

## MAY THE LAMB BE WITH YOU

A sermon on John 1:29-42

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

Ahh yes, that time a weird guy from the desert pointed fingers at Jesus and called him a baby sheep. You may have never thought of it *that* way before.

Behold the power of word choice and phrasing!

Way back in my first introductory Greek class

I worked on a project diving into what was meant by John's word choice in the phrase:  
το Αμνο του Θεου, that is, the Lamb of God.

So the “baby sheep” of it all plays large  
in my own imagination and interpretation of this passage.

It is in some ways a curious image.

And it is found in the earliest depictions of John the Baptist which show a man holding a lamb and pointing at it. You know it is John because he just loves pointing at the baby sheep! It's his thing!

But why?

There are sheep of course, and lambs, throughout the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament:

- ◆ Maybe we are to think of the ram that was sacrificed in the place of Isaac back in Genesis.
- ◆ Maybe it recalls the Passover Lamb whose blood spared the Israelites and brought them out of Egypt.
- ◆ Maybe it is in reference to the lamb spoken about in the “Suffering Servant” passage in Isaiah, where it is written:

As a lamb led to the slaughter  
and like a sheep before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

Maybe it is all of these at once, in fact it probably is all of these at once

- they have certainly all long been recognized as symbols and foreshadowing of Christ.

But this exact phrase — The Lamb of God — is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament,  
but it obviously seems to mean something to John the Baptist and his followers.

The exact phrase does occur elsewhere in Jewish literature of that time that John the Baptist may have known about, especially in literature dealing with apocalyptic visions.

Just a couple of examples:

### **1 Enoch 85-90**

In first Enoch, which provides an apocalyptic take on Jewish history portrays King David as a lamb ruling over the sheep and making them victorious over all manner of lion, leopards and wolves.



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Another lamb figure seems to represent Judas Maccabeus,  
a national hero who led a revolt against the Seleucid empire.  
In Enoch, The Lamb of God denotes a victorious leader.

### **Testament of Joseph 19:8**

Then in the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*,  
we read this vision put in the mouth of Joseph (the one with the coat of many colors):  
“And I saw a virgin...and from her was born a spotless lamb,  
and he was at her left hand like a lion,  
and all the wild animals rushed against him,  
but the lamb conquered them, and destroyed them,  
trampling them underfoot.”

It goes on to instruct readers to honor Levi and Judah because, and I quote,  
“from their seed will arise the Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world,  
and will save all the nations, as well as Israel.”

Sound familiar?

I'd suggest that this very well could be what John the Baptist is referencing  
when he points fingers and calls Jesus a baby sheep.

A clearly Messianic figure, and one who conquers through meekness and frees the world from sin.

The conquering Lamb of God certainly has shown up throughout the ages.

Looking at some 8<sup>th</sup> century Celtic prayers from the Dunkeld monastery in Scotland  
there was one that inspired what I have prepared for the congregational prayer,  
and immediately after a series of  
“Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world / Lord have mercy,”  
we read “Christ conquers, Christ rules, Christ commands.”  
These two seemingly conflicting images of a peaceful lamb and conquering king  
nonetheless go together.



And let's not forget that part about taking away the sin of the world;

John repeats it each time he points to the Lamb. It is important.

The language used does not suggest that the sin is covered over or overlooked or ignored,  
not even merely forgiven in some legalistic sense.

It is lifted up, taken away, removed.

The sin of the world, that is the whole condition of sinfulness more than individual acts,  
is lifted up to God where it can be healed and taken away.

St. Irenaeus from the second century wrote about recapitulation,  
the idea that Christ, in taking on human nature itself,  
healed it from within through contact with the divine.

I find all this symbolism and the theology intertwined with it really interesting,

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but I also realize that neither the symbol nor the idea itself is the point. We'd do well not to push analogies too far, lest the truths intended get distorted.

Once upon a time, in the year 692, there was a Church Council held in "Trullo" - the domed rotunda of the imperial palace in Constantinople. And at this council, one of the things the gathered church leaders talked about was that John with Lamb picture I mentioned earlier:

"In certain venerable icons, the Forerunner [John the Baptist] is pictured pointing at the lamb with his finger. This representation was adopted as a **symbol** of grace. It is a **hidden figure** of that true lamb who is Christ, our God, and shown to us according to the Law. Having thus welcomed these ancient **figures** and **shadows** as **symbols** of the truth transmitted to the Church, we prefer today grace and truth themselves as a **fulfillment** of this law. Therefore, in order to expose to the sight of all that which is perfect, at least with the help of painting, we decree that henceforth Christ our God ought be represented in His human form instead of in the form of the ancient lamb."



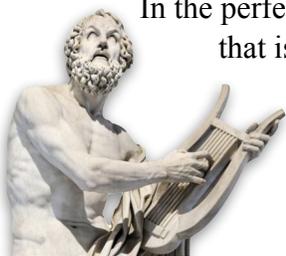
And so images of John the Baptist now have him pointing at Jesus the man, but he still holds a scroll that reads: Behold the Lamb of God. You see, a lamb, no matter how ancient and venerable and profound a symbol it is, simply fails to convey that central truth of Christianity — that God became man to dwell among us and save us.

The symbol has fallen away in its fulfillment in reality. And that is what we see within the scriptures.

When Andrew and whoever the other disciple of John's was who heard that declaration: Behold the Lamb of God, they did not merely "behold." They went for a "be with." They went from hearing about an abstract and mysterious figure from prophesy that was open to interpretation and whose lack of being demanded only hypothetical obedience, to now beholding and being with one Jesus of Nazareth.

The word used for "behold" by the way, Ἰδε means more than "look over there!"

In the perfect tense, that would be literally "to have seen" in English came to mean "I know," that is to say that this "behold" language, already quite ancient in Jesus' day (Homer had used it nearly a thousand years before!), was a seeing that led to knowledge of a thing or person, or Lamb.



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But that goes both ways.

It is also a knowledge that comes from beholding, from knowing where to look.

And there is John, ever pointing towards Christ and not at himself.

John's followers become Christ's followers.

Because they behold, and then choose to be with, seeking after Him, staying with Him.

And when they catch up with Him, he invites them to come and see,

to continue in seeking to come to the knowledge that comes through encounter.

The word for see in Christ's invitation ... well, it depends on which manuscript you're looking at.

The tense used varies, but one of my favorites is actually in the future,

as Christ tells them not only to come and see,

but that coming, they *will* see and find their answers.

It's as much a promise as an invitation.

Andrew told his brother Simon, he found the Messiah,

for that is what he understood through his encounter with the Lamb of God.

And that meant something and demanded something of them.

It certainly changed both his and his brother's lives,

and all Christians throughout the ages who hear their stories.

It even gave his brother a new name, a re-shaped identity -

Peter, whose faith is the rock on which Christ builds his church.

And them both new direction and purpose in their lives,

to follow and serve the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us  
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,  
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus  
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*