

JESUS: THE LAMB OF GOD

By

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Introduction

Although Jesus is referred to as the Lamb of God in many liturgies of the Christian Church – for example the Agnus Dei – there are only two references to Jesus as the “Lamb of God” in the whole of scripture, although Jesus is sometimes described as a lamb - especially in Revelation. Both of the references to Jesus as the Lamb of God are to be found in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Let me just read them both to you:

““I baptise with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising. The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” (John 1:26-30 NIV)

and

“Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!” When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.” (John 1:32-37 NIV)

We are so used to hearing Jesus described in this way that perhaps you’ve never stopped to think that it really is quite a curious way to describe a man. Why should Jesus be called ‘God’s Lamb’? What does this description mean?

Now we know that John the Baptist was a man sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus, so clearly we have to listen carefully to what he has to say about Jesus. However, neither John the Baptist nor John the gospel writer bothered to explain why they used this phrase. We shall be talking about the meaning of this phrase today and from now on I shall speak of John the gospel writer using the phrase and putting it into the mouth of John the Baptist. So, let me just ask you why you think that John referred to Jesus in this way? Can you think of any scripture or scriptural ideas that support this description of Jesus?

In preparing this talk, I have identified no less than nine scriptural themes that to a greater or lesser extent support the description of Jesus as the Lamb of God. These are:

1. The Passover Lamb
2. The Lamb that is led to the slaughter
3. The guilt offering
4. The scapegoat
5. The daily sacrifice in the Temple
6. The suffering servant
7. The gentle lamb
8. The lamb that God provided for Abraham
9. The Lamb of the apocalypses

As you can see most of these are based on animal sacrifices that the Israelite people were commanded to make. So let's take a look at each of these ideas in turn and see how we can develop our understanding of the meaning of this image of Jesus.

The Passover Lamb

This is perhaps the most common suggestion for what John had in mind. Certainly there is no doubt that John does concentrate quite a bit on Passover imagery in his gospel, and in his account of the crucifixion he seems to put the death of Christ at the same time as the Passover lambs were being slain in the Temple. This clearly identifies Christ's death with the Passover sacrifice and Paul takes this idea up in 1 Corinthians 5:7

“Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.” (1 Corinthians 5:7 NIV)

This is the only time Paul takes up this image in his letters and some scholars think that he may have been writing this particular letter around the time of the Passover. In addition Christ himself identified his sacrificial death with the Passover at the Last Supper.

The Passover imagery is highly appropriate as a description of the work of Christ. You will remember that at the original Passover, lambs were slaughtered and their blood daubed on the doorposts of the houses of the Jews to save their sons from death and redeem the whole Jewish race from captivity. Let me read the account to you from Exodus:

“Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the door-frame. Not one of you shall go out of the door of his house until morning. When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the door-frame and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.” (Exodus 12:21-23 NIV)

This was not just to be a one off event but an enduring ceremony:

““Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” Then the people bowed down and worshipped.” (Exodus 12:24-27 NIV)

In many ways, it was the Exodus and all the events associated with it, that transformed the Israelites into a people, a nation – the people of God. So, this great deliverance remained in the minds of the Jewish people, and throughout the OT there are references to it. This was important because it guaranteed the transmission of the imagery and its significance through into NT times. These ideas, this imagery, are important for understanding the nature of Christ's work for us. Just as the Jews were delivered from slavery in Egypt through the Passover, so Christ's sacrifice delivers men from the captivity in which their sins enslaved them. It transforms us from being slaves into being the people of God and it saves us from the destruction that God visits on sin.

At this point, I think it would be interesting to look at the Jewish celebration of the Passover in a bit more detail. The meal was framed within a liturgy whose core was the Passover prayer of the family head and the recitation of the Hallel psalms (Psalms 113–118). When those participating had taken their places, the head of the house began the celebration by pronouncing a blessing, first of the festival and then of the wine (M. *Pesachim* X. 2). Then the paschal company drank the first cup of wine. After this the food was brought in, consisting of unleavened bread, bitter herbs, greens, stewed fruit and roast lamb (M. *Pesachim* X. 3). The son then asked why this night, with its special customs and food, was distinguished from all other nights (M. *Pesachim* X. 4). The family head responded by recalling the biblical account of the redemption from Egypt. This occurred after the meal had been served but before it was eaten. So the head of the household would say: “This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let everyone who hungers come and eat; let everyone who is needy come and eat the Passover meal.” Each of the other elements was also introduced in the context of Israel’s experience in bondage. The bitter herbs served to recall the bitterness of slavery, the stewed fruit, which possessed the consistency and color of clay, evoked the making of bricks as slaves, while the paschal lamb provided a reminder of God’s gracious “passing over” of Israel in the plague of death that came to Egypt.

The blessing of God for the gift of bread immediately preceded the meal itself. The head of the family sat up from his reclining position, took a cake of unleavened bread, and recited the blessing over it in the name of all: “Praised be Thou, O Lord, Sovereign of the world, who causes bread to come forth from the earth” (M. *Berachoth* VI. 1). Those present identified themselves with the blessing by saying “Amen.” The family-head then broke for each person present a piece and gave it to him, the bread passing from hand to hand until it reached all the guests who were at the table, who ate it with the bitter herbs and the stewed fruit. The distribution normally took place in silence, for the explanation of the elements belonged to the Passover devotions, not to the grace before the meal. This instruction led naturally into the praise of God for the salvation he had provided and the anticipation of future redemption: “So may the Lord, our God, and the God of our fathers, cause us to enjoy the feasts that come in peace, glad of heart at the upbuilding of your city and rejoicing in your service . . . and we shall thank you with a new song for our redemption” (M. *Pesachim* X. 4–6). The new song was the first part of the ancient Hallel (Ps. 113–115), after which a second cup of wine was drunk. Only then did the meal really begin with the eating of the roasted lamb, and this was not to extend beyond midnight (M. *Pesachim* X. 9).

Following the main meal, the head of the household rose again from his reclining position and exhorted those present to “Speak praises to our God, to whom belongs what we have eaten,” to which those present replied, “Praised be our God for the food we have eaten.” With his right hand he then took the third cup of red wine mixed with water, and with his eyes on the cup pronounced the prayer of thanksgiving on behalf of all, with the concluding words: “May the All-merciful One make us worthy of the days of the Messiah and of the life of the world to come. He brings the salvation of his king. He shows covenant-faithfulness to his Anointed, to David and to his seed forever. He makes peace in his heavenly places. May he secure peace for us and for all Israel. And say you, Amen.”

There followed the singing of the second part of the Hallel (Ps. 116–118) and the drinking of the fourth cup, which concluded the Passover (M. *Pesachim* X. 7).

Most importantly, Jesus himself linked his sacrifice on the cross to the Passover in two ways. Firstly, by instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper – itself a Passover meal.

“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them.” (Mark 14:22-24 NIV)

Interestingly this cup referred to in Mark’s gospel would have been the third cup of the Passover meal. Jesus never took the fourth cup, but has saved it until he meets with us again following the second coming, for immediately after the third cup he said:

““I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.”” (Mark 14:25 NIV)

Luke’s Gospel and 1 Corinthians 11:25 both make it perfectly clear that this covenant was a new covenant. Both the Passover and the making of a covenant explicitly required a blood sacrifice, which is no doubt why Christ referred to his blood. Secondly, Jesus arranged the time of his crucifixion to coincide with the Passover. He entered Jerusalem on the Sunday before the Passover – the very day that the Passover lambs were driven into that city – and was crucified around the time the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple.

Some scholars reject the Passover imagery because they say that the Passover was not expressly an expiatory sacrifice – that is it was not a sacrifice to take away or atone for sin - whilst John says that the lamb of God takes away the sins of the world. I reject this view. I believe that all sacrifices involving blood were understood as atoning by the Jews. In my view Leviticus 17:11 makes this quite clear:

“For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” (Leviticus 17:11 NIV)

Also, there are Rabbinic passages referring specifically to the Passover as atoning – for example:

“I will have pity on you, through the blood of the Passover and the blood of circumcision, and I will forgive you.”

The Midrash (Jewish commentaries on OT scripture) says that the Israelites were under God’s condemnation on account of their idolatry. They were liable to the death penalty. But, the Passover blood freed them. The Midrash also equates the Passover with the sin offering, citing Numbers 7:46:

“one male goat for a sin offering;”

It is difficult to see how the Jews could link the Passover sacrifice so closely to the sin offering if it was not regarded as expiatory or atoning.

Also the substitutionary nature of the Passover lamb is quite clear. Once the lamb was chosen it was taken into the house for four days – it almost became part of the family. When it was slaughtered at Passover it died in the place of the firstborn sons of Israel.

Over the centuries this sacrifice was repeated millions of times. To give just one example, when King Josiah celebrated the Passover, he slaughtered more than 37,000 sheep (2 Chronicles 35). Imagine all those sheep and all that blood! According to Josephus, the ancient historian, several hundred thousand lambs were herded through the streets of Jerusalem every Passover. Yet not even the blood of all those animals could atone for sin. In Hebrews we read that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4). What was needed was a more efficacious sacrifice, the offering of a more precious blood – the blood of Christ.

Whatever may have been the Jewish conception of Passover at the time of its original institution, I think it is quite clear that by NT times it was certainly held to have atoning aspects. Certainly, Jesus gives the Passover atoning aspects by identifying his sacrifice so closely with the Passover. Thus, there seems good reason to say that when John says that the lamb of God takes away sin he was probably thinking of the Passover lamb.

The only significant objection to the identification of Christ the Lamb of God with the Passover lamb is that the Jewish Passover sacrifice would not necessarily have been a lamb at all. It might be, and indeed often was, a kid of the goats. Thus, there is no more reason to speak of the Passover lamb than of the Passover kid or the Passover goat. First century Jews spoke of the Passover sacrifice simply as 'the Passover'. An example of this usage is found in 1 Corinthians 5:7:

“Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us:” (1 Corinthians 5:7 AV)

You'll notice that this time I quoted this verse from the old authorised version of the Bible, because this renders the Greek correctly as 'Christ our Passover' whereas the NIV inserts the word 'lamb' to make the verse more understandable to the modern reader.

So, in spite of the objections to the imagery of the Passover lamb as the “the lamb of God”, I think we can say that the concepts are sufficiently close that John probably had this image in mind.

The 'lamb that is led to the slaughter'

This is a reference to Isaiah 53:7:

“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7 NIV)

This sounds as if it fits quite well, but on closer examination there is nothing in John's gospel that points to an identification with this passage. John speaks of the 'lamb of God' whereas Isaiah does not use this designation. The big point in favour of connecting Isaiah 53 with John's phrase is that the lamb of Isaiah 53 is linked with the taking away of sin and the lamb of John is also linked in that way.

It seems to me that for John's 'the lamb of God' to be seen as an allusion to the lamb in Isaiah 53:7, then John's 'lamb' has to be accepted as a messianic designation and Isaiah 53 must also be accepted as a messianic reference. Then the two would come together naturally.

I think we should accept these messianic linkages. The use of the lamb imagery for the Messiah in the Book of Revelation shows that early Christians referred to the Messiah in this way shortly after the writing of John's gospel. There is no particular evidence that Jews of the first century or even the early Christians believed that Isaiah 53 applied to the Messiah. However, we do know that the early Christians believed that the coming of the Messiah was foretold by the OT Prophets and also that they believed the Messiah must suffer – Jesus himself said this (Matthew 16:21; Matthew 17:12; Mark 8:31; Mark 9:12; Luke 9:22; Luke 17:25). Thus, it is easy to see how the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, could be identified with the Messiah.

There is also good evidence that the disciples regarded Isaiah 53 as a Messianic prophecy referring directly to Christ. In the book of Acts we are told that Phillip explained Isaiah 53 – and particularly verse 7 – to the eunuch and used the passage as a basis for preaching the gospel. Let's just take a quick look at that passage:

“Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?”” (Acts 8:26-36 NIV)

Whatever the Jews and early Christians understood about Isaiah 53 this is one of the most remarkable prophetic passages in the whole of scripture, and the predictions it makes about Jesus are so striking that I think it is well worthwhile spending some time at this point to look at these prophecies verse by verse.

Lets start with Isaiah 53:2:

“He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” This verse gives a clear picture of Jesus' lowly birth. The Saviour began his earthly life in circumstances of deep humiliation. He was born of a virgin mother with a cloud of reproach upon his name. His circumstances were of poverty. His cradle was a manger. His home was Nazareth, whose very name stood for all that was despicable and was a play upon the words of the text, “a root out of dry ground,” for “Natsar” means a dry sprout. In a purely human way, there seems to have been no natural attractiveness about the person of Jesus Christ. He was a contradiction of the ideals of the flesh, and a disappointment to every form of human pride.

However, the Jewish nation expected Messiah to be someone quite different than he who came, for they were looking for someone with royal banner, pride and pomp. Blinded by their prejudices, they could not bring themselves to believe that the promised Messiah who should wield a sceptre was fulfilled in One who held only a reed; that the prophecy that the Messiah should wear a diadem was fulfilled in One who was crowned only with thorns; or that the prophecy that the Messiah should occupy a throne was fulfilled in One who occupied only a cross.

Moving on to verse 3:

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”

He was rejected by his own people. As John says: “*He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him*” (John 1:11). Israel slew their benefactor, rendering evil for good, death for

life. The One who had raised their dead, healed their sick, caused the lame to walk, cleansed the leper, and opened the eyes of the blind: Him they crucified. The unbelief that Isaiah pictures in this chapter is the same unbelief we see all around us today. Men declare that Jesus was a good man and a great prophet, and admit to the fact that he is the only One who has solutions to the social problems confronting the world today, yet they will not acknowledge their sins and need of a Savior. The death of Christ was a vicarious sacrifice designed to satisfy God's just nature and to reconcile an offended God to all us sinners.

The Savior, the Servant, the Son of God, is still despised and rejected of men. The cause of this contempt is unbelief. The love of evil is greater than our love of that which is right and good. Many are ignorant of their own sinful condition. Many are obsessed with self-righteousness and consider that they have no need of Christ and salvation. Many think that salvation can be obtained on the terms they choose and not on the terms God has chosen. Knowing God's Word through Bible study is vital in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. It is essential to gain an understanding of what God requires so that we can live lives that will honor and glorify him.

Turning to verse 4:

"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted."

In this verse, Isaiah not only speaks of the suffering Jesus would endure, but also points out that the people of Israel would consider the suffering of Jesus a punishment for his own sins. In the following verses, Isaiah makes it perfectly clear why and for whom Jesus suffered.

Let's now look at two verses 5 and 6 together:

"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

There is no more remarkable language than this in the whole of the Word of God, the whole of the Bible. It is a clear statement of the doctrine of substitution of the innocent for the guilty. The innocent Christ dying for guilty humankind.

Through Christ's suffering for sins, we are delivered from sin. Through his death, we are made to live. His bitter passion, his tasting of death on the cross as set forth in the Scripture, is the sole means and method of man's salvation and restoration to God. Without shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin (Leviticus 17:11; Hebrews 9:22). Jesus Christ became our substitute: "*To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood*" (Revelation 1:5). He suffered and died in our place. The blood of sheep and bulls could not adequately atone for human sin (Micah 6:6-7) only the blood of a perfect human – and that was uniquely Christ – would do.

In our verses 5 and 6, there are three terms expressive of what belongs to us: "*our transgressions*," "*our iniquities*," "*gone astray*." These three phrases have a common feature, that is, they all indicate what is wrong, though they represent different aspects of that wrong. Firstly, "*Transgressions*" – the word as translated indicates: missing the mark through aimlessness or carelessness or wilfulness; or of coming short. Even though our actions may be right in their direction, they do not come up to the required standard – God's standard is 100% in thought and word and deed. Another translation could carry the idea of crossing a boundary and going over to the wrong side of a line altogether. All these allusions

mean that our actions have violated God's laws. Secondly, "*Iniquities*" this word also has reference to the Law as the standard of duty. The Hebrew word is from a root which signifies "to bend," "to twist," and suggests that we have perverted God's Law in tortuous, crooked, winding ways which conform to no standard at all except that suggested by our own fancies or conceits. The third phrase, "*gone astray*," has reference to the God of law rather than to the law of God and to his relationship to us as Lord, Leader, Shepherd and Guide. In these words, there is not only the infringement of God's Law, but also universal neglect and abandonment of divine leadership and love. As the result of this, disaster is sure to follow. Like the sheep, we find the way out easily enough, but then wander lost and without direction, each one to "*his own way*." Like sheep, we can never find the way home again and begin to think that there is no home for us.

"And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." The Messiah was wounded and bruised and then died for our iniquities and transgressions. The Father acted on the principle of substitution. Sin was condemned in and through Christ: through his taking on Himself the sin of the world, your sin and mine – past present and future. This gracious work of redemption was in accord with the will and plan of the Father and carried out with the acceptance of the Son. The substitution does not belong to law, but to love. Christ became our sacrifice for sin, voluntarily taking the shame and guilt of all, of each and every one of us. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16). Because of Messiah's punishment, our deep need for peace and reconciliation was fulfilled.

Finally, Isaiah declares there is healing for us, and this healing is procured by Messiah's stripes. For us there is a complete freedom from everything that caused the Savior to die.

Moving on again to verse 7:

"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." Although Christ was completely innocent of any crime or sin he went willingly to his death, because he was a willing participant in God's plan. The metaphor is that of a lamb – the primary animal involved in Jewish sacrifice. The most distressing element in Christ's suffering was not the physical pain he suffered – terrible though that was – but rather he who had no sin experiencing for the first time the terrible sting of sin. Sometimes we have the experience of agonizing over a single sin, but on Christ rested all the sins of the whole world. They were imputed to him and counted as his own, and he had to bear their penalty, the wrath of God – a burden which separated him from the Father for the first time ever. Yet through this, Jesus accomplished his great purpose of the redemption of the whole of mankind.

Turning to verses 8 and 9:

"By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth."

Here the fact that Messiah's crucifixion was on account of our sins is re-emphasised – "for the transgression of my people he was stricken". We are also told that he had done nothing wrong. But, what an astonishing fulfilled prophecy we have here. We know that Jesus was indeed "with the rich in his death" because a rich man Joseph of Arimathea laid him in his own tomb (Matthew 27: 57-60) and he was "assigned a grave with the wicked" because having been condemned as a criminal by Pilate, Jesus would have been put in a common

grave with those executed for their crimes had Joseph not intervened. There is no way that any human writing hundreds of years before the Messiah's coming could have predicted such a surprising thing. It was, it must have been, divinely imparted knowledge.

Lets finish this examination of Isaiah 53 by taking a look at verses 10 to 12:

“Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

Those who put Christ to death were wicked men and fully responsible for their evil deed, yet his death was not in the hands of wicked men but in the Lord's hands. The wicked men were allowed to do their evil deed because it fulfilled the promised redemption for all mankind; because this, the redemption of mankind, is the pleasure of the Lord. The pleasure of the Lord lay in accomplishing his divine will. Because Messiah voluntarily gave up his life as a sin offering, he shall be rewarded (*“He shall see His offspring”*) in the salvation of huge multitudes and a glorious reign of peace and love that reaches to all nations. His Father will rejoice for this is his pleasure and this work shall prosper in Messiah's hand. His finished redemptive work will be his joy. Out of his death of scorn and agony come fruits of magnificent reward; through the knowledge of him many will be justified because he bore their iniquities. He sees through to after the torment of his soul and is satisfied. The salvation of a great multitude which no man can number is his everlasting glory. Indeed I believe verse 10, in looking beyond Christ's death to his glorification, necessarily speaks of the resurrection. Redeemed multitudes, from among all men in all ages, owe their salvation to Jesus Christ because he was willing to lay down his own life. No man had the power to take his life from him. He offered it because it was for this purpose he came into the world. He died as one who came to make atonement for the sins of the people. Paul said, *“For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life”* (Romans 5:10).

In conclusion then, we see how well the image of “the lamb that was led to the slaughter” of Isaiah 53 fits with John's image of Jesus as “the lamb of God”. Given the strong ethical note in the preaching of John the Baptist and his call for repentance followed by the rite of baptism, it is easy to believe that he anticipated the need for a more profound atonement for sin. So, I think we certainly need to keep this image in mind as a part of the answer to our question today.

The Guilt Offering

In OT times the guilt offering typically followed a pattern involving the following elements:

- (1) An unblemished animal, signifying moral perfection, was presented at the door of the sanctuary by the offerer.
- (2) The offerers placed their hands on the animal's head, denoting identification with the victim and the transfer of sin's penalty to the substitute.
- (3) The animal then was slain, signifying death as the requisite punishment for sin.
- (4) The priest sprinkled the blood of the victim on the altar, the blood representing the life of the victim (Leviticus 17:11), and

(5) The offering, in part or in whole, was burned on the altar of burnt offering, its fragrance ascending to God as a pleasing aroma.

There are actually a number of kinds of guilt offering depending on whether the trespass was against God or man, voluntary or involuntary, the exact nature of the trespass and whether or not financial compensation was appropriate. However, in all cases Scripture indicates that the purpose of these sacrifices was “to make atonement” and provide forgiveness for the offerer e.g. Leviticus 1:4:

“He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.”

See also Leviticus 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:13, 16; 6:7; Num 5:8; 8:12; 15:25; etc.). The making of a guilt offering always implied an admitted guilt on the part of the person making the offering. In the same way when we accept Christ’s atonement for our sins, we admit that we are sinners.

The verb *kāpar*, meaning “make atonement,” is used in these scriptures and altogether is used more than 100 times in the OT in sacrificial contexts where the meaning is clearly to propitiate God’s wrath, expiate sins, and restore fellowship between God and sinners.

The description of the procedure for the guilt offering indicates that sin places a person in debt. Jesus similarly depicts the sinner as a debtor to God (e.g., Matthew 18:21–35). So Jesus’ death must be understood as a guilt offering that has removed the debt we formerly owed to God. This notion is certainly a basis for the proclamation that Jesus “paid” for our sins.

Without doubt, the guilt offering anticipated the vicarious sacrifice of Christ. The laws in Leviticus remind us then of Christ’s death and what he has done for us.... The worshipper might well feel very much deprived when he had paid for a choice lamb to be sacrificed. But it reminded him that the animal was a ransom, a substitute payment instead of his own life. Forgiveness of sin always required a costly payment in blood.

We usually think of the Jewish guilt offering as being a ram – and so it often was. But, a lamb was an acceptable substitute (Leviticus 4:32) and on certain occasions, it was prescribed that a male lamb should be sacrificed Leviticus 14:12:

“Then the priest is to take one of the male lambs and offer it as a guilt offering, along with the log of oil; he shall wave them before the LORD as a wave offering.”

Leviticus 14:21

“If, however, he is poor and cannot afford these, he must take one male lamb as a guilt offering to be waved to make atonement for him, together with a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, a log of oil,”

Numbers 6:12

“He must dedicate himself to the LORD for the period of his separation and must bring a year-old male lamb as a guilt offering. The previous days do not count, because he became defiled during his separation.”

So, there is some evidence that John’s reference to Jesus as the Lamb of God – the lamb who took away sins – could have been a reference to the guilt offering, which also took away sin.

As James Morgenstern says “Here beyond all doubt, Jesus is conceived of precisely as was the Servant, as an ‘*shem*, a guilt offering” sacrificing himself for the redemption of mankind from its iniquity and thus bringing about salvation.

This of course ties in closely with our earlier expression from Isaiah 53:8. There Christ was depicted as suffering vicariously “for the transgression of my people he was stricken” or perhaps even more clearly in Isaiah 53:5:

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

This is, of course, the function of the guilt offering – to bear the sins of another.

Given the fact that the function of the guilt offering was to make atonement for sin, it is likely that John had this image in mind.

The Scapegoat

Some scholars have suggested that John’s description of Jesus as the lamb of God could have derived from the Jewish scapegoat. The ceremony involving the scapegoat took place once a year on the Day of Atonement. There are quite a lot of parallels in this sacrifice with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, so I think its worth looking at the Day of Atonement in some detail. The detailed regulations for this day are set out in Leviticus Chapter 16:

“The LORD said to Moses: "Tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die, because I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover. "This is how Aaron is to enter the sanctuary area: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. He is to put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban. These are sacred garments; so he must bathe himself with water before he puts them on. From the Israelite community he is to take two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. "Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household. Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the LORD at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the LORD and the other for the scapegoat. Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as a scapegoat. "Aaron shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering. He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. He is to put the incense on the fire before the LORD, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the Testimony, so that he will not die. He is to take some of the bull’s blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover; then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover. "He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull’s blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness. No-one is to be in the Tent of Meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel. "Then he shall come out to the altar that is

before the LORD and make atonement for it. He shall take some of the bull's blood and some of the goat's blood and put it on all the horns of the altar. He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites. "When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert. "Then Aaron is to go into the Tent of Meeting and take off the linen garments he put on before he entered the Most Holy Place, and he is to leave them there. He shall bathe himself with water in a holy place and put on his regular garments. Then he shall come out and sacrifice the burnt offering for himself and the burnt offering for the people, to make atonement for himself and for the people. He shall also burn the fat of the sin offering on the altar. "The man who releases the goat as a scapegoat must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water; afterwards he may come into the camp. The bull and the goat for the sin offerings, whose blood was brought into the Most Holy Place to make atonement, must be taken outside the camp; their hides, flesh and offal are to be burned up. The man who burns them must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water; afterwards he may come into the camp. "This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work—whether native-born or an alien living among you— because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a sabbath of rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance. The priest who is anointed and ordained to succeed his father as high priest is to make atonement. He is to put on the sacred linen garments and make atonement for the Most Holy Place, for the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and for the priests and all the people of the community. "This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites." And it was done, as the LORD commanded Moses." (Leviticus 16: 1-34 NIV)

The name "Day of Atonement" is not actually found in Leviticus chapter 16, but it is referred to by that name in Leviticus chapter 23. The annual Day of Atonement (*yôm hakippurîm*, Leviticus 23:27; 25:9) was the most important cultic celebration in the OT. In preparation for this solemn event the high priest had to dress in special garments which were much less flamboyant than the normal high priestly robes (Leviticus 16:3-4). On the Day of Atonement he looked much more like a slave. Like Christ he was a servant of God and of the whole community. He was also required to sacrifice a young bull as a sin-offering and a ram for a burnt-offering to atone for his own sins and those of the priesthood (Leviticus 16:11-14). He sprinkled the blood of the bull on the front of the golden lid of the ark designated the "atonement cover" (or "mercy seat"—*kappōret*, meaning "place of atonement"; cf. Exodus 25:17). Then the high priest sacrificed the first male goat as a sin-offering and sprinkled its blood upon and in front of the "atonement cover" in the holy of holies, thereby expiating the uncleanness of the people (Leviticus 16:15-19) and making atonement (*kippurîm*; cf. Exodus 29:36; 30:10; Leviticus 23:28). According to Leviticus 17:11, this act of blood-shedding represents God's ordained means of securing atonement. The helpless animals died in place of the penitent sinner. This is a unique feature of the Day of Atonement ceremony as it is the only time that blood was brought into the holy of holies. The blood on the mercy seat indicated that Israel's sins were atoned for by a substitutionary death.

The high priest then laid his hands on the head of the second goat (the "scapegoat") and confessed all the sins of the whole community, thus symbolically transferring guilt from all

the people to the victim. Note the difference between this and an individual guilt offering where the sinner himself laid one hand on the head of the animal. Here the high priest lays both his hands on the head of the animal indicating both an intensification of the supplication and a mediation by the high priest on behalf of all the people. The second goat became a sin-bearer as it carried the sins and iniquities of the people into the wilderness. The Day of Atonement ritual dramatically depicted the holiness of God, the gravity of sin, and God's gracious provision by vicarious sacrifice. The gravity of sin is well illustrated by the fate of the two goats – on the one immediate death on the other first separation from God and then ultimate death.

Aaron laid his two hands upon the head of the creature that was to be the scapegoat, and confessed the sins of the congregation. The sins being confessed were such as may not have been atoned for by the usual sacrifices, and they are summed up as “iniquities” and “transgressions” and “sins” (verse 21). The scapegoat was to go away with its burden into a “a land not inhabited,” or “land of separation,” a “wilderness,” a place in which it might be lost sight of and from which it could not possibly return to bring back the sins to the Israelites. Indeed according to Jewish tradition the goat was thrown over a cliff to make absolutely sure it could not return. This teaches us how effectually our sins are borne away into oblivion by Christ. As David put it so beautifully in the Psalms “As far as east is from west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Ps 103:12). There are many other scriptural references which are also appropriate here (Isaiah 38:17; Micah 7:19; John 1:29; Hebrews 8:12). To further emphasise this important truth, it was also ordered that the bodies of those beasts whose blood was brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, were *burnt outside the camp* (verse 27). Now Christ was taken outside the city of Jerusalem – outside the camp – to be crucified. He was also sent to the Romans for trial and execution. These two things directly parallel sending the scapegoat outside the camp to die amongst the aliens.

Prior to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, mankind had no direct opening to God. The high Priest, entered into the holiest place, but then only once in the year, on the Day of Atonement. This showed that, while the tabernacle stood, the way into the holiest, the way into God's presence, was not made openly available. At the crucifixion the veil of the Temple was torn in two and the way into the holy of holies, the way into God's presence, was opened freely to all mankind.

On the Day of Atonement, atonement was made for all the people, none were exempted from the need of it, the High Priest and his household included. This prevented the High Priest and his family from becoming overly proud. Also the fact that the High Priest was required to cleanse himself prior to the ceremony reminds us that only the sinless can intercede for us and take away sin. Defilement attached even to the tabernacle, because it stood in the midst of sinners. Defilement attaches to even our highest acts of worship as sinful human beings. Nevertheless, through the blood-shedding of this day, all stood “clean from all sins before the Lord,” *i.e.* he looked upon them and accepted them as clean. So, in the great day of judgment will he look upon us and accept us as clean through the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ (Jude 24). Although the Day of Atonement was a general atonement for sins known and unknown, it was not an atonement for sin itself. That would have to await the sacrifice of Christ. Also, it was necessary for The Day of Atonement to be repeated each year, the greater sacrifice of Christ is once and for all, once for all, and need never be repeated. The privileges enjoyed by the Israelites were nothing compared to the privilege we enjoy. Christ the sinless one died the death we all deserve in penal, sacrificial substitution for us and fully

and finally carries away the sins of each and every one of us, so that we may one day stand before the throne of God cloaked and clothed in his righteousness. He has taken on our sins which he did not deserve and we have taken on his righteousness which we did not deserve.

In conclusion we can say that the scapegoat and the Day of Atonement are a wonderful parallel to the life and sacrificial death of Christ. Nevertheless we cannot say that this is certainly what John had in mind in describing Jesus as the Lamb of God, for after all the scapegoat was a goat and not a lamb. There seems no reason to suppose that the scapegoat was ever referred to as God's lamb.

The Daily Sacrifice in the Temple

Every morning and every evening a lamb was offered in sacrifice as a burnt offering on the altar of the Temple. This would have been the most familiar of offerings to the Jewish people. The regulations for the burnt offering are set out in Leviticus chapter 6:

“The LORD said to Moses: "Give Aaron and his sons this command: “These are the regulations for the burnt offering: The burnt offering is to remain on the altar hearth throughout the night, till morning, and the fire must be kept burning on the altar. The priest shall then put on his linen clothes, with linen undergarments next to his body, and shall remove the ashes of the burnt offering that the fire has consumed on the altar and place them beside the altar. Then he is to take off these clothes and put on others, and carry the ashes outside the camp to a place that is ceremonially clean. The fire on the altar must be kept burning; it must not go out. Every morning the priest is to add firewood and arrange the burnt offering on the fire and burn the fat of the fellowship offerings on it. The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out.” (Leviticus 6:8-13 NIV)

Thus, the evening sacrifice was “burning upon the altar all night up to the morning.” This was the daily sacrifice of a lamb for the whole congregation. That evening sacrifice was then followed by the corresponding morning sacrifice. This, together with the occasional sacrifices, which were offered throughout the day, would keep the altar fully occupied until the evening. These offerings and the fire continually burning ensured that a constant “remembrance of sins” was maintained day by day, the year round, and “year by year continually.” The repetition of the sacrifices showed that “they could never take away sins.” These sins could only finally be removed “through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once” (see Heb. 10:1–10):

“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming— not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.’" First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them" (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Hebrews 10:1-10 NIV)

God commanded that the fire on the altar should “not be put out.” God will consume with the fire of his wrath those who quench the fire of his love. Even if we are not always offering sacrifices, love must be kept always burning in the heart (1 Thessalonians 5:19; 2 Timothy 1:6). The priests were carefully instructed how they should keep the fire alive. They were to put on wood. On this they had to lay the burnt offering. Similarly, Christ was laid on the wood of the cross, where the fires of God’s wrath entered into his very soul. The fat of the peace offerings was placed on the burnt offering. So the fire was maintained (see Isaiah 31:9).

But, there is no positive evidence that the daily sacrifice was referred to as God’s lamb. Equally we have no evidence that it was not and the term certainly fits. If the daily sacrifice was referred to in this way, then it will certainly have been in John’s mind when he referred to Jesus as the ‘lamb of God’.

The Suffering Servant

This image is rather like, and certainly closely related to, the image of the ‘lamb that is led to the slaughter’ that we have already considered. The only difference is that it does not rest so much on the use of the word “lamb” in Isaiah 53:7. Instead, the thought is that the lamb in John 1 is understood only when it is seen to mean ‘servant’. The ‘Lamb of God’ then becomes the ‘Servant of the Lord’. J Jeremias and other scholars have suggested that this equivalence is supported if we suppose that the Aramaic word ‘talya’, which means either ‘lamb’ or ‘servant’ can be rendered with the Greek word for ‘lamb’. Certainly if we accept this theory it leads to a wonderful picture of Jesus expressed in Isaiah 53.

To some extent, we already looked at this issue in considering the image of ‘the lamb that is led to the slaughter’, but let’s now look at this from a slightly different perspective. In order to help with that it would be useful if you turned to Isaiah 53 in your Bibles.

First of all Isaiah 53 makes it quite clear the ‘servant’, Christ, suffered vicariously on our behalf. There are seven different assertions to this effect:

- (1) He took up our infirmities (verse 4);
- (2) He carried our sorrows (verse 4);
- (3) He was pierced for our transgressions (verse 5);
- (4) He was crushed for our iniquities (verse 5);
- (5) The punishment that brought us peace was upon him (verse 5);
- (6) By his wounds we are healed (verse 5);
- (7) For the transgression of my people he was stricken (verse 8).

This vicarious suffering is indirectly implied in four other assertions:

- (1) The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (verse 6);
- (2) The Lord makes his life a guilt offering (verse 10);
- (3) He will bear their iniquities (verse 11)
- (4) He bore the sins of many (verse 12).

It was thought that he was suffering and afflicted by God on account of some sin or wrongdoing of his own, but he was suffering for our sins alone – as verse 4 makes clear. The sacrificial death of Jesus atones for and takes away our sins – as verse 5 makes clear.

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

Jesus responded to his unjust punishment with complete submission and sacrificed himself willingly on our behalf – verse 7.

We have the astounding prophecy of the manner of Jesus’ burial in verse 9 that we have already discussed:

“He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.”

Jesus sacrifice and suffering were God’s ordained plan for our redemption as verse 10 makes abundantly clear:

“Yet it was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.”

After his suffering, Jesus was to be raised from the dead – see verse 11

“After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.”

And through his sacrificial death our sins are completely taken away and we are justified before God.

As verse 12 tells us, on the cross, Jesus was made sin for us, but he has now been exalted by the Father for his obedience and suffering:

“Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

This chapter of Isaiah sets out quite a full theology of the cross. The focus is on taking away sin, and John was well aware that the Messiah was to take away sin – see John 1:29:

“The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

and the use of lamb imagery in Isaiah 53:7 indicates to me that John might well have had this passage in mind when he referred to Jesus as the lamb of God.

The gentle lamb

On one occasion the prophet Jeremiah said “I was like a gentle lamb that is led to the slaughter” (Jeremiah 11:19). Perhaps John might have had this passage in mind. The main attraction to that suggestion is that the meekness of the lamb referred to by Jeremiah could well refer to the unresisting way that Jesus went to his death. However, there is no evidence that the lamb here might have been associated with images either of the Messiah or the lamb of God.

Nor does Jeremiah associate the lamb with the taking away of sins, which is certainly a characteristic point about John’s lamb. Gentleness and innocence are not the same thing as expiation or atonement. There is some ancient evidence for linking this passage with Isaiah 53 – Origen linked it with Isaiah 53:7. Nevertheless, and despite this high authority, I am not fully persuaded.

The Lamb that God Provided for Abraham

This is a powerful image, not least because the lamb finally sacrificed here was a lamb directly provided by God. Jesus is the ultimate answer to the question posed by Genesis 22:7 – “where is the lamb”. Let’s take a moment to look at the full text of the incident in Genesis Chapter 22 1-14 – again as we study this text I think it will be helpful if you turn to this passage in your bibles:

“Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."” (Genesis 22:1-14 NIV)

This passage is particularly significant and NT scripture emphasises its significance by referring to it in Hebrews 11:17–19 and James 2:21–24.

Abraham had earlier displayed considerable faith in leaving the comfort of Ur to go to the relatively primitive land of Canaan. His faith in this respect, and in believing God’s word to him, were essentially personal and completely demonstrable. God therefore tested Abraham – for the father of the nation had to provide an example of the faith God requires of a righteous people, an example which clearly demonstrated the spiritual aspects of faith. The events were also prophetic, for they foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ which resulted in the blessing of all nations. This is not accidental, but results from the obedience of Abraham, as the wording of verse 18 establishes:

“and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”” (Genesis 22:18 NIV)

The culmination of the story was to take place on Mount Moriah. This is interesting because Scripture connects Mount Moriah with Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 3:1). So, Mount Moriah was later to become the site of Solomon’s Temple – the place where all the sacrifices of the Jewish people were carried out and the place where Christ was crucified.

We can suppose that Isaac was in his middle teens, for he is called a ‘lad’ in verse 5 and Ishmael is also called a lad in verse 18 of the previous chapter when he was sixteen or seventeen years old – although Jewish tradition makes Isaac much older, putting his age at 37 at this time. Abraham must have wondered just what was happening; when Ishmael was a teenager he had been instructed to evict him from his household, and when Isaac reached this age he was instructed to offer him as a burnt offering. Can you imagine a greater dilemma for a loving father? Yet Abraham set out to obey God without remonstrance, despite the deep parental love he had for Isaac. The first recorded words of Isaac to Abraham in the Hebrew Bible are ‘my father’ (in verse 7), and the last recorded words of Abraham to Isaac are ‘my son’ (in verse 8); so the Bible itself stresses the deep father/son bond between these two. Yet, it’s amazing that not a word of conversation is recorded for the whole of the two or three day journey from Beer-Sheba to Moriah. If Abraham ever said, “if it is possible, let this cup pass from me,” Scripture has not recorded it. This absence of any speech by Abraham prompts G. Coats to say of the patriarch: “He appears in superhuman, somewhat unrealistic dress. He never objects to the unreasonable, slightly insane commandment to sacrifice his son, as the Abraham of Genesis 12 or Genesis 16 most certainly would have done. To the contrary, he seems to move about his grim task with silent resignation, as if he were an automaton.”

The narrative is terse and leaves much to the imagination; one wonders, for instance, what Abraham told Sarah as he set out with Isaac for Mount Moriah. Can you imagine Abraham’s emotions as they prepared for the journey? We can easily imagine Abraham’s utter despondency at facing the most horrendous ordeal of his life. Yet he went.

One wonders what Abraham thought, for God had specifically forbidden taking human life (Genesis 9:6). Child sacrifice was later specifically forbidden in Israel:

““Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 18:21 NIV)

Molech was of course the god of child sacrifice.

His dilemma was compounded by God’s promise both that his everlasting covenant would be with Isaac, and that Isaac would have descendants (Genesis 17:19). Could it be that Abraham realized that if God could rejuvenate Sarah to bear a child fifteen years late, then he could resurrect Isaac from the ashes of the sacrifice? Hebrews 11:19 tells us that Abraham expected a resurrection! What fantastic faith in God’s promises! We also need to note that the wood for the burnt offering was placed on Isaac’s shoulders. In the same way Christ had to carry his cross to the place of his crucifixion.

So, we know what Abraham thought, and we also know what God planned, for verse 2 reveals that God directed Abraham to the place where the ram was to be found. Consider Abraham’s emotions as Isaac questioned where the offering was in verses 7 and 8:

“Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.” (Genesis 22:7-8 NIV)

Isaac’s question consists of six words (in Hebrew) and Abraham responds with an answer of six words. Isaac begins his question with *Father*. Abraham ends his answer with *son*.

There is possible ambiguity not only in Abraham’s first word to Isaac, “God will provide,” but in his last words in this verse: “God will provide ... for a burnt offering, my son.” “My son” at the end of the quote may be understood as a vocative (the way Abraham wished Isaac to hear it) or in apposition to “a burnt offering”—“God will provide ... for a burnt offering,

i.e., you, my son” (the way Abraham would not want Isaac to hear it). Isaac makes no response to his father’s explanation. Such silence could be read as either satisfaction with Abraham’s projection or bewilderment. God tested both of these men, this father and his son, to the limit, yet both Abraham and Isaac held firmly to their faith in their God. Note the juxtaposition of the wood and the lad in verse 6 and verse 9; note, too, how verse 6 introduces the knife (the Hebrew reads ‘the’ knife) for the first time. Can you doubt that God purposefully built drama into this narrative?

We need to recognize Isaac’s complete submission and compliance in this event; it is second only in its remarkableness to Abraham’s submission to God. If Abraham displays the faith that obeys, then Isaac certainly displays the faith that cooperates. A sixteen year old youth, a one hundred and sixteen year old man, yet the youth allowed himself to be bound because of faith in his father’s God! He doesn’t ask why these ropes! Pause to consider what an example of faith Abraham must have been to Isaac for him to subject himself in this way, and what an example this is to us, for how do we measure up in our children’s eyes? Notice, God intervened before Abraham had the knife poised above his son. I imagine Abraham would have resolved to do this last act quickly, for how could a loving father stand with a knife poised above his own son’s neck, and, with the imploring eyes of the young man riveted on his own, still plunge the knife? Abraham was probably concentrating on as little as possible, for he did not notice the ram. However, God intervened before that final fatal act – see verses 11 and 12. The repetition in verse 11 indicates the urgency of God’s command. What a reprieve for both Abraham and Isaac!

The parallel between Abraham’s selfless attitude with Isaac, and God’s selfless attitude in relation to Jesus Christ is not coincidental. Nor is the parallel between the complete submission of Isaac to the will of his father Abraham and the complete submission of Christ to the will of the Father.

The test Abraham underwent, despite its intense emotional strain, was essentially spiritual; he was tested to ascertain whether he held anything more dear than his faith in God. He proved right at the beginning of God’s dealings with Israel, once and for all, that it is possible for a man to lay aside anything, whether material (as in Ur) or personal (the one loved most deeply), in favor of obeying God. Abraham set a standard: God asks, “Do you measure up?”

Finally, consider the unwritten story here, for both God the Father and God the Son were present and involved in this drama, knowing full well that it would be reenacted two millennia later, but without a happy ending. Note, too, that the site was very possibly the same, and yet God, who, in love, spared Abraham’s son, in an impossible-to-understand display of his own love, did not spare his own Son. We should try to understand Abraham’s emotions as a loving and dedicated father, for this is possibly the clearest way that we can start to comprehend God’s sacrifice and pain in the death of Christ. If we get a glimpse of this truth, our lives can never be selfish again.

Clearly, this story links God with the lamb. It is not unreasonable to hold that the ‘lamb’ that God provides might be called ‘God’s lamb’. Furthermore this incident was very prominent in Jewish thought. The ‘binding of Isaac’ (Akedah) was a well known and well loved Rabbinic theme. Isaac’s willingness to be sacrificed profoundly impressed Jewish scholars. The fact that it is not so prominent in Christian thought must not blind us to its significance to first century Jews.

G Vermes writes:

“For the Palestinian Jew, all lamb sacrifice, and especially the Passover lamb and the Tamid offering [the daily sacrifice], was a memorial of the Akedah [the binding of Isaac] with its effects of deliverance, forgiveness of sin and messianic salvation. Since all lamb sacrifice pointed back to the Akedah so must the reference to the lamb of God.”

A Richardson also supports this view. He points out that ‘Jewish thought increasingly came to hold that the covenant relationship with God was founded on Abraham’s offering of Isaac: St John is asserting that the new relationship between God and man in Christ (the new covenant) is based on the fulfilment of the promise contained in Genesis 22:8 that God would provide the lamb that would make atonement for universal sin ... Christ is the lamb of sacrifice promised by God to Abraham, the father of many nations and thus he is the God given universal Sin Bearer.’

The only objection I can find to this identification of John’s use of the expression ‘the lamb of God’ with the Akedah is that God ultimately provided Abraham with a ram and not a lamb – although we should note that verses 7 and 8 show that both Abraham and Isaac expected a lamb to be provided!

The lamb of the Apocalypses

This most interesting suggestion arises from the frequent use of lamb imagery in the apocalyptic imagery so popular in the first century. There the lamb was often seen in a way which is, to us at least, quite unexpected.

The apocalypses used beast of various kinds as symbols for men. The lamb and most especially a horned lamb, was used as a symbol of a leader, a triumphant conqueror. Perhaps the reason for choosing a lamb for this role was precisely because it is the last animal which might be suspected of signifying military conquest. Perhaps there was the thought of a ram leading the flock symbolising the Messiah leading his people. Whatever the reason, apocalyptic literature certainly did make use of the lamb in this way.

The most familiar example of this to Christians is the Book of Revelation. There Christ is portrayed both as a mighty conqueror and as a lamb. These notes run throughout the book. In Revelation the ‘lamb’ image certainly contained a sacrificial element and alluded to Christ’s death. Furthermore, Revelation frequently brings out the idea that we are saved only through Christ’s death. But, coupled with that thought, is the idea of Christ triumphant. The lamb is supreme. As it says in Revelation:

“Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!"” (Revelation 5:13 NIV)

Arguments that it is this imagery which John had in mind when speaking of Jesus as ‘the lamb of God’ have been put forward by many scholars, perhaps most notably C H Dodd. Some have objected to this on the ground that Dodd presents little positive evidence for his views, rather concentrating on attacking alternative views. Others have objected on the grounds that the lamb of the apocalypses is a horned lamb, whereas John does not mention any horn. I think the most powerful objection is that the lamb of God in John’s gospel has the specific function of taking away sin, whereas this function is not so directly associated with the triumphant lamb. He rather is the one who overthrows God’s enemies. However,

Revelation does refer to Christ's dying as an atonement, perhaps most powerfully in Revelation 1:5

“and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,” (Revelation 1:5 NIV)

And to his being sacrificed in Revelation 13:8

“All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.” (Revelation 13:8 NIV)

Certainly this latter verse speaks of Christ's sacrificial death having been God's plan from before the creation of the world. How amazing!

Conclusion

So, which of the many images that we have examined this morning did John have in mind when he wrote of Jesus as the lamb of God. We have made stronger cases for some of the images and weaker cases for others, but in my opinion, none of the arguments are completely conclusive. However, it is interesting to note that John frequently makes use of irony and of double or multiple meanings in his gospel. One example of such a double meaning is contained in John 3:3:

“In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."”

Here the Greek word ‘another’ translated “again” in the NIV (and indeed most Bibles) can equally mean ‘from above’. I believe this double meaning adds much to the story.

Nicodemus focuses far too much on a literal ‘born again’ whereas Jesus is said speaking spiritually of ‘born from above’ – even though we have to remember that he was almost certainly speaking in Aramaic rather than Greek. Of course, Jesus and Nicodemus were probably conversing in Aramaic, but I believe John is bringing out an essential misunderstanding in their discussion.

Another example of a multiple meaning is contained in a few verses further on in the story about Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in John 3:5:

“Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”

Here the word ‘water’ is capable of multiple meanings. For example, it could be a reference to the baptism of repentance performed by John the Baptist in the river Jordan. It could be a reference to the baptism of cleansing required of converts to the Jewish religion. It could be a reference to the ceremonial washing often required of Israelite priests to cleans them (Exodus 30:20) or indeed of ordinary Israelites to make them ceremonially clean (Leviticus 14:8) or it could be a reference to the ‘living water’ of the word of God.

I believe the totality of these multiple meanings and images are fully intended by John. As we think of each of them into turn and allow them to blend into a multi-faceted whole, the richness of our understanding is immeasurably enhanced.

We cannot know exactly how many of the lamb images we have looked at John originally had in mind when he referred to the ‘lamb of God’ – although I certainly believe several of them were in his mind at that time – but I do believe that all these images are divinely inspired and combine together to add to our understanding of Jesus. Just as John the evangelist insists that Caiaphas the high priest spoke better than he knew when he said that it

was better for one man to die than for the whole nation to perish (John 11:49–52) so John may well be speaking better than he knew in the passages from his gospel.

As we consider the image of the regular daily sacrifice of a lamb in the Temple, we are reminded that Christ's sacrifice on the Cross bears away our sins each day – indeed continually. One of the references with which we started – John 1:29: “The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” is in the present continuous tense – thus the ‘taking away’ of sin is a continuous process.

As we consider the Passover, we are reminded that Christ's sacrifice was ‘once for all once and for all’ as the sacrifice of the original Passover Lamb was a unique event that was for all Israelites and which released them completely from captivity in Egypt.

As we consider the image of the guilt offering we are reminded that Christ was an unblemished and perfect sacrifice; that in his death he identified with us as he assumed our sins and paid the penalty we deserved and we identify with Christ as we take on his righteousness; that the punishment for sin is death and that only in the shedding of blood can there be atonement for sin. Finally, we are reminded that the making of a guilt offering implied the acceptance of guilt by the one making the offering, and thus we must confess our sins and acknowledge our guilt to benefit from Christ's sacrifice.

Turning to the image of the scapegoat, we are again reminded that Christ bears away our sins, that the blood of the other goat had to be shed to make atonement for those sins, and that prior to Christ's sacrifice mankind had no direct access to God. Only the high priest could enter his presence and that only on one day a year – the Day of Atonement. We are also reminded that all the Jewish sacrifices were at best of limited effectiveness. They had to be repeated each year, whilst the sacrifice of Christ was and is completely effective and never needs to be repeated.

In the images of the lamb that is led to the slaughter and the suffering servant we are reminded what a wonderful prophecy of Christ's life and death we have in Isaiah chapter 53. This is such a wonderful passage that I'm just going to read it to you once again: “He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life

and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”
Isaiah 53:2-12 NIV)

Here we see Jesus was of lowly birth (he was born in a stable); that he was rejected and despised (the Jewish leaders hated him and plotted to kill him); that he bore our sins on the cross in silence and submission and accordance with God’s plan and will. Christ substituted himself as a sacrifice for us, for each one of us – for all mankind, and for all our sins. He died the death we each deserve to die in our place.

In the image of the gentle lamb we are reminded that Jesus went quietly to his death in complete submission and obedience to his Father’s will.

In the image of the lamb that God provided for Abraham we are again reminded that Christ was the lamb provided by God, that he died in accordance with and in submission to God’s will and that it was always God’s plan to provide Christ as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. We are utterly unable to provide atonement for our sins ourselves, only God could do that.

Finally, in the image of the lamb of the apocalypses we are reminded that Jesus will one day return as the victorious conqueror to put all God’s enemies under his feet.

We can also see an interesting progression in the images. The lamb God provided for Abraham represented the saving of one man – Isaac. The Passover lamb and the guilt offering represent the saving of a whole nation – the Israelites. But the blending of all images together in Jesus’ sacrifice brings salvation to the whole world. This sacrifice of the Lamb is our eternal message. Abraham and Isaac *prophesied* Christ’s sacrifice. The Passover *applied* the principles of his sacrifice. Isaiah 53 *personified* his sacrifice. Chapter 1 of John’s gospel *identified* the sacrifice. Finally, it is *magnified* in Revelation 5:9–14. The sacrificial death of Christ—this is the essence of our message.

As we’ve seen, all the images of OT sacrifice that we have considered are valid and important images that lead us to, and help our understanding of, Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. But, we do need to remember that sacrifice is not merely an image and concept of the OT. In the NT it becomes a reality. Christ sacrificed himself to pay the price for our sins and NT scripture calls for sacrifice, not of the blood of bulls and goats, but of our lives as we seek to follow Christ. Let me just read to you a couple of passages to illustrate what I mean.

Firstly from Hebrews chapter 13:

“The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” (Hebrews 13:11-16 NIV)

and from Romans chapter 12

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” (Romans 12:1 NIV)

We are now called not to a daily sacrifice of animals, but to a daily sacrifice of ourselves. Isn’t it wonderful and amazing how God prepared us for his ultimate plan of salvation – Christ’s atoning death on the cross – and for our lives as Christians today through the images from the OT we’ve been looking at.

Returning to the sacrifice of Christ, the question that people most often ask me about Jesus is ‘why did he have to die for our sins? – why couldn’t God just forgive us?’ Of course, God is perfectly loving, and his loving nature wants to forgive us. But, he’s also perfectly just and righteous and those aspects of his nature don’t allow him just to forget about sin. Someone had to suffer the penalty that sin deserves and in his love God sent his son. God is true to all aspects of his nature all of the time.

So, believing God could just forgive our sins is to fundamentally misunderstand the seriousness of sin and its consequences. You will note that almost all of the images of Christ we have considered today are sacrificial – Christianity is a bloody religion because only the blood of Christ can cleanse us from our sins. Christ came to earth to fulfil the Father’s redemption plan for mankind – to sacrifice himself by dying on the Cross. The Bible consistently teaches that the only way to come to God is on the basis of the Lamb that God has provided. All the other lambs prepared for the coming of Christ. A theologian would call them *types*. In other words, the lambs were signs pointing to salvation in Christ. He is the only perfect sacrifice which takes away sin. As the famous Jonathan Edwards wrote in his *A History of the Work of Redemption*, “Christ and his redemption are the subject of the whole Word of God.” I hope that today you’ve really appreciated the close parallels between the various Jewish sacrifices for sin and Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. God cannot simply forgive sin because of his just and righteous nature. Yes, he is perfectly loving, but he is also perfectly just and righteous.

Nothing reveals the gravity of our sin like the cross. For what ultimately sent Christ there was neither the greed of Judas, nor the envy of the Jewish priests, nor the vacillating cowardice of Pilate, but our own greed, envy, cowardice and all our other sins. I cannot face Christ’s cross with integrity without feeling ashamed of myself. Indeed, in the words of Canon Peter Green “only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross may claim his share in its grace”. “Christ was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5). In other words, Christ died for my sins and yours to bring us forgiveness and healing.

God’s love must have been wonderful. He could, quite justly have abandoned us to the fate our sins deserve – to perish in our sin. But, he did not. Because he loved us, he pursued us in Christ – as the good shepherd pursues his lost sheep.

We see that God couldn’t simply forget about our sin. Sin is too serious in God’s eyes and his nature would not have permitted that. But – “It is finished” - because he loved us so much he sent Jesus Christ to die for us on the cross, which secured the forgiveness of sin; he was the innocent lamb slaughtered to pay for all our sins past present and future – and we

should be eternally grateful for what he has done for us. May that gratefulness be reflected in the lives of each and every Christian. In the words of the well known hymn:

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all

I hope that today has brought Jesus into a new and clearer focus for you as we blend all the images we have examined into one composite image of Jesus and what he has done. I hope that you have arrived at a new appreciation not only of what Christ has done for us, but of who he was and is – our saviour and yet our Lord and master.

May our understanding and gratitude bring Easter into a sharper focus for each one of us this year and forevermore and lead us to make that daily sacrifice of ourselves which Jesus requires of us.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father, let us all take away from this day a new appreciation of what your Son's sacrifice on the Cross means for each and every one of us. If there are any here today who have not fully accepted Jesus as their Saviour and Lord, then I pray that they will be moved here and now to turn to him and fully give him their hearts and minds, even now today. Amen.