking the μονογενής Son to the very beginning of time, to the dawn of the ages, so to speak. Of course, this does not solve the issue *per se*, for one of the pressing matters of the Trinitarian discussions of the 4th century was what exactly is meant by "the beginning," and if the strong

13. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 29: On the Son," in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, 84–85.

14. Gregory, "Oration 29," 70.

15. This is also the interpretation of many modern Greek scholars. See F. Büchsel, "μονογενής," *TDNT* 4:739–741.

semantic implication of the Son having “a beginning” meant he was therefore not eternal.

Gregory had addressed this issue in the same Oration. In fact, he assumes that the Son and the Holy Spirit are originated when he begins a dialogue with himself: “So when did these last two originate?” He answers:

They transcend “whenness,” but if I *must* give a naive answer-- when the Father did.

When was that? There has not been a ‘when’ when the Father has not been in existence. This, then, is true of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Put another question and I will answer it.

Since when has the Son been begotten?

Since as long as the Father has *not* been begotten.

Since when has the Spirit been proceeding?

Since as long as the Son has *not* been proceeding but being begotten in a non-temporal way that transcends explanation.¹⁶

Therefore, in Gregory’s thought, “the beginning” must not be considered in a temporal frame but in a non-temporal sphere of existence corresponding only to God: “In a serene, non-temporal, incorporeal way, the Father is parent of the ‘offspring’.”¹⁷ Of course, in a non-temporal setting, to ask “when” the Son was begotten, or when “the beginning” is, has no significance whatsoever. There is no “when.” There is no past, present, or future. It is the only way in which an “Only-begotten” (μονογενής) Son can be considered entirely equal to the Father in every sense, including being co-eternal.

Here, Gregory clearly adheres to the Greek philosophical framework of the existence of God in a non-temporal and immaterial realm, entirely transcendent and outside the human sphere of temporal and material things. Timelessness, in this context,

describes a reality that is totally devoid of time. A timeless reality does not exist in the future-present-past flux of time. It cannot experience anything new, because it has no future. It cannot experience anything now, because it has no present. It cannot bring things to memory because it has no past. . . . A timeless reality experiences all things as a simultaneous whole.¹⁸

16. Gregory, “Oration 29,” 71. All italics belong to the translated English edition of the text.

17. Gregory, “Oration 29,” 70.

18. Fernando Canale, *Basic Elements of Christian Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI:

This conclusion can be inferred also by the following quotes, where Gregory states that the Son “has existed as begotten from the beginning,”¹⁹ in a non-temporal sphere. Therefore, “being begotten coincides with existence, and is ‘from the beginning;’. . . What point is there prior to ‘from the beginning’ to fix the existence or non-existence of the Son? Either way the notion of ‘from the beginning’ will be destroyed.”²⁰

Furthermore, Gregory argues that “if there was a ‘when’ when the Father did not exist, there was a ‘when’ when the Son did not exist. If there was a ‘when’ when the Son did not exist, there was a ‘when’ when the Holy Spirit did not exist. If one existed from the beginning, so did all three.”²¹

It should be clear by now that Gregory understands “from the beginning” to mean “from all eternity.” Gregory’s argument in this sense is so forceful and seems so obvious to him, that he considers it very “stupid” to question “whether or not what has been begotten from ‘from the beginning’ existed prior to its begetting. That question only arises in connection with temporally determined beings.”²²

It must be pointed out, however, that in this aspect of his reasoning, Gregory does not use any Scriptural evidence. Of course, the Bible makes no direct references to temporal or non-temporal spheres in this manner. One must appeal to Greek philosophy, not Scripture, for a clearly expounded concept of God as non-temporal and immaterial.²³ And this is precisely what Gregory does, albeit indirectly. When speaking of the nature of the Holy Spirit, for example, he refers to “the more theologically-minded” non-Christians as having “views nearer our own” than the Jews.²⁴ Wickham identifies these “non-Christians” as Aristotle, Plotinus, and the Neoplatonists.²⁵ Gregory also refers several times to God, particularly the Father, as the “First Cause” (Gr. *πρώτης αἰτίας*),²⁶

Andrews University Lithothec, 2005), 58.

19. Canale, *Basic Elements of Christian Theology*, 73.

20. Canale, *Basic Elements of Christian Theology*, 76.

21. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 31: On the Holy Spirit,” in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, 119.

22. Gregory, “Oration 29,” 77.

23. See Canale, *Basic Elements of Christian Theology*, 62–79.

24. The Sadducees, to be more specific. Gregory, “Oration 31: On the Holy Spirit,” 119–120.

25. Gregory, “Oration 31,” n15, 143.

26. Gregory, “Oration 28,” 47. See also Gregory, “Oration 29,” 71; and Gregory, “Oration 31,” 128, 141. Gregory even goes to the point of saying that “when we look at the three in whom the Godhead exists, and at those who derive their timeless and

and as the “unmoved mover,”²⁷ both clearly Aristotelian concepts.²⁸

It is clear that, for Gregory, the only way to maintain that the Son is begotten of the Father but at the same time co-eternal and equal with him, without an ontological subordination, is by placing the existence of the Godhead in the non-temporal sphere proposed by Greek philosophy. However, in the end, Gregory is forced to concede that the Son and the Spirit “derive their timeless and equally glorious being from the primal cause,”²⁹ that is, from the Father. Gregory strives to explain further by asking himself: “How is it, then that these are not co-unoriginate, if they are co-eternal with him?” his answer is: “Because they are *from* him, though not *after* him,” and “clearly a cause is not necessarily prior to its effects.”³⁰ Of course, this creates a logical conundrum. How is it possible that a cause is not prior to its effects? This would defy the natural laws of physics. Again, to solve the issue Gregory draws on Aristotelian metaphysics: “Because time is not involved, they are to that extent *unoriginate*.” It would seem that Gregory’s argument is: The Son and the Spirit, though not unoriginate because they originated from the Father, are considered unoriginate for they exist in non-temporality.

Even so, in spite of Gregory’s efforts, one cannot help but perceive in this conceptualization a sense of ontological subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father. Even in Aristotelian metaphysics, all beings derived from the First Cause, or unmoved mover, are subordinate and inferior to Him.³¹ No matter how much Gregory might insist that the Son and the Spirit themselves, though originated in the Father, become together with Him a single First Cause, he cannot avoid the fact that they are non-unoriginate.

equally glorious being from the primal cause, we have three objects of worship.” Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 31,” 128. Note the reference to a “primal cause” [Gr. *πρώτης αἰτίας*] in a “timeless” existence. This is clearly Aristotelian theology. For more details, see Christopher John Shields, *Aristotle* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 196, 226.

27. “On the one side we have the mover [Gr. *ὁ κινούμενος*], and on the other that which is, so to speak, the motion [Gr. *ἡ κίνησις*]” (Gregory of Nazianzus, “The Third Theological Oration. On the Son,” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989–], 7:303).

28. See Shields, *Aristotle*, 196, 226.

29. Gregory, “Oration 31,” 128.

30. Gregory, “Oration 29,” 71.

31. Concerning the unmoved mover, Aristotle states: “For there is nothing else stronger than it to move it—since that would mean more divine.” Therefore, the unmoved mover is necessarily “more divine” than any being originated in or by him. See Aristotle, *De Caelo*, transl. J. L. Stocks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), I.9, 279a, 34–35.

Oration 30, “On the Son” (4th Oration)

The next occurrence of *μονογενής* in Gregory’s Five Orations comes from the fourth (Oration 30), also titled “On the Son.” If the context of the first two occurrences in Oration 29 dealt with *when* the *μονογενής* was begotten, here Gregory further elaborates on *how* he was begotten: “I take the view that he is called ‘Son’ because he is not simply identical in substance with the Father, but stems from him. He is ‘Only-begotten’ [*μονογενής*] not just because he alone stems uniquely from what is unique, but because he does so in a unique fashion unlike things corporeal.”³²

It is clear that, in Gregory’s conception, *μονογενής* cannot be understood in human terms, due to the very nature of divinity. Previously, he had already asserted: “One whose being is not the same as ours has a different way of begetting as well.”³³

For Gregory, then, the *μονογενής* Son is not begotten in the ordinary human sense, but rather He “stems from”, or “is from” the Father.³⁴ Therefore, this divine begetting is done so in a “unique fashion”, because it occurs in the immaterial realm of the divinity, where no physical body intervenes. In Gregory’s words, “a body is not involved. If corporeal begetting implies subjection to change, an incorporeal one must be free of it.”³⁵ Again, Gregory draws on Aristotelian metaphysics to explain the divine begetting of the Son, where everything must be understood in immaterial and incorporeal terms. This presents a paradox: *μονογενής* should be understood in its literal meaning as “Only-begotten,” referring to being physically born or procreated. How can this term be applied to divinity in an incorporeal realm?

Cornered by his own line of reasoning, Gregory attempts to solve this conundrum in the following passage:

The heavenly begetting is more incomprehensible than your own, to the same extent that God is harder to trace out than Man. If you make its incomprehensibility a ground for denying the fact, it is high time you ruled out as non-existent a good number of things you do not understand, the chief of which is God himself... God’s begetting ought

32. Gregory, “Oration 30,” 109.

33. Gregory, “Oration 29,” 72.

34. Wickham translates “stems from” the Father; however, the Greek literally reads “*καὶ ἐκείθεν*,” which Schaff and Wace translate as “is of” the Father. See Gregory, “Oration 30,” 109; and *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 7:316.

35. Gregory, “Oration 29,” 72.

to have the tribute of our reverent silence. The important point is for you to learn that he has been begotten. As to the way it happens, we shall not concede that even angels, much less you, know that. Shall I tell you the way? It is a way known only to the begetting Father and the begotten Son. Anything beyond this fact is hidden by a cloud and escapes your dull vision.³⁶

In other words, astonishingly, Gregory's argument can be summarized as follows: the begetting of the *μονογενής* is incomprehensible and therefore must be accepted blindly, without any attempt to understand it. Of course, this is probably due in part to the fact that the Bible does not explain the divine begetting of the Son. In fact, once again, Gregory does not quote any passage of Scripture to support his arguments regarding *how* the Son was begotten, just as he had not done so when arguing in favor of a non-temporal sphere for his begetting. In these aspects, it seems clear that Gregory himself is aware of the lack of biblical foundation on which to build his case, for he considers them to be "hidden by a cloud" from human understanding and, therefore, not revealed in Scripture.³⁷

Oration 31, "On the Holy Spirit" (5th Oration)

In his fifth and last Theological Oration, Gregory expounds on the Holy Spirit. He mentions *μονογενής* twice in this context as part of his explanation of the Holy Spirit's nature and of the Trinity in general.

In his first mention of *μονογενής*, Gregory attempts to further explain why the three divine members of the Trinity are called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but are still considered a united entity of equal persons: "The aim is to safeguard the distinctness of the three hypostases within the single nature and quality of the Godhead. The Son is not the Father; there is *one* Father, yet he is whatever the Father is. The Spirit is not the Son because he is from God; there is *one* Only-begotten [*μονογενής*]. Yet whatever the Son is, he is. The three are a single whole in their Godhead and the single whole is three in personalities."³⁸

To begin with, Gregory is clear on one thing: the Spirit is not *μονογενής*; only the Son is begotten; the Spirit "proceeds" [*ἐκπορεύεται*]

36. Gregory, "Oration 29," 75–76.

37. Gregory, "Oration 29," 75–76.

38. Gregory, "Oration 31," 123.

from the Father, as he has just stated in this very Oration.³⁹ Both are “from” the Father, but in a different manner. Thus, argues Gregory, they are distinct but equal. As for the meaning of “proceeding” and how it differs from begetting, Gregory once again appeals to the mystery of the divine incorporeal realm: “What, then, is ‘proceeding’?” he asks dialogically. “You explain the ingeneracy of the Father and I will give you a biological account of the Son’s begetting and the Spirit’s proceeding—and let us go mad the pair of us for prying into God’s secrets... We cannot... enter into the ‘depths of God’ and render a verbal account of a nature so mysterious, so much beyond words”.⁴⁰

The sarcasm is evident. No doubt Gregory intends to mock his adversaries. In doing so, however, he gives again a hint as to what he means by *μονογενής*, for he speaks of the notion of “biological begetting”, as it were. Of course, Gregory himself acknowledges that this idea is a complete impossibility when applied to the Divinity, which once again calls into question Gregory’s literal interpretation of *μονογενής* as applied to God the Son to begin with.

The second time he mentions *μονογενής* in his fifth Oration, Gregory is striving once again to ascribe to the Son and the Spirit the same dignity and honor as the Father: “Stop giving a false dignity to the Father at the expense of the Only-begotten [*μονογενής*] (it is a poor kind of honor, giving him a creature by robbing him of that nobler thing, a Son!) and to the Son at the expense of the Spirit. He is no creator of a fellow-slave like us, but is glorified with a peer in honor.”⁴¹

Here Gregory continues building his case against the Arian and Neo-Arian concept of a created Son. A mere created being would be inferior to his Creator, while the Only-begotten Son is “a peer in honor.” Previously, Gregory had already insisted on this point: “How can he [the Son] be God, if he is a creature? What is created is not God.”⁴²

This is exactly Gregory’s central argument regarding *μονογενής*: The Son is truly equal to the Father in every sense precisely because he is the Only-begotten of the Father. In his own words: “Here we have a living image of a living being, indistinguishable from its original to a higher degree than Seth from Adam and any earthly offspring from its parent. Beings with no complexity to their nature have no points

39. Gregory, “Oration 31,” 122; Gregory quotes John 15:26.

40. Gregory, “Oration 31,” 122.

41. Gregory, “Oration 31,” 126.

42. Gregory, “Oration 29,” 72.

of likeness or unlikeness. They are exact replicas, identical rather than like.⁴³ With this assertion Gregory appears to drive home his argument, which is quite clear: The Son is an exact replica of the Father inasmuch as nature or substance is concerned, to an even higher degree than any human son is of his human father. Notice the subtle mention, once again, to the Greek philosophical framework, specifically the Aristotelian concept of a non-complex or completely simple deity.⁴⁴

Even so, Gregory will return to the same paradox time after time, trying to reconcile the fact that the Son (and the Holy Spirit), though being the offspring of the Father, is completely equal to Him. In fact, Gregory says, about the Son and the Spirit: "Make them twins if you like." And then he adds:

For my part, if I saw the necessity for the alternatives, I should accept the realities without being put off by the names. But because the Son is "Son" in a more elevated sense of the word, and since we have no other term to express his consubstantial derivation from God, it does not follow that we ought to think it essential to transfer wholesale to the divine sphere the earthly names of human family ties.⁴⁵

It would appear, then, that Gregory understands the terms "Father" and "Son" as more of an adaptation of human terms to divine realities. However, given his insistence on the Father as unoriginated and the Son as originated and begotten, it is not quite clear how the terms "father" and "son" must be interpreted in the divine realm. McGuckin recognizes that "Gregory is highly ambivalent and particular in his understanding of how scriptural designations apply. Sometimes he sees them as revealing acts, other times as being merely analogies and poetic descriptors."⁴⁶

Gregory mentions the term *μονογενής* one more time in his fifth Theological Oration. This time, it is in the context of his defense against the accusation of tritheism, due to his insistence that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all God. Gregory first directs his answer to those who deny the divinity of the Spirit,⁴⁷ but then also to the

43. "Gregory, "Oration 31," 110.

44. See Agenilton Correa, "A Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity in Seventh-Day Adventist Theology and Roman Catholic theology" (PhD dis., Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 2015), 160.

45. Gregory, "Oration 31," 121.

46. McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus*, 284.

47. Probably the Pneumatomachi, a heretical sect which flourished during the latter half of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century, who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit, hence the name Pneumatomachi or "Combators against the Spirit." See John Arendzen, "Pneumatomachi," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: The

Eunomians: “What right have you to accuse us of tritheism—are you not ditheists? If you deny worship to the Only-begotten [μονογενής] as well, you clearly align yourselves with our opponents.”⁴⁸

This is the general objective of the Five Orations, of course: To underscore the unity and equality of the three *hypostases* of the Godhead, despite the fact that the Son and the Spirit derive from the Father. “Rather than resulting in ontological inequality, Gregory argues, the Father’s generation of the Son and the Spirit results in their ontological *equality* and essential identity.”⁴⁹ On this note, Gregory states that “though they are three objects of belief, they derive from the single whole and have reference to it.”⁵⁰ And then he adds:

When we look at the Godhead, the primal cause, the sole sovereignty, we have a mental picture of the single whole, certainly. But when we look at the three in whom the Godhead exists, and at those who derive their timeless and equally glorious being from the primal cause, we have three objects of worship.⁵¹

It would appear *prima facie* that in this passage Gregory is including the Father, along with the Son and the Spirit, as also “derived” from a single whole or primal cause. Thus, it could be said that in Gregory’s conception the “primal cause” refers both to the Godhead as an undivided whole and to the Father as the unoriginate from whom the Son and the Spirit originated. Beeley argues that, for Gregory, “it is the special property of the Father to be both the source of himself. . . and the source of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and thus the cause and source of the Trinity as a whole.”⁵²

Summary and Conclusions

A close analysis of Gregory’s use of *μονογενής* in his Five Theological Orations shows that he interprets this term in a literal sense, to mean “Only-begotten”, with the connotations of “originated” and “offspring”. The Son is understood as the Only-begotten of the Father,

Encyclopedia Press, Inc., 1913–), 12:174.

48. Gregory, “Oration 31,” 127. The opponents referred to here are most likely the pagan and irreligious, mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph.

49. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 210.

50. Gregory, “Oration 31,” 127.

51. Gregory, “Oration 31,” 127.

52. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 205.

who has existed “from the beginning” together with the Father.

However, crucial to Gregory’s interpretation of *μονογενής* is the Greek philosophical understanding of a non-temporal and incorporeal sphere of existence for the Godhead. Therefore, each time Gregory strives to explain the details of the Son’s begetting, he goes as far as his reasoning and logic can take him, and then appeals to the mystery of the divine realm, timeless, incorporeal, and unfathomable. Thus, the true meaning of *μονογενής* remains in mystery, hidden and beyond human understanding. However, this timeless view of God contradicts the Scriptures, where God is clearly presented as a temporal (though eternal) reality.⁵³ In fact, a timeless and immaterial God would not be able to create anything outside of Himself. Furthermore, such a God could not interact with human beings and angels in the flow of created history, as Scripture portrays Him doing. Thus, we are left with a self-centered and self-sufficient God who only knows and relates to Himself. This is completely opposite to the relational nature of divine love showed in the Scriptures.⁵⁴

This worldview was not unique to Gregory. The majority of the church fathers adhered to a similar belief regarding the timeless and immaterial realm of the divinity, including (but not limited to) Origen, the three Cappadocian fathers, Augustine of Hippo, and Thomas Aquinas, among others. And of course, it is built into the Nicaea and Constantinople Creeds.⁵⁵

Ruether argues that

Greek philosophic language was the only language available in which to speak of ethical and theological ideas, and the Christians inevitably adopted it as the basis for their own theological development. In so doing they could scarcely fail to recognize the affinity between their own ideas and those of the Greek philosophical tradition. The Christian apologists explained this similarity by asserting that the Greek thinkers had borrowed their ideas from Moses, and therefore any truth

53. See Job 36:26; Pss 90:4; 103:15–17; Mic 5:2; Titus 1:2; Heb 1:10–12; 2 Pet 3:8; for a detailed analysis of God’s temporality as presented in Scripture, see Canale, *Basic Elements of Christian Theology*, 62–79.

54. See Canale, *Basic Elements of Christian Theology*, 53.

55. See Correa, “A Study of the doctrine of the Trinity in Seventh-Day Adventist theology and Roman Catholic Theology,” 149–167. Beeley observes that “Gregory is adhering to the shape of the biblical narrative as well as the long ecclesiastical tradition expressed in rules of faith, confessional statements, and formal creeds.” Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 124.

that was contained in Greek philosophy actually belonged to the Christians in any case. This idea was borrowed from Jewish apologetics, and appeared in Josephus' defense of Jewish antiquity against the Greeks.⁵⁶

Ultimately, Gregory (and Christianity in general) based his understanding of *μονογενής*, as it applies to the Son in the trinitarian context, on a biased reading of Scripture, especially dependent on the presupposition that the Godhead exists in a non-temporal and immaterial (incorporeal) sphere, which lies beyond human understanding. However, he fails to demonstrate this philosophical framework from the standpoint of Scripture. And without it, Gregory's entire logic crumbles under its own weight; for in a temporal and material setting, the Son would have been physically (bodily) begotten, and would have a beginning in time, thus not eternal, and would be inferior and subordinate to the Father. In other words, the Arians would have been right.

Therefore, if we are to adhere to the *Sola Scriptura* principle, it is necessary to seek an alternative interpretation and understanding of *μονογενής* in its Biblical context, and within the philosophical presuppositions found in the Bible alone.

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56. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gregory of Nazianzus: Rhetor and Philosopher* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 167. In any case, Christian and Jewish apologetics must provide evidence for their claim that the Greek philosophers derived their ideas from Moses. The Pentateuch certainly does not contain them.