

## ANOTHER LOOK AT “THE LAMB OF GOD”

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**I**NQUIRIES INTO THE INTERPRETATION of John the Baptist's “Lamb of God” pronouncements in John 1:29 and 36 have long been the subject of serious discussion in New Testament studies.<sup>1</sup> Countless commentators have attempted to identify the referent behind the “Lamb.” The purpose of this study is to summarize the major positions with the intention of understanding the history of interpretation on the subject during the last century and proposing a view that incorporates a number of factors germane to the discussion.

The nine most commonly posed views to be considered fall into two groups—those that appeal to the theology of atonement and those that do not.

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<sup>1</sup> Major contributions to the discussion include the following in chronological order: C. J. Ball, “Had the Fourth Gospel an Aramaic Archetype?” *Expository Times* 21 (1909): 92–93; C. F. Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Parker, 1922), 104–8; E. May, *Ecce Agnus Dei: A Philological and Exegetical Approach to John 1:29, 36* (Washington, DC: Catholic University, 1947); C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 230–32; C. K. Barrett, “The Lamb of God,” *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954): 210–18; idem, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 175–77; Walther Zimmerli and Joachim Jeremias, *The Servant of God* (London: SCM, 1957), 82; Raymond E. Brown, “Three Quotations from John the Baptist in the Gospel of John,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22 (1960): 292–98; Stephen Virgulin, “Recent Discussion of the Title ‘Lamb of God,’” *Scripture* 13 (1961): 74–80; C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 269; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 58–63; E. W. Burrows, “Did John the Baptist Call Jesus the ‘Lamb of God?’” *Expository Times* 85 (1974): 245–49; Charles B. Cousar, “John 1:29–42,” *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 401–6; George L. Carey, “The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 32 (1981): 98–121; Peter M. Renju, “The Lamb of God,” *Bible Translator* 49 (1988): 232–39; and D. Brent Sandy, “John the Baptist's ‘Lamb of God’ Affirmation in Its Canonical and Apocalyptic Milieu,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991): 447–59.

## MAJOR VIEWS ASSOCIATED WITH THE ATONEMENT

THE *TAMID* OR THE LAMB OF THE DAILY SACRIFICES

A critical part of communal life and worship under the Mosaic system was the daily sacrificial offering of a lamb in the tabernacle and later in the temple. This practice became known as the *Tamid* (תָּמִיד, the Hebrew term meaning “regularly” or “continually”). This daily ritual was outlined in the Mosaic Law in a portion dedicated to the requirements and activities of the priests. “Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs a year old regularly [תָּמִיד] each day. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer in the evening and with the first lamb one-tenth of a measure of choice flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of beaten oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine for a drink offering. And the other lamb you shall offer in the evening, and shall offer it with a grain offering and its drink offering, as in the morning, for a pleasing aroma, an offering by fire to the Lord. It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the doorway of the tent of meeting before the Lord, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there” (Exod. 29:38–42).<sup>2</sup> As with other Old Testament sacrifices, this was a way for Israel to gain access to the Lord.

Animals being sacrificed were to be unblemished physically. This requirement is related to the “otherness” of Yahweh; the strict guidelines as to how the community should approach Him emphasize His holiness. Thus the ideas of God’s unapproachableness and His perfection juxtaposed with the glaring imperfections of His people emerge as critical theological concepts. Seen from that perspective, this view does have something to offer the discussion of John the Baptist’s “Lamb of God.”

This view is attractive because it offers a theologically sophisticated referent behind the “Lamb” of John 1:29 and 36. Jesus’ *absolute perfection* is a fundamental element of the faith.<sup>3</sup> Further the cross of Christ is presented throughout the New Testament as both a *sacrifice* for sins and as a *vicarious experience* providing access to God. In these three areas the *Tamid* interpretation offers valid theological correspondence.

While few commentators make an explicit link between this

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this article are those of the author.

<sup>3</sup> The Chalcedonian definition reads, “This selfsame one [i.e., Jesus] is *perfect* both in deity and also in humanness” (John Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches*, 3d ed. [Louisville: John Knox, 1982], 34).

Old Testament image and John the Baptist's reference to the Lamb of God, Hoskyns points to Exodus 29 as the background for John 1:29 and 36. "The faith of the apostles is authorized by the original and primary witness of John, who declares Jesus to be the property of God, by whose complete obedience the normal sacrifices in the Temple—a lamb without blemish was offered daily both morning and evening (Exod. xxix. 38–46). . . . The place of the sacrifice is the place where the glory and grace of God is made known (Exod. xxix. 43). The obedience of the Son of man is therefore the place where the guilt of sin is taken away, and since His obedience is an ultimate obedience its consequences are universal."<sup>4</sup> Bruce agrees, "The Lord, as to his humanity, is the Lamb of God. This is a name given to him as the great antitype of the Jewish sacrifices, *especially of the lamb of the daily sacrifice*, and of the paschal lamb, which were types of Jesus, who offered himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world."<sup>5</sup>

Theologically the association between Jesus and the *Tamid* lamb of the daily sacrifices is compelling. However, the points of correspondence between the two are recognizable only in light of the Cross. Furthermore when Jesus was crucified, people did not immediately recognize Him as the embodiment of perfection or the "sacrificial Messiah." And while Christians confess that Jesus did provide unique access to God through His death, this is true only in light of His crucifixion and resurrection.

It seems unlikely, therefore, from a theological standpoint that the *Tamid* represents John the Baptist's notion behind "the Lamb of God." It should be noted, though, that the correspondence of the *Tamid* extends beyond the theological level. It also has correspondence at the lexical level. The Greek term used for "Lamb" (*ἀμνός*) in John 1 is the same term used in the Greek translation of Exodus 29:38 from among the many used in the Old and New Testaments (as well as in extracanonical literature) for "lamb" and "sheep."

However, though John the Baptist used *ἀμνός*, the broad use of the term in the Septuagint and the fact that *ἀμνός* is used in reference to lambs in many different situations within Israel mitigate against its carrying much weight in the discussion of this interpretive option. While the Evangelist did emphasize Christ's death on behalf of others, he did not refer elsewhere in his Gospel to the

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<sup>4</sup> Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. Francis Noel Davey (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 176 (italics added).

<sup>5</sup> William Bruce, *Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John* (London: James Speirs, 1891), 26–27 (italics added).

daily sacrifices. This fact makes the *Tamid* interpretation unlikely, even with consideration of the lexical congruence.<sup>6</sup>

#### THE SCAPEGOAT OF LEVITICUS 16

The requirements for the Day of Atonement included the offering of a scapegoat. "Then Aaron shall offer the bull for the sin offering (which is for himself), that he may make atonement for himself and for his house. And he shall take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the doorway of the tent of meeting. And Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for the scapegoat. Then Aaron shall offer the goat on which the lot for the Lord fell, and make it a sin offering. But the goat on which the lot for the scapegoat fell, shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make atonement upon it, to send it into the wilderness as the scapegoat" (Lev. 16:6–10). Since the context in which the scapegoat is mentioned is the Day of Atonement, this view has some credence theologically. But though the ideas of atonement and acceptance before God present strong theological correspondence, this view fails to be convincing for several reasons.

First, atonement was not initially associated with the coming of the Messiah,<sup>7</sup> so it is a strain to identify the scapegoat as the primary image behind John the Baptist's declaration. As with the *Tamid* interpretation this idea of the atoning work of the scapegoat can be explained only in light of Jesus' crucifixion. Second, the view "suffers from the fatal defect that the scapegoat was not a lamb."<sup>8</sup> When people heard the words "the Lamb of God," they would not have thought of the goat of Leviticus 16.

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<sup>6</sup> Several commentators suggest that John the Baptist's use of this title for Christ points to the fact that Christ is the "end" or "general fulfillment" of the Old Testament sacrifices. See, for example, C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 175–77; Marcus Dods, *The Gospel of St. John: I–XI* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1895), 46; Arno Gaebelin, *The Gospel of John* (New York: Our Hope, 1925), 32–33; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 147–48; and A. W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 57–59.

<sup>7</sup> This assertion is based on the idea that the title "Lamb of God" is messianic to some degree but not *in toto*. In other words the title is not to be understood as strictly messianic but may reveal an aspect of the expected Messiah. Moloney's comment in this regard is helpful. "Many christological themes emerge across these first days, especially in the witness of the Baptist to Jesus as the Lamb of God and the Son of God. . . . In the Fourth Gospel, the Baptist is the one sent by God to give witness to Jesus, and he never fails in the task. *He unerringly says things about Jesus which match what has been revealed to the reader in the Prologue*" (Francis J. Moloney, "The Jews' in the Fourth Gospel: Another Perspective" *Pacifica* 15 [2002]: 21) (italics added).

<sup>8</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 146.

This view is not strongly advocated by any modern author. Such scholarly silence may tacitly confirm the tenuous nature of this position.

THE "GENTLE LAMB" OF JEREMIAH 11:19

This reference to a gentle lamb is associated figuratively with the threats against the life of the unsuspecting prophet. As Jeremiah wrote, "The Lord revealed it to me [i.e., the conspiracy against Jeremiah], and I knew; then you showed me their evil deeds. But I was like a gentle lamb [*ἀφελος*, LXX] led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, 'Let us destroy the tree with its fruit; let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered'" (Jer. 11:18-19).

However, a connection between "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" and a vulnerable prophet facing a conspiratorial situation is negligible. The idea being communicated through the "gentle lamb" is one of unsuspecting innocence and meekness. True, Christians acknowledge Jesus' innocence and meekness in the face of suffering, but it would be a stretch to conclude that this was the ultimate idea intended in John. As Bernard says, "The thought of the gentleness of a lamb is *insufficient* to explain the Lamb of God which *takes away the sin of the world*."<sup>9</sup>

Bernard suggests that this view may have won a hearing among some scholars because the description so closely resembles the gentle lamb of Isaiah 53:7 which was "silent before its shearers."<sup>10</sup> Not only is the lamb in that verse associated with Christ in the New Testament, but also it has gained further momentum and recognition from reflection on His death.

However, it would be risky to make a leap from the meaning of one verse (Jer. 11:19) because of its supposed relation to another text (Isa. 53:7) and then conclude that this was the intended image in John the Baptist's pronouncements. While the "gentle lamb" of Jeremiah may find some symbolic correspondence, it ultimately fails to offer a valid explanation for the meaning of "the Lamb of God."

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<sup>9</sup> J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1928), 43 (italics added).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. See also Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 63; and I. Howard Marshall, "Lamb of God," in *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 433.

## THE GUILT OFFERING

This view is less clearly defined than the previous three views. Several verses refer to sacrificial animals offered as guilt offerings. The first of these is Leviticus 14:12–13. “The priest shall take one of the lambs [ἀμνός, LXX] and offer it as a guilt offering along with the log of oil, and raise them as an elevation offering before the Lord. He shall slaughter the lamb where the sin offering and the burnt offering are slaughtered in the holy place; for the guilt offering, like the sin offering, belongs to the priest; it is most holy.” Another text is Numbers 6:11–12. “And the priest shall offer one as a sin offering and the other as the burnt offering, and make atonement for them, because they incurred guilt by reason of the dead body. They shall sanctify the head that same day, and separate themselves to the Lord for their days as Nazirites, and bring a male lamb [ἀμνός, LXX] a year-old as a guilt offering.”

The guilt offering, like some of the previous views, does provide a theological correspondence with Jesus’ death. The removal of guilt is intimately associated with the removal of sin, which the Lamb of God is said to provide.

However, one problem, which both Morris and Carson point out, is that the sacrifice itself was not always a lamb but was more often a bull or a goat, as alluded to in the Book of Hebrews.<sup>11</sup> A greater problem for this view is that the guilt offering is never mentioned in the Gospel of John. It would seem odd to have such a concept introduced in the first chapter only to have it abandoned throughout the remainder of the Gospel.<sup>12</sup>

## THE AQEDAH OF GENESIS 22

A view that has been prominent since the early church is that “the Lamb of God” is to be associated with the sacrificial animal God provided as a substitute for Isaac (Gen. 22:8).<sup>13</sup> This passage has come to be known as the “binding of Isaac,” or the *Aqedat Yitshaq*. The context in which this event took place is important in that it includes the reaffirmation of God’s plan to bless Abraham and his descendants.

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 147; and D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 149.

<sup>12</sup> See note 7 above.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed treatment of the *Aqedah* in the Old Testament, early Judaism, the New Testament, and extrabiblical literature see James Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1981), 23–85; and P. R. Davies and B. D. Chilton, “The Aqedah: A Revised Tradition History,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978): 514–46.

The event recorded in Genesis 22 is significant in that it reports Abraham's faithfulness when he was "tested" by God and God's faithfulness in providing a substitute for Isaac and in confirming His blessing on Abraham. Isaac is only a secondary element of the story, for the passage focuses primarily on the relationship between Abraham and the Lord. However, those who see the animal in Genesis 22 as typifying Jesus as "the Lamb of God" see several points of correspondence between Jesus and Isaac.

For instance Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice, just as Jesus carried His wooden cross to His ultimate sacrifice for sin. Isaac laid down his life and in a sense received it back, something like a resurrection from the dead (Heb. 11:19).<sup>14</sup> Jesus laid down His life and received it back through resurrection from the dead. However, the animal was a ram, not a lamb. Further, the connections made by this view are to Jesus' *death* and not to His arrival on the scene, as in John 1.

Another argument used in support of this view is that the ram and the Lamb of God were both provided by God.<sup>15</sup> In John 1:29 and 36 the genitive in the phrase *ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ* would be understood as "from God" or "provided by God." However, ablatival uses of the genitive, like this one, are rare in Hellenistic Greek. For such a translation one would almost expect *ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ* or *ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ*, rather than simply *τοῦ θεοῦ*.<sup>16</sup>

While the ram image would have been familiar to the original readers of the Fourth Gospel, during the Old Testament period the ram was not associated with the advent of the Messiah. Nor does the *Aqedah* speak of the removal of sin. In fact God's purpose in providing a substitute for Isaac was to spare him while testing Abraham's faith, not to atone for or "take away" sin.

#### THE "LAMB LED TO THE SLAUGHTER" OF ISAIAH 53:7

The New Testament is replete with significant references to Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecies in Isaiah. For instance Matthew 1:23 states that the miraculous birth of Christ fulfilled Isaiah 7:14. And Luke 4:14–21 records Jesus' own declaration that He is the

<sup>14</sup> See the discussion of these nuances in C. T. R. Hayward, "The Sacrifice of Isaac and Jewish Polemic against Christianity," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990): 292–300.

<sup>15</sup> Morris also briefly discusses this as a translational possibility (*The Gospel according to John*, 144).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 107. It is possible, however, that the simpler *τοῦ θεοῦ* is used because a double entendre was in view.

fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1. In John 12:41 the Evangelist wrote that Isaiah saw Jesus' glory and subsequently spoke about Him, a text many scholars believe to be a reference to the events of Isaiah 6. More specifically in Isaiah 53:7 the silent lamb that was "led to the slaughter" has been traditionally understood by Christians as a picture of Jesus, who in His meekness and faithfulness submitted to "the slaughter" of the cross. "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb [πρόβατον, LXX] led to the slaughter, and like a sheep [ἀμνός, LXX] that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."

This verse occurs in one of the Servant Songs of Isaiah.<sup>17</sup> The "servant" of these songs has been identified in numerous ways, ranging from historical individuals to the nation Israel to a specific group or "remnant" within Israel.<sup>18</sup> However, there is little evidence, if any, that before the first century these passages were thought of as referring to the Messiah. Since the Jews did not expect a *suffering* Messiah, these texts would have been foreign to the context of a discourse on the nature of the Messiah.

However, in the New Testament period Isaiah 53:7 was viewed as a valid prophecy of Jesus' substitutionary death. Philip encountered an Ethiopian eunuch who asked him to explain Isaiah 53:7. "Philip began to speak, and starting with *this scripture* [i.e., Isa. 53:7], he preached to him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). This identification cannot have escaped the attention of the church fathers, who not only saw this as a legitimate way of describing Jesus' messiahship but also interpreted the Servant Songs in this manner.

In Christian theology the lamb led to the slaughter presents a profound picture of Christ as the Servant of God, but in the Fourth Gospel this connection is questionable. This view then suffers from three weaknesses. First, there was no concept in Hebraic thought of a suffering Messiah. Second, no Jewish exegetes before the late second century understood or interpreted the text in this way. Third, this view claims to have theological correspondence to Christ's death, which was not primarily in view at this point in the Gospel of John. While this view may find symbolic expression in the exposition of John 1:29 and 36, from an interpretive standpoint it must be rejected as the *primary* notion behind the title "the Lamb of God."

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<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 42:1–17; 49:1–13; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12.

<sup>18</sup> For an extensive discussion of the history of interpretation on the suffering servant see Christopher R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical and Critical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 6–116.



## THE PASSOVER SACRIFICE

One of the most common images connected with Jesus' sacrifice is the Passover lamb. There is much to commend this interpretation in the Fourth Gospel. First, Christ is explicitly identified with the Passover Lamb in John 19:36,<sup>19</sup> and it seems certain that John intended to portray Jesus as the ultimate Passover Lamb.<sup>20</sup> Also in recording three different occasions of the observance of the Passover (2:13–23; 6:4; 11:55; 19:14) the Evangelist clearly emphasized the Passover and its significance. So in the Fourth Gospel it is clear that a connection is made between Jesus' death and the Passover.

Passover was one of the four great festal celebrations for the Hebrew people. The inception of the celebration is seen in Exodus during Israel's struggle for independence from Pharaoh's oppressive regime. The manner of escape for the Hebrews eventually came about through the blood of a sacrifice—the paschal lamb—in the midst of a great plague.

This event was highly significant for the Hebrews. It facilitated the establishment of their autonomous state as a theocracy under Yahweh. After they gained their freedom it remained an annual remembrance in their communal worship. The significance of the Passover is further recognized in Jesus' use of it as the locus for the Last Supper. It is no coincidence that these events occurred during the same time frame, especially in the Fourth Gospel where, as has already been stated, the Evangelist placed great emphasis on this festal observance.

A major problem for this view is that an identification of Jesus as a Passover Lamb is related to His death and its effects with respect to sin. From a narrative standpoint, though, it is not unlikely that John the Baptist's early identification of Jesus as "the Lamb of God" is a foreshadowing of what will occur later in the narrative.

Another objection is that the Passover victim was not always a lamb, and therefore an explicit identification with the Passover

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<sup>19</sup> John 19:36, "These things occurred that the Scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken,'" alludes to Exodus 12:46 and/or Numbers 9:12, both of which describe requirements for the Passover feast.

<sup>20</sup> In this regard Brown writes, "Most commonly scholars point to noon as the hour when the priests in the Temple began slaughtering the lambs for the Passover meal to be eaten that night. One may wonder whether John's readers would have understood this symbolism. . . . That Jesus the Lamb of God was sentenced to death at the very hour when lambs for the Jewish Passover began to be killed would constitute a replacement theme (i.e., Jesus in place of a significant festal motif) quite at home in John's treatment of Jewish feasts" (Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah—From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* [New York: Doubleday, 1994], 1:847–48).

sacrifice would not necessarily have followed. Exodus 12:5 reads, "You may take it from the sheep or the goats." The term *πάσχα* is used nine times in John's Gospel, and while only one occurrence seems to be a direct reference to the sacrifice itself (John 18:28), this does reveal the Evangelist's familiarity with the terminology. Further, the differing terms are not problematic in view of the Evangelist's predilection for double entendre.<sup>21</sup>

Barrett and Brown both say the paschal lamb is intended by the title "the Lamb of God" (although Brown also sees the Suffering Servant as an equally valid referent).<sup>22</sup> However, both writers also make a distinction between the meaning intended by the Evangelist and that intended by John the Baptist. Both Barrett and Brown assert that the Passover lamb could not have been John the Baptist's original meaning, and that instead this was the emphasis of the Fourth Evangelist. Considering the obvious attention given to the Passover in the Fourth Gospel, this is not a far-fetched claim.

The proponents of this view argue that at the literary level there is theological correspondence in the notion of atonement. This view points to the protection and atonement provided by the initial paschal lamb and associates that in a wider sense with Christ's substitutionary work on the cross. In that sense the paschal lamb is said to be a type of Christ.

However, one objection is that the Passover sacrifice was not *generally* held to be expiatory and therefore would not necessarily have lent itself to an understanding of atonement. Morris notes that this is not insurmountable, though, since there seems to be strong evidence that by the close of the Old Testament period all the sacrifices were held to be expiatory in some way.<sup>23</sup>

The Fourth Gospel records at least two and a half years of Je-

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<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, the classic example of double entendre in Jesus' use of *ἀνωθεν* in John 3:14. The primary sense of the term is "from above," as Jesus likely intended it, but Nicodemus understood it in the secondary sense of "again." See also the Samaritan woman's use of *κύριε* in her conversation with Jesus in John 4. She was using the word as a polite title, probably to be understood as "Sir." However, the reader has already been given privileged information in the prologue. Therefore the reader understands that the application of this term to Jesus is ironic because the term *κύριε* can also mean "Lord," and this is how the reader has already come to know Jesus. For a discussion of Johannine irony and the many ways the author used this literary device see Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985).

<sup>22</sup> C. K. Barrett, "The Lamb of God," *New Testament Studies* 1 (1955): 217–18; Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 62–3; and idem, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1:847–48.

<sup>23</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 145.

sus' ministry, punctuated by three observances of the Passover. This is significant when compared with the single Passover mentioned in each of the three Synoptics. Also in the Gospel of John the time of Jesus' condemnation coincides with the slaying of the lambs for Passover.<sup>24</sup> Also, as noted, in John 19:36 the Evangelist unambiguously identified Jesus with the Passover sacrifice. When all these factors are considered, the paschal interpretation is a strong contender for the primary referent behind "the Lamb of God."

### MAJOR VIEWS NOT ASSOCIATED WITH ATONEMENT

The seven views discussed thus far each have some connection with the idea of atonement or sacrifice. The two following views represent further attempts to identify the referent behind John the Baptist's "Lamb of God" but without reference to the theology of substitutionary atonement.

#### THE "SERVANT OF YAHWEH" OF ISAIAH 53

This view was first given expression in 1909 by C. J. Ball.<sup>25</sup> It then found clearer exposition in 1922 by C. F. Burney.<sup>26</sup> Thirty-five years later Zimmerli and Jeremias presented this view.<sup>27</sup> According to these proponents an ambiguous Aramaic expression underlies the "unparalleled genitive combination"<sup>28</sup> (ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) that was mistranslated and has therefore been misconstrued over time. This view is based on the idea that behind the Fourth Gospel there was an original Aramaic source.<sup>29</sup>

The primary contention of this view is that behind the Greek phrase ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ lies an Aramaic expression מְלִיץ דָּאֵלֵהָ ("Servant of the Lord") in the sense of the well-known Hebrew phrase עֶבֶד יְהוָה ("Servant of Yahweh"). This view points out the

<sup>24</sup> See Brown's discussion of this in *The Death of the Messiah*, 1:847–48.

<sup>25</sup> Ball, "Had the Fourth Gospel an Aramaic Archetype?" 92–93.

<sup>26</sup> Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel*.

<sup>27</sup> Zimmerli and Jeremias, *The Servant of God*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> There is much debate among the proponents of this position as to whether the supposed Aramaic source was written or oral. See Oswald T. Allis, "The Alleged Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel," *Princeton Theological Review* 26 (1928): 531–72; Schuyler Brown, "From Burney to Black: The Fourth Gospel and the Aramaic Question," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 26 (1964): 323–39; and C. C. Torrey, "The Aramaic Origin of the Gospel of John," *Harvard Theological Review* 16 (1923): 305–44.

ambiguity in the Aramaic term טליא,<sup>30</sup> which can mean lamb, boy, or servant. It is further postulated that in John טליא was mis-translated as ἀμνός rather than the more proper παῖς (“servant”), resulting in an incorrect Greek rendering.

However, nothing in the Gospel of John points to such an understanding. Also there are serious lexical problems with this view. Dodd effectively speaks to this concern. “As I have elsewhere observed, ἀμνός in the LXX never translates טלה. No examples are adduced of טליא as a rendering of עבר. Even the Syriac versions go back from παῖς to עברא, except where they take it to mean ‘son.’ Thus we lack evidence in support of the view either that the Aramaic-speaking church (or John the Baptist) could have spoken of the יהוה עבר as טליא דאלהא, or that a bilingual translator who took טליא in the sense of ‘lamb’ would have chosen ἀμνός as its equivalent.”<sup>31</sup>

Along with these lexical difficulties Morris makes a significant point. “It is not easy to think that so well known an expression as ‘the Servant of the Lord,’ should be unrecognized, and should be translated by so difficult and unusual a phrase as ‘the Lamb of God.’”<sup>32</sup> Carson adds that this view “presupposes that whoever put this Aramaic expression into Greek somehow avoided a perfectly common and obvious expression, ‘the servant of the Lord,’ in order to produce a new and rather strange expression, ‘the lamb of God.’”<sup>33</sup> These points lead to the conclusion that, while novel and imaginative, this option fails to present the most likely sense of the “Lamb of God” pronouncement by John the Baptist.

#### TRIUMPHANT LAMB OF THE APOCALYPSE/APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Dodd suggests that the title “Lamb of God” is equivalent to “King of Israel.” He says this indicates that John the Baptist was presenting Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>34</sup> While Dodd is not dogmatic about this view, he does identify the Baptist’s ὁ ἀμνός τοῦ θεοῦ with the prominent, conquering Lamb (ἀρνίον) of Revelation.

The triumphant, horned lamb of Revelation is a slain lamb

<sup>30</sup> The Aramaic טליא is taken in the sense of the Hebrew טלה, which means “lamb,” but which in Aramaic corresponds to the Greek παῖς, “boy” or “servant.”

<sup>31</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 235–36.

<sup>32</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 146.

<sup>33</sup> Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 149.

<sup>34</sup> Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 231.

that has returned from death and is receiving worship (Rev. 5:6–14). He exercises wrath and strikes fear in those with whom he comes in contact, some of whom are powerful and revered (6:15–17). In a strange mix of metaphors the lamb is also described as the shepherd of God's people (7:17). He even stands triumphant on Mount Zion (14:1), the place associated with God's blessing for Israel. The Lamb also overcomes in the midst of opposition (17:14) and ultimately establishes His reign on the earth as the representative of God (22:1–5). This view has several difficulties. First, the term used for the triumphant Lamb in Revelation is *ἀρνίον* rather than *ἀμνός*, which is used in John 1:29 and 36. However, the difference between *ἀμνός* and *ἀρνίον* is not a problem if it is recognized that *ἀρνίον* in the Apocalypse is something of a technical term, whereas in the Gospel of John *ἀμνός* is more ambiguous. While Revelation uses only *ἀρνίον*, the Fourth Gospel uses several terms for lamb, *ἀμνός*, *ἀρνίον*, *πάσχα*, and *πρόβατον*.

Second, the particular understanding of "the Lamb of God" offered by the *ἀρνίον* in Revelation is potentially anachronistic in that the Apocalypse was likely written years later than the Fourth Gospel. This is hardly a consensus opinion regarding the dates of the Apocalypse and the Fourth Gospel.<sup>35</sup> However, if it is granted for the sake of argument that the Fourth Gospel preceded the Apocalypse, one must also recognize that it is not as though the images presented in the Apocalypse arose in some apocalyptic vacuum.

At this point the extrabiblical literature makes a significant contribution to the discussion. Here Dodd introduces an important point in tracing the *ἀρνίον* image used in the Apocalypse to the lamb imagery found in intertestamental apocalyptic literature. He then connects John the Baptist's "Lamb of God" conceptually to these same images. What Dodd argues, however, is that the apocalyptic Lamb is the idea intended by the Evangelist.<sup>36</sup> This seems unlikely in view of the consistent focus of the Evangelist on

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<sup>35</sup> There is fairly wide acceptance among New Testament scholars that the Fourth Gospel was written sometime between A.D. 90 and 110. With respect to Revelation, though, two primary options are suggested for the date of its composition. The first is just after the death of Nero, around A.D. 68–69. The second is near the end of Domitian's reign, in A.D. 95 or 96. There is much speculation and varying opinion among New Testament scholars about which date is the more likely candidate for the composition of the Apocalypse.

<sup>36</sup> This is also how Brown understands Dodd in his assessment of this view. Further, Brown appears to regard this as a legitimate historical saying (*The Gospel according to John*, 58–9).

the redemption provided in Christ.<sup>37</sup> Further there is little room theologically for the notion of a “conquering Messiah” as a theological emphasis at the narrative level. However, there is a potential place for such a notion in the historical context of John the Baptist.

Several extrabiblical texts include such a “conquering lamb” image. Among the more prominent texts are *1 Enoch* 90:6–19; *Testament of Joseph* 19:8–12; and *Testament of Benjamin* 3:8.<sup>38</sup> Each of these passages refers to a conquering lamb, and that image was early enough to have informed the messianic expectation of John the Baptist.<sup>39</sup> Also all three “lamb” references are found in works clearly concerned with the nature and role(s) of the Messiah. And all three references are in apocalyptic works. This last observation is significant because John the Baptist was expecting an apocalyptic-eschatological, triumphant Messiah, and not one who would suffer or atone for sin.<sup>40</sup>

If “the Lamb of God” is a pronouncement by John the Baptist recorded in the narrative for the sake of ironic emphasis—a common Johannine technique—then a proper interpretation of the title would yield two meanings, one historical and one theological.

### THE MEANING OF “WHO TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD”

The phrase “who takes away the sin of the world” has often been understood in the Christian tradition as a reference to Jesus’ bearing of sin for sinners through His substitutionary death. However, the lexical and conceptual background of the adjectival participle, *ὁ αἰρων*, “who takes away,” must be considered. Some writers

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, John 1:12–13; 5:24–27; 8:51–52; 10:9, 15–17.

<sup>38</sup> For a fuller treatment of these passages see Christopher W. Skinner, “Did John the Baptist Call Jesus the ‘Lamb of God’ and If He Did, What Did He Mean?” A Historical and Exegetical Study of John 1:29, 36” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2001), 93–109. For a reliable translation of these passages see James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1:70, 824–26.

<sup>39</sup> Though clearly composite in nature, the three works in question were all written before the first century A.D.

<sup>40</sup> This can be seen in John’s kerygma preserved in Matthew 3:7–12 and Luke 3:11–17, and it helps explain John’s questioning of Jesus (“Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” Matt. 11:3; Luke 7:19). Such a question betrays John’s expectation of deliverance not only from his incarceration but also from the oppressive regime of Rome, and lends further credence to the notion that he was not expecting a suffering, substitutionary Messiah. For more on John’s eschatological and apocalyptic preaching see the description of John in Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 77.

contrast the meaning of *αἴρω* in this verse with the verb *φέρω* ("to bear or carry").<sup>41</sup> The Septuagint uses the phrase *ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν*, to translate either *יִשָּׁרְנוּ* ("to take away sin") or *יִשָּׁרְנוּ* ("to take away iniquity").

The idea of removing or taking away sin, as expressed literally in both the Hebrew and Greek constructions, figuratively expresses the idea of the pardoning or forgiveness of sin. Significantly the Greek verb used to translate *שָׁרַף* is often a cognate form of *αἴρω*, the verb used in John 1:29. Five times in the Septuagint the word *αἴρω* or its cognates are best rendered "to forgive" or "to pardon" (Exod. 28:38 [34]; 34:7 [*ἀφαίρω*]; Num. 14:18 [*ἀφαίρω*]; 1 Sam. 15:25 [*αἴρω*]; Mic. 7:18 [*ἐξαίρω*]). In this regard Barrett notes that these Hebrew constructions and by analogy their Septuagint counterparts "often signify the removal not of evil simply but of guilt."<sup>42</sup> In that case the qualifying phrase "who takes away the sin of the world" is connected with atonement, not messianic triumph.<sup>43</sup>

#### THE TRIUMPHANT LAMB AND THE SUBSTITUTIONARY LAMB

The most acceptable conclusion sees a combination of the Passover image as a theological emphasis and the triumphant lamb image as rooted in John the Baptist's words about Jesus in John 1:29. This means that the phrase "the Lamb of God" possesses something of a double entendre consistent with the Evangelist's practice of investing a speaking character's words with greater post-Resurrection significance. When John the Baptist declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God," he was referring to Jesus as the conquering Messiah, who was poised to bring swift judgment like that meted out in the images from his own eschatological preaching. Then the Evangelist capitalized on this genuine pronouncement, investing it with greater theological meaning. Since the Johannine Jesus is the sin-bearing Messiah, the Evangelist framed the Baptist's pronouncement in such a way that it produced a double

<sup>41</sup> Addressing this view, Dodd writes, "It is illegitimate to understand *αἴρειν ἁμαρτίαν* as 'to bear sin,' implying an interpretation of the death of Christ as a piacular sacrifice. It means 'to remove sin', as in I John iii. 5 *ἐφανερώθη ἵνα τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἄρῃ*, i.e., to abolish or do away with sin" (Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 233).

<sup>42</sup> Barrett, "The Lamb of God," 210.

<sup>43</sup> In this view, then, the qualifying phrase "who takes away the sin of the world" may have been added by the Evangelist under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This fits the Evangelist's emphasis on the Passover in his Gospel.

meaning. This is largely accomplished through the combination of the sacrificial Passover image with the qualifying phrase in verse 29.<sup>44</sup>

In that light the “Lamb of God” can be regarded as both an utterance of John the Baptist as well as a powerful theological affirmation by the Evangelist. The Baptist’s idea is related to the conquering images of the Messiah in the Apocalypse and the extrabiblical apocalyptic literature of the intertestamental period.<sup>45</sup> The Johannine concept of the “Lamb of God *who takes away the sin of the world*” can be regarded as an implicit reference to Jesus as the ultimate Passover lamb. This finds greater significance in the Fourth Gospel’s emphasis on that observance. Thus the difficult title “the Lamb of God” reveals not only the incompleteness of John the Baptist’s messianic expectation, but at the same time the glorious nature of Jesus as the Messiah.

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<sup>44</sup> The second, shorter occurrence of the title in 1:36 probably reflects the pronouncement originally made by John the Baptist.

<sup>45</sup> As stated above, the dating of Revelation has some bearing on this conclusion.



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