

Word study: Begotten in Ps 2:7; Heb 1:5; 5:5 and Acts 13:33

By Daniel Gray

This word studies investigates the Hebrew word יָלִידְתִּי (yēlidtî) in Psalm 2:7, and the Greek word γεννηκά, (genenneka) in the three NT quotations that is translated “begotten” by literal translations. This word study looks at the definitions of the words and how they have been translated but it does not delve into the interpretation of the verses.

Begotten: is an English word. One should keep in mind, when asking what “Begotten” or “Beget” means, one is asking for the definition of the English word that the original languages have been translated into. In English, begotten carries the idea of the biological connection as in procreation.

Looking at Begotten in Ps 2:7

- 1) יָלִידְתִּי (yēlidtî) Begotten
 - a) (verb, Qal, (perfect), first person, singular)
 - b) Qal perf. of completed action in time of speaker for יָלִידְתִּי .¹
 - A) The perfect form indicates that actions, processes and events have already been completed in the past.²
 - B) The perfect form can express a state of affairs or a condition.³
 - C) This is often referred to as the prophetic perfect.
 - c) Gen 21:7; 29:34; 30:20; Num 11:12; 1 Kings 3:21; Ruth 1:12; 1 Chron 4:9; Ps 2:7; 110:3; Isa 23:4; Jer 20:14. This search disregards vowelings and searches consonants only.
 - d) יָלִידְתִּי occurs in the OT as Qal Perfect 11 times with four being in the construct. The Septuagint’s sole use of γεννηκά is found in Ps 2:7 for יָלִידְתִּי . This is the same exact word form used in Hebrews 1:5, 5:5 and Acts 13:33.
 - e) One must also consider if the meaning of γεννηκά has changed since the Septuagint used it to translate יָלִידְתִּי (yēlidtî). Based on definitions for the lemma the usage of γεννάω in the Septuagint appears to have the same definition as it did in the NT going with Lust’s⁴ “to bring forth, to create” compared to BDAG’s “to cause someth. to come into existence, primarily through procreation or parturition.”⁵ Although Lust’s definition may be broader it is very close to BDAG’s third definition, “to cause someth. to happen, bring forth, produce, cause, fig” and one does not have support to say the definition has changed between the time of the Septuagint translation and the time of the NT writings.

HALOT⁶ יָלִידְתִּי (yēlidtî) lexical definitions for the Qal stem only.

- 1) Give birth to or bear young (said of women)
- 2) To beget (said of men and comparable to the hif’il use- to beget or cause to bring forth)
- 3) Metaphorical usage.

Many commentators agree with HALOT’s placing יָלִידְתִּי in Ps 2:7 under metaphorical use.

- “I have become your father. Implying through adoption”⁷
- “I have begotten you” is metaphorical language; it means more than simply adoption, which has legal overtones, and implies that a “new birth” of a divine nature took place during the coronation.⁸
- David and his seed were adopted as Yahweh’s Son on the day of the institution of the Davidic covenant, when first David reigned by right of divine sonship.⁹

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Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament ¹⁰ quotes Buswell saying:

yālad in Ps 2:7 (note that it is not Hiphil) refers to the relationship of love between the Father and the Son. The NT interprets it of Christ's resurrection and session at the Father's right hand (Acts 13:33; Heb 1:3–5; 5:5)

Psalms 2 is a coronation psalm and we do well to first understand it in that way, as addressed to the newly crowned David or Solomon. The NT writers are able via inspiration to draw from the OT and apply it in a fresh new way to present their message. We have the task of also understanding the quoted passage in this new way when they do this. We must also take care as to how much if any of the unquoted context can also be applied in the new way along with the quoted passage. It is often said that reading part of a passage would bring the entire passage to the mind of the hearer, such as when Jesus read from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue (Lk 4:18-19). One must consider whether the NT writer applied new meaning to the quote or retained the original meaning. Some translations use begotten while others use something like "I will be/become your father".

Each Bible student will decide, either consciously or by default, whether this is the job of the translator, the commentator, themselves, or a combination of these. Every translation introduces some interpretation, some more than others. This includes the Septuagint also.

Summary of יָלַדְתִּי (yēlidtī)

יָלַדְתִּי (yelidti) means procreation in a biological procreation such as fathering a child. However, according to Harris and Buswell, the use of the Qal instead of Hif may indicate a focus on the relationship rather than the event a biological procreation, but HALOT indicates that a definition for the Qal and Hif are comparable, and both denote beget, when it applies to men. The Septuagint's use of γεγέννηκά many indicate the interpretation of Ps 2:7 at the time of translation or it may be an unfortunate choice of a word that introduced additional possible meanings as it probably retained the same meaning since the Septuagint's translation through NT times. Yet it is the state of affairs after "today I become your father" that requires our attention.

Understanding begotten in The Book of Hebrews:

(γεγέννηκά, genenneka, (lemma γεννάω) verb, perfect, active, indicative, 1st person, singular)

- 1) Heb 1:5; 5:5
 - a) The only other time γεγέννηκά also appears in in the NT is in Acts 13:33
 - b) All three incidences of γεγέννηκά are quotations of Ps 2:7.
- 2) A search of the NT for the lemma γεννάω in NASB95 yields 97 results in 65 verses. Only four of these are translated "begotten" by NASB
 - see Philemon 10 (ἐγέννησα) for the fourth. It is in the aorist tense here rather than the perfect.
 - a) NASB95 translated these as: born, father, begotten, became, child, bear, bearing, bore, conceived, gave gives produce.
 - b) Γεγέννηκά comes from a different root than μονογενής.
 - c) In Greek, the perfect tense, as in Hebrew, indicates the completion of the action by the time of the speaker without further indication of time.

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Lexicon BDAG¹¹ main definitions:

- i) Become the parent of, beget
 - A) By procreation
 - B) By exercising the role of a parent figure
 - BDAG list all three quotations of Ps 2:7 under this definition. Heb 1:5; 5:5; Acts 13:33¹² although NASB95 seems to have placed it under “1.A) “by procreation,” translating it “Begotten.” Note that Definition 3 “figuratively” is not used by BDAG for these verses.
 - This definition is supported by Philo’s use of γεγέννηκα for the relationship of a teacher and his students.
 - BDAG list Paul two uses of the aorist form of the word (ἐγέννησα) under this definition in:
 - 1 Cor 4:15 - became your father
 - Philemon 10 - begotten.
- ii) To give birth to, bear
- iii) To cause something to happen, bring forth, produce, cause, figuratively.

Sometimes lexicons list definitions that are not truly a definition of the word. One must use discretion when using lexicons. In this case, even though definition i.B is not an identical fit for Ps 2:7, there is support for this definition for the use of γεγέννηκά, genenneka in the New Testament. Questions to consider are, how much does one lean on the source of the quote in these verses, how did the Jewish readers/hears of this passage understand it and how does it fit into the NT context. It is up to the interpreter as to whether definition 1A or 1B is to be used for γεγέννηκά, genenneka in these verses after due considerations.

The perfect tense verses the aorist tense and what the perfect tense tells us:

It is to be noted that the choice between aorist and perfect is not determined by the objective facts, but by the writer’s wish to connote the special nuance of the perfect; if this be not required, the aorist will be used. The use of the perfect in the NT thus shows that the author has in mind the notion of a state of affairs resultant upon the action.¹³

It is important for us to understand the state of affairs resulting in this action of God having begotten Christ. That is, a focus on the authority the Father has given Him rather than His incarnation or coronation.

People place Christ’s being begotten of Heb 1:5 as occurring at various times such as: His transfiguration, resurrection, or ascension, but Jn 3:35; 5:22 shows Christ’s authority prior to those events. It is difficult to tie down the time of “begotten” in Hebrews.

The majority of translations use “begotten” in Ps 2:7 (35/50) and Hebrews 1:5; 5:5 (10/15) Acts 13:33 (9/15). Of the English translations I have available, having Ps 2:7 and Heb 1:5; 5:5, all but one (Young’s Literal Translation) translated all three verses using (26)/or not using (9) a form of beget. Multiple versions of the King James family of and other translations skews the data which is otherwise close to half though I did not attempt to separate and count them all. A sampling of 17 modern translations as well as the King James, aimed at eliminating redundancy found half the translations used begotten in these verses and half did not.

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Summary:

Begotten in Psalm 2:7 retains the lexicographical meaning of 'נָתַן (yēlidtî). However, it is taken in a metaphoric sense by interpreters as it is applied to the King or Christ in the verse. Half of the translations give it a metaphoric interpretation. They also carry that metaphoric interpretation into the New Testament. Both 'נָתַן (yēlidtî) and γενένηκα (gegenneka) indicate the action is completed at the time of the speaker, yet it may be the “prophetic perfect” used in prophecy indicating it will occur.

Μονογενής (monogenes) “only begotten” or more recently translated “unique” or “only Son” (and deserves a separate article) is a different word than γενένηκα (gegenneka) and the one does not affect the meaning of the other.

γενένηκα (gegenneka) allows the obtaining descendants or becoming a father such as through formal adoption or merely acting fatherly toward someone as does the apostle Paul. “Become your father” seems to be an acceptable translation of γενένηκα (gegenneka) but not for 'נָתַן (yēlidtî) as this introduces interpretation. The Perfect tense of the Greek directs one toward the state of affairs after γενένηκα (gegenneka) rather than to the event itself and sets the stage for understanding the passages.

¹ Briggs, C. A., & Briggs, E. G. (1906–1907). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the book of Psalms* (p. 22). New York: C. Scribner's Sons.

² Van der Merwe, C., Naudé, J., Kroeze, J., Van der Merwe, C., Naudé, J., & Kroeze, J. (1999). *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (electronic ed., p. 145). Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lust, J., Eynikel, E., & Hauspie, K. (2003). *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint : Revised Edition*. Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft: Stuttgart.

a) ⁵ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 193). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁶ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000). *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament* (electronic ed., p. 411). Leiden: E.J. Brill.

⁷ Dahood, M., S. J. (2008). *Psalms I: 1-50: Introduction, translation, and notes* (Vol. 16, p. 11). New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

⁸ Craigie, P. C. (2004). *Psalms 1–50* (2nd ed., Vol. 19, p. 67). Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference & Electronic.

⁹ Briggs, C. A., & Briggs, E. G. (1906–1907). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the book of Psalms* (pp. 15–16). New York: C. Scribner's Sons.

¹⁰ Harris, R. L., Archer, G. L., Jr., & Waltke, B. K. (Eds.). (1999). *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (electronic ed., p. 379). Chicago: Moody Press.: E.J. Brill.

¹¹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 193). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹² Although Acts 13:33 has more than its share of textual issues, these issues do not affect the use of γενένηκα aside from P45, 33 (context), 99 (omission) and spelling in 9 manuscripts. (per CNTTS: H. Milton Haggard Center for New Testament Textual Studies. (2010). *The Center for New Testament Textual Studies: NT Critical Apparatus (Ac 13:33)*. New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.)

¹³ Zerwick, M. (1963). *Biblical Greek illustrated by examples* (English ed., adapted from the fourth Latin ed., Vol. 114, p. 97). Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico.