

REV Bible – John 1:18 Commentary

No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is in a most intimate relationship with^a the Father, he has explained *him*.

a[18]

Lit. “in the bosom of”

[THIS VERSE AND COMMENTARY ARE CURRENTLY BEING WORKED ON...UPDATES COMING SOON]

“**seen God.**” In this case, “seen God” refers to knowing Him for who he really is, not seeing Him with the eye. In many languages, “to see” is a common idiom for “to know.” In the Hebrew language, one of the definitions for “see” (Hebrew = *ra’ah*) is “see, so as to learn, to know.” Similarly, the Greek word translated “see” in verse 18 (*horaō*) can be “to see with the eyes” or “to see with the mind, to perceive, know.” Even in English, one of the definitions for “see” is “to know or understand.” For example, when two people are discussing something, one might say to the other, “I see what you mean.”

The usage of “see” as it pertains to knowing is found in many places in the New Testament. Jesus said to Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” ([John 14:9](#)). Here again the word “see” is used to indicate knowing. Anyone who *knew* Christ (not just those who “saw” him) would know the Father. In fact, Christ had made that plain two verses earlier when he said to Philip, “If you really knew me you would know my Father as well” ([John 14:7](#)).

Further evidence that “see” means “know” in [John 1:18](#) is that the phrase “no man has seen God” is contrasted with the phrase “has made Him known.” So from the context and vocabulary in [John 1:18](#), we can see that it is not talking about “seeing” God with one’s eyes; it is saying that the truth about God came by Jesus Christ. Before Jesus Christ came, no one really knew God as He truly is, a loving heavenly Father.

Beyond that, however, people did actually see God in a form that He took on Himself temporarily so that He could fellowship with humankind. No one can see all that God is, and His nature is to be invisible to humans, but angels are naturally invisible to humans also and they quite often come into concretion in human form and are seen by people. God does that too. The NIV84 text note on [John 1:18](#) is correct: “Sometimes in the OT people are said to have seen God (e.g., [Ex 24:9-11](#)). But we are also told that no one can see God and live ([Ex. 33:20](#)). Therefore, since no human being can see God as he really is, those who saw God saw him in a form he took on himself temporarily for the occasion.”

[For more information on the idiomatic uses of “seen,” see [commentary on Luke 1:48](#). For more information on the idiomatic uses of “seen” and people who saw God, see [commentary on Acts 7:55](#).]

“only begotten son.” There is a huge controversy about the original reading of this verse. As it stands, some Greek texts read “God” and some read “Son.” At some point in time the Greek text was changed, and either “Son” or “God” is original. The manuscript evidence is divided. Much has been written on this subject, and readers are invited to read some of the more scholarly books and commentaries that go deeply into the arguments.

When totaled, the evidence indicates that the reading, “only begotten son” is more likely original than “only begotten God.” A brief summary of some of the most important arguments is: first, a study of the scope of Scripture reveals that Jesus is not God. That is the plain reading of dozens of verses of Scripture. There is no description of the Trinity anywhere in Scripture, or of the “hypostatic union,” or of the “incarnation,” and the fact is that every single “Trinity proof text” can be explained from the position that Jesus is the Son of God, not God. In contrast, there are dozens of points of logic that cannot be explained if the Trinity is true, such as why, after his resurrection, Jesus spoke of having a “God.” God does not have a God—He is God.

Second, and very importantly, there is no other reference anywhere in the Bible to the “only begotten God,” while there are other Johannine references to the “only begotten son” ([John 3:16, 18](#); [1 John 4:9](#)). To fully understand that argument we must recognize that [John 3:16, 18](#), and [1 John 4:9](#) have “son,” not “God” and there is no textual disagreement. So while the Bible has only begotten “Son” three times (four including [John 1:18](#)), the reading “unique God” in [John 1:18](#) would be the only occurrence of that reading in the Bible, which makes it very unlikely.

Also, going along with the point just stated above is the fact that the Gospel of John closes with, “these are written so that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and so that by believing you will have life in his name” ([John 20:31](#)). It would be strange indeed if John chapter one said Jesus was God, but the Gospel of John closed by saying it showed that Jesus was the Son of God. That would be even more strange—frankly too strange for us to believe—if Jesus were God and a person had to believe he was God to be saved. In that case, the Gospel of John should have plainly said that “these are written so that you believe that Jesus is God and so that by believing you will have life in his name.” If a person cannot be saved by just believing that Jesus is the “Son” of God, then [John 20:31](#) should not have said so.

Also, many scholars concur with Bart Ehrman that the textual evidence supports the word “Son,” not “God” in [John 1:18](#). Although the reading *theos* (God) appears in the Alexandrian texts, which are earlier than the Western and Byzantine texts and therefore most often considered by scholars to represent the original reading in disputed verses, there are times when the Alexandrian readings are not original. Many factors must be considered. For one thing, the Alexandrian readings are earlier because they survived in the sands of Egypt, whereas the early Western texts disintegrated in the climate and thus had to be copied more often. So the older age of the Alexandrian manuscripts does not, in and of itself, make the Alexandrian manuscripts more accurate. Other things have to be considered. Besides that, there are some Alexandrian texts that do read “Son.” Also, if “God” were the original reading, it seems, especially given the desire among third-century Christians to support the Trinity, that

the Western, Cesarean, and Byzantine text families would have more than a few manuscripts that read “God,” after all, that is what those theologians believed, but the reading “God” is almost totally absent from those text families. Bart Ehrman writes:

“This is not simply a case of one reading supported by the earliest and best manuscripts and another supported by late and inferior one, but of one reading found almost exclusively in the Alexandrian tradition and another found sporadically there and virtually everywhere else.”^a

Furthermore, “Son” predominates not only in the Greek manuscripts, but in the Latin and Syriac (Aramaic) manuscripts as well, and also is predominant in the writings of the Church Fathers (although some have “God” as well).

Another reason for believing that “Son” is original is the word *monogenēs* (“only begotten,” actually referring to “one of a kind,” some say “unique”). The fact is that *monogenēs* can mean “only begotten,” and that usage fits perfectly with Jesus Christ as the Son of God. There is a sense that the verse could read “unique Son,” but to what purpose? Just because a word can mean something does not mean that definition should be used. Occam’s razor, that simpler theories are the most satisfactory unless a more complex theory has greater explanatory power, applies here. Why create the difficult phrase “unique Son” when the translation “only begotten Son,” which occurs three other places in John’s writings, is understandable and biblical? Yes, Jesus was unique, but as the Son (not as “God,” because if Jesus, as part of the Trinity, was unique, then so are the Father and Holy Spirit, which would make three unique Gods, and defeat the purpose of using “unique” in the first place).

Another argument against the reading “God” in [John 1:18](#) is the fact that there is no evidence that anyone in the culture of the time John was writing would have understood the concept of a “begotten God.” What would “*monogenēs* God” mean to the Jews and Greeks John was writing to? We should remember that, although John certainly wrote for Christians too, he was writing to unbelieving Jews and Greeks. We know this because John concludes his Gospel by saying, “But these are written so that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” ([John 20:31](#)). So what would “*monogenēs* God” mean to those unbelieving Jews and Greeks? Certainly not “begotten.” What is a “begotten God?” But “unique” is no better. The Jews already had their One God ([Deut. 6:4](#)), who by definition would have been unique, and to the Greeks, every god or goddess was unique in some way. Thus, the concept of a “unique god” would not have made sense in the culture, but an “only begotten Son” of God would have made sense.

It is worth noting that by the time of the great Christological arguments and the development of the doctrine of the Trinity there were ways that theologians could explain Jesus as a “unique God” but there is no reason to assume that when John wrote anyone would think that way. This adds to the evidence that “God” was the later addition, and “Son” was original.

Some modern Trinitarians skirt this issue by claiming that *monogenēs* inherently has the meaning of sonship (thus the NIV2011: “the one and only son, who is himself God”). The problem with that is that it is not a legitimate translation, but an interpretation due to bias.

There is nothing inherently in the word *monogenēs* that demands sonship. It is used in Greek writings of both animate and inanimate objects. Translations such as the NIV2011 are only giving voice to their theology, not translating the text.

Other Trinitarian scholars try to claim that the phrases in [John 1:18](#) are a series of appositions, which would read something like: “the unique one, God, who is in the bosom of the Father.” That translation also has problems. Again, how could Christ be “unique” and “God” at the same time? It would just mean that there were three unique Gods, which defeats the purpose of “unique.” It seems that theologians only suggest that the adjectives are substantives because they are trying to make the simple statement, that Jesus is the “only begotten Son,” fit with their theology that Jesus is God and there is a Trinity.

Another reason for favoring “Son” over “God” is that the verse is about God being revealed by Jesus ([John 1:17](#)), because the verse started with the phrase, that no one had ever seen “God.” To call Jesus in that context “the only begotten God” (or the “unique God”) would set up an inherent contradiction. If you cannot see God, how could you see “the unique God?” If, on the other hand, you could see “the unique God,” why could you not see “God” too (especially since, by the definition of “unique” being used, God the Father is unique too)? The simple answer in the verse is that the Son is not God, and so while we cannot see God, we can see the only begotten Son who has made God known. The fact is that the reading “the only begotten Son” is textually substantiated, fine from a translation standpoint, and makes perfect sense in the context, even to Trinitarians.

It has been argued that “God” is the likely reading because in trying to reconstruct the original text, scribes usually emended a harder reading so it read more easily. Thus, a scribe reading “God” would change it to “Son” because “Son” was the easier reading, and thus the reading “Son” was created. While the principle that the more difficult reading is usually original is often correct, in this case that principle would not apply because scribes had a theological reason for changing “Son” to “God” and creating the more difficult reading—their belief in the Trinity. Verses were sometimes amended to support the Trinity, as almost all modern scholars admit happened to some manuscripts of [1 John 5:7-8](#), and may have purposely happened in [1 Timothy 3:16](#).

[For more information on Jesus being the fully human Son of God and not being “God the Son,” see [Appendix 10](#), “Jesus is the Son of God, Not God the Son.” For more on “the Holy Spirit” being one of the designations for God the Father and “the holy spirit” being the gift of God’s nature, see [Appendix 11](#), “What is the Holy Spirit?” For more on many of the places where scribes changed the Greek text of the Bible to match their theology, see Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*.]

“has made him known.” The Greek is *exegeomai* ([#1834](#) ἐξηγέομαι). See [commentary on Luke 24:35](#), “related.”