

THE LAMB OF GOD – EXODUS 12

Introduction

Recapitulation

We're now into the third week of this series of Bible studies and I think it might be helpful just to have a quick recapitulation so that we remember where we've got to and how we arrived there.

The series started with two utterances by John the Baptist about Jesus. Twice he referred to him as 'the Lamb of God'. On the first of those occasions he added 'who takes away the sins of the world' – but we'll return to that later.

We noted that this way of referring to Jesus is actually very apt and has made a powerful contribution to Christian worship through the centuries – it's in lots of liturgies (including your communion liturgy) and also in lots of Christian art. In fact, we're so familiar with this idea of Jesus that we don't often think about it very much. But the very first reference to Jesus as the lamb was made by John the Baptist and it's interesting to try and understand where he got that idea from.

So, James then looked at various passages in the OT which might indicate to us where John the Baptist could have got this idea about Jesus from – such as Isaiah 53:7 (the suffering servant), Exodus 12 (the Passover Lamb), Leviticus 4 (the lamb as a sin offering) and Genesis 22 (the binding of Isaac).

Then last week you started to look at those passages in some more detail, commencing with Isaiah.

Reading

This week we're going to look at the Passover lamb from Exodus 12. Let's start by reading that chapter. I'm going to read the whole chapter even though it's rather long as there are important parallels hidden away in some of the later verses.

Message

[Ask audience to discuss whether or not they feel this passage would have been relevant to John the Baptist and why]

I believe John the Baptist probably did have the Passover in mind when he initiated this phrase.

The Passover lamb imagery would have been particularly powerful for the Jews, because the great deliverance of the Exodus and the means by which it came about were absolutely central to their faith. Indeed the Exodus was the means by which the Israelites first became a nation in any real sense – before that they were just disorganised slaves in Egypt. Its importance is shown by the injunction in Exodus 12:2 that henceforth the date of the Exodus was to mark the beginning of their year – an injunction which they kept in relation to

religious matters as their religious year 'Abib' started in March whilst their secular year Tisri started in September.

Certainly the Apostle John seemed to think the Passover was very relevant - he talked a lot about the Passover in his gospel, there are 73 references to the Passover in the whole Bible and 10 of these are in the gospel of John. John also mentions the Passover more than any other feast. Furthermore he puts the death of Christ at the time of twilight when the Passover lambs were being slain in the temple (Exodus 12:6) and so identifies Christ's death with this sacrifice as does Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:7, which reads "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." (1Co 5:7 NIV)

Incidentally, it's interesting to note here that many translations (e.g. the King James and NKJV) omit the word lamb here because the Jews generally referred to eating the Passover rather than eating the Passover lamb.

In fact lots of scholars think that John deliberately put the quotes from John the Baptist near the beginning of his gospel as an introduction to the idea of Jesus as the Passover lamb so that he could develop that theme in the rest of his gospel.

I think this Passover lamb imagery is very important for our understanding of our redemption through Christ. Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross delivers men from the destruction that their sins involve them in. It also transforms us from being slaves to sin into being people of God. This is a powerful parallel.

[Ask for input on this]

Some scholars have objected to this idea on the grounds that the Passover sacrifice didn't take away sin. However, I think that the OT always connects atonement with blood in general and not blood from any particular sacrifice e.g. in Leviticus 17:11 "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." (Le 17:11 NIV)

There are also passages from the sayings of Jewish Rabbis which specifically include the Passover as atoning. There is a Midrash (a Jewish story for teaching purposes) which says "I will have pity on you, through the blood of the Passover and the blood of circumcision, and I will forgive you" The Midrash says the Israelites were under God's condemnation on account of their idolatry, but the Passover blood freed them.

[Ask audience to think of other parallels between the Passover and Jesus' death]

There are lots of other parallels between Jesus and the Passover festival. Jesus was the Passover lamb without blemish of Exodus 12:5 – as Peter says in 1 Peter 1:19 "but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." (1Pe 1:19 NIV)

Also John 19:36, which reads

"These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken,"" (Joh 19:36 NIV)

seems to relate back to from Exodus 12:46 which we read

"It must be eaten inside one house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones." (Ex 12:46 NIV)

Furthermore, Jesus had entered into Jerusalem four days before he was crucified, just as the Passover lamb was to be set apart four days before its slaughter (combined effect of Exodus 12: 3 and 6).

Finally Jesus was a “firstborn male” in his prime of life rather like the Passover lamb - a male of the first year from Exodus 12:5. Here its interesting that it was the firstborn of the Egyptian households which were struck down, that Jesus was in a sense “firstborn” and the firstborn animals were to be consecrated to the Lord (Exodus 13:2).

[Ask audience to think of any differences between the Passover and Jesus’ death]

One difference between Jesus’ sacrifice and the Passover is that Jesus was one individual slain for the sins of all mankind, who takes away the sins of the world as John the Baptist said, whereas at the Passover each household kills a lamb (actually Jews held in OT times that a lamb should serve not less than 10 people and not more than 20). I don’t think this difference is important. Each household was commanded to kill a lamb in order that they might partake and eat and be bound into the ritual, just as we all partake of the rituals of communion or baptism. But Jesus was unique and his sacrifice alone was necessary and sufficient for our redemption. Indeed, it may have been to prevent the Passover lamb becoming an object of undue veneration that the Jews were ordered to consume the whole lamb and burn any remnant including the bones.

Incidentally returning for a second to the sacrament of communion, the parallel with eating the Passover is clear. Also interesting is the idea from Exodus 12:48 that only the people of God and those who are in good standing with him should eat the Passover – analogous to the requirements we generally set for taking communion.