



“The Lamb of God”

Exodus 12:5-8; John 1:29-34; Revelation 5:1-8

“For our sake he was crucified by Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried”

from the Nicene Creed

It was about 27AD, and John had gone out to the Jordan River, preaching the coming of God’s kingdom and urging his fellow Jews to come out to the river to be washed in the river’s water, symbolizing their repentance of sin and their cleansing of its stain.

Since the time of Joshua, more than a millennium before, the Jordan had been a potent symbol of Israel’s freedom and the people’s allegiance to the LORD God.

Not surprisingly, John attracted a lot of attention. So much so that the High Priest sent some representatives out to see John. The Baptizer willingly told them that he was neither the Messiah nor Elijah. Rather, he was the one spoken of in the scroll of Isaiah, the one who would prepare the way for the coming of the LORD (see Isaiah 40:1-11). John told his questioners that he was not even worthy to tie the sandals of the one who was coming. The questioners left and the next day, John saw Jesus of Nazareth coming to him. John stopped what he was doing, pointed at Jesus and said for all to hear:

“Look the Lamb of God,¹ who takes away the sin² of the world.”

How did John know that Jesus, a relative of John’s, was the “Lamb of God”? John had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River some time earlier; for John went on to tell the crowd what he saw when he had baptized Jesus. John told them that this man, Jesus, was the reason John had called people out to the river. John had seen the Spirit descend on Jesus in the Jordan river and remain on him. Further, God had revealed to John that Jesus was “God’s Chosen One.”

The key element in John the Baptizer’s testimony is that Jesus is the “Lamb of God,” with all its layers of meaning. Making better sense of this has to begin with a look at the place of sheep and lambs in the story of God and his people.

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep” (Ezekiel 34:15)

Sheep have been domesticated for more than 8000 years and need humans more than any other farm animal. Indeed, they are hyper-domesticated. Even more so than other animals, sheep need human care for food, water, and defense from predators. There are no known instances of domesticated sheep surviving in the wild. Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that one of the dominant biblical portraits of God is the Good Shepherd. The most famous reference to this portrait is the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Here, the psalmist even speaks as a sheep. Sheep will not drink from streams, only from pools; therefore, “he leads me beside still waters.” Sheep will not lower their heads into buckets or troughs; thus, the shepherd ensures that, “my cup overflows.” Sheep are an ideal surrogate for human weakness and the helplessness of innocents – in dire need of a loving shepherd.³

This recurrent theme of a good shepherd and his flock make all the more poignant God’s command to the Israelites that they were to spread the blood of a slaughtered lamb on their doorways so that the death coming for the first-born of Israel would pass over the households of God’s people (see Exodus 12). The notion of animal sacrifice wasn’t new to the Israelites; God’s covenant with them provided for the slaughtering of lambs on several occasions each year. For us however, few parts of the Old Testament seem more foreign than this business of sacrifice.

Sacrifice

Few topics are more perplexing and disturbing to modern-day Christians than the biblical perspective on sacrifice. Sure, we can handle talking about sacrifice in the sense of giving something up, but all the stuff about blood and animals and

¹ The phrase, “Lamb of God” is found only twice in the Bible, John 1:29 and in John 1:36. John probably intends it to refer to both the sacrificial lamb and the triumphant lamb depicted in Revelation 5.

² Notice that “sin” here is singular not plural. “Sin” here is not just the individual transgressions nor even their sum, but the beast that imprisons us and holds us in bondage.

³ from John Miles’ entry, “Lamb,” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Doubleday, 1992.

death can be very upsetting. We want to relegate it to an ancient time and culture that has little to do with us. Yet, unless we confront blood sacrifice, much of the Bible simply won't make sense.

It isn't an overstatement to say that the New Testament is an extended reflection on the meaning of Jesus' death in light of the Jewish scriptures. Why did he die? More to the point, why didn't he save himself? Who was he – really? Was anything accomplished by his horrifying and humiliating death on a Roman cross? What do we really make of this Lamb of God? What does Jesus' death, symbolized by the cross, mean for us?

From the beginning, Jesus' followers used and expanded upon the Jewish imagery of blood sacrifice. God's covenant with the Jews provided several rituals in which the sacrifice of an animal was used to deal with sins in such a way that the people could be restored to right relationship with God and their consciences healed.

With Jesus though, all this becomes something new. At the beginning of John's Gospel, upon seeing Jesus, John the Baptist exclaims "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Then a few years later, Jesus' last week before his death is Passover week. At the Last Supper, sharing the bread and cup set the stage for the breaking of Jesus' body and the shedding of his blood. Like the silent lamb of Isaiah 53:7, Jesus won't even defend himself (John 19:9). The legs of the Passover lamb were to be left unbroken (Exodus 12:46); hence, Jesus' legs are not broken by the soldiers (John 19:36).⁴ As the writer of Hebrews puts it, Jesus' death is the final and perfect sacrifice to which all the Old Testament sacrifices pointed.

The triumph of the Lamb

Grasping the full weight of John's pronouncement that Jesus is the Lamb of God also takes us to the powerful images in the fifth chapter of Revelation.

In his vision, John (yet another John!) has been whisked away to the throne room of God, where God is attended by four cherubim and twenty-four elders who are worshipping God. Yet, amidst this worship there is soon mourning and tears. The one on the throne holds a scroll that, unlike most papyri, is written on front and back. It is sealed with seven seals, which signifies that the seal is completely and utterly closed, for seven is the number of completion and totality. What does the scroll contain? We are not told. It could be God's plan for creation, or it could be the rest of the book. Whatever the scroll contains, there is no one, in all the heavens and the earth, who is worthy to open it and John weeps because the scroll will remain closed.

Then, one of the twenty-four elders comes to John and tells him that the Lion of Judah is worthy to open the scroll. Thus, we'd expect that John would turn to see a lion, the Davidic symbol of power and strength, standing ready to open the scroll.

Yet, when John turns, he doesn't see a lion at all. He sees a lamb. But not a cute, white, leaping little lamb. John sees a Lamb standing there as if it had been slaughtered! This is such a powerful moment in Revelation. John hears "Lion" but sees "Lamb." The contrast couldn't be more striking. It is Jesus, who embodies them both, the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God.

We think we know what power and might are, but Jesus Christ has revealed that the truth is far from our expectation. It is the Lamb who conquers. Craig Koester writes, "What John hears about the Lion recalls promises from the Old Testament, and what he sees in the lamb reflects the crucifixion of Christ. Both images point to the same reality. According to the Old Testament, God promised to send a powerful and righteous ruler. These promises are not rejected but fulfilled through the slaughtered yet living Lamb, who is not a hapless victim but a figure of royal strength."⁵

And strong the Lamb certainly is. The Lamb has seven eyes, all-seeing and all-present (see Zechariah 4:10), and seven horns, all-powerful, as horns were ancient symbols of kingly power. In Revelation, there are twenty-eight references to the exalted Lamb.

The Lamb then takes the scroll from the hand of God, causing all the elders and cherubim to fall down before the Lamb in worship, singing their acknowledgement that the Lamb, and the Lamb alone, is worthy to open the scroll.

Then angels too numerous to count join the elders and the cherubim in their worship of the Lamb. The crescendo presses forward as all the creatures in all the cosmos join in the praise of the one seated on the throne and of the Lamb.

⁴ Roman execution squads would often, mercifully, break the legs of those being crucified in order to hasten their death. The broken legs would prevent the person from being able to push themselves up on the cross to keep breathing. Typically, suffocation was the cause of death on a cross.

⁵ From Koester's excellent book, *Revelation and the End of All Things*.

Testimonies

We've now heard the testimony of John the disciple and gospel writer and of John the Baptizer and of John the Revelator. We've been told that Jesus is:

- God, creator and giver of life,
- A man who came to be baptized by John in the Jordan river and the true light of the world
- The Lamb of God and his chosen one. The one for whom Israel had been waiting a very long time.
- The sacrificial lamb who gave his life for all.
- And, the Lamb who invites his bride (the Church) to the great marriage supper.

Next week, we will remain with the world of sheep and lambs, as we come to Jesus: The Good Shepherd.