

John 1:28–30

Introduction

This morning, we continue with the “witness” or the “testimony” of John the Baptist to Jesus. If last week we saw that John would say only “*negatively*” who he was *not*, this week we come to the beginning of John’s *positive* witness to the Messiah. This week we’ll see the *positive* answer John would have given to the priests and Levites if only they had asked the question they ought to have been asking. But first, we read in verse 28:

John 1:28 — These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

That’s not just a piece of trivial information. This is an eyewitness testifying to the truthfulness of his words by telling us the location where these things took place. John was there, in Bethany—not the Bethany on the west side of the Jordan River where Mary and Martha and Lazarus were from, but a no longer identifiable Bethany “across the Jordan” on the east side—where John the Baptist was baptizing. And so we rejoice not only in this eyewitness testimony that has come to us in the Word of God, but also in the thoroughly historical and factual nature of our salvation. Not only does John recall the location of these events, but even the chronology. He continues in verse 29:

John 1:29–30 — *The next day* he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “**Behold**, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! **This is he** of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who is before me, because he was first with respect to me.’”

I. What was in John the Baptist’s mind?

The language, here, of the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” has become so familiar to us, we may no longer see or understand its true and full meaning. In the first place, we have to ask what John himself would have understood about the meaning of his own words. We look back today from a place of “fulfillment.” It’s in this sense that Jesus says *we* are even “greater” than John because we’ve seen and understood far more clearly than John ever did the realities of the Messiah and His kingdom – the very realities to which John was bearing witness (cf. Mat. 11:11). We look back on the testimony of John concerning the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” and we see this in the full light of Christ’s suffering and sacrificial death on the cross.

II. Passover

We see Christ as the fulfillment of the Passover “lamb” who brings about a second exodus from Egypt – this time delivering us from our slavery and bondage to sin. And rightly so. But is this really what John the Baptist was thinking here?

“Lamb” (Gr. *amnos*) is never used in the Bible for the Passover sacrifice. Instead, the sacrificial victim is simply called “the Passover” (*pascha*).

- Luke 22:7 — Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover had to be sacrificed.
- 1 Corinthians 5:7 — Christ, our Passover has been sacrificed.

If John had specifically had in mind the fulfillment of Passover, it seems that he would have said “Passover.”

One reason we never hear in the Bible about a “Passover lamb” is that in the Old Testament the Passover could be either from the sheep or from the goats (cf. Exod. 12:5).¹ But, of course, the “Passover goat” or the “goat of God” wouldn’t quite have the same “ring” for us today as the “Passover lamb.”

From our privileged place in history, we see clearly that Jesus is the fulfillment of Passover – whether the Passover lamb *or* the Passover goat (cf. Jn. 19:36; 1 Cor. 5:7), but it seems almost certain that when John the Baptist first spoke these words, he wasn’t thinking of Christ as the fulfillment of Passover.

III. The Suffering Servant

We can hear John’s words and be reminded right away of Isaiah 53 and the suffering “servant of the Lord” who “opened not his mouth” – “*like a sheep [LXX, probaton] that is led to the slaughter, and like a lamb [LXX, amnos] that before its shearers is silent*” (Isa. 53:7; LXX). But is this really what John the Baptist was thinking of?

The problem, here, is that in precisely this verse where we see a “lamb” the point isn’t sacrifice. The imagery of being led to slaughter (as likely for the preparation of a regular household meal as for sacrifice; cf. Gen. 43:16; 1 Sam. 25:11; Prov. 9:2) is followed up by the parallel imagery of a lamb that’s silent before its *shearers*.

From our privileged place in history, we can see clearly that Jesus is the fulfillment of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 (cf. Acts 8:32-35; Mk. 14:61; Jn. 19:9; 1 Pet. 2:23), but this was not at all clear to those living *before* Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. Once again, it seems almost certain that when *John* first spoke these words, “behold, the Lamb of God,” *he* wasn’t thinking of Christ as the fulfillment of the “sheep” or the “lamb” in Isaiah 53.

IV. Morning and evening sacrifice

We can hear John’s words and see in them the fulfillment of the daily morning and evening sacrifice of a lamb at the temple (cf. Exod. 29:38-43; Num. 28:3-4, 8-9). But is this really what John the Baptist was thinking of?

The problem is that there’s no evidence in the text for this *specific* connection – or for thinking that *John* or those listening to him would have made this connection.

¹ The word translated “lamb” in the Old Testament was actually just a word for a “flock” animal (see Exod. 12:5 in the HCSB or the NLT) – whether a sheep or a goat.

V. The important difference between the Old Testament sacrificial victim and John's "Lamb of God."

In the Old Testament, the sacrificial victim (whether a lamb or a goat or a bull) was just that – it was a *passive* and *helpless* sacrificial *victim*. In the Old Testament, it was not the lamb or the goat or the bull that *acted* to take away sin. But in *John's* mind this "lamb" is neither passive, nor helpless, nor a victim. This is a lamb who *Himself* "takes away the sin of the world." In John's mind this lamb isn't a sacrificial victim such as we see in the Old Testament, but a powerfully active lamb who performs mighty and powerful deeds. This is the lamb of whom John says: "After me comes a man who is before me, because he was first with respect to me."

Now *we* can put these two apparently contrary ideas together in our minds in light of the fulfillment, but John was not living in the days of fulfillment. So when John speaks here of a "*lamb*"—not a goat or a bull, but very specifically a *lamb*—taking away the sin of the world, it's almost certain that he himself doesn't have in mind any kind of sacrificial imagery.² This isn't to say that the God who gave these words to John doesn't have these things in mind or that today we're not meant to look back and see the full meaning of these words in the light of Christ's sacrificial death. But John the Baptist was not just mindlessly repeating words that God had given him to say. So we have to see how these words would have made sense not just to John – but even to the crowds who were listening to him and coming to be baptized by him. Did John and these crowds understand what even Jesus' own disciples couldn't understand until after His death and resurrection (cf. Lk. 9:44-45; 18:31-34; 24:13-49)?

While John does not see in the imagery of the lamb a sacrificial victim, what he does see in the imagery of a lamb is a conquering and almighty Messiah who even takes away the sin of the world – one who is so great that even to untie the strap of His sandal would be a task of which John was unworthy. But how can the imagery of a Lamb fit with this idea of a conquering, saving Messiah? How would *John* have made sense of a *Lamb* taking away the sin of the world?

VI. The lamb as leader and protector of the flock

We first have to remember that John was not guilty of sentimentalizing "lambs," like we might be. In the Bible, a sexually mature male ram of one year old with fully developed horns was still called a "lamb" (*amnos*; cf. Lev. 23:12; Num. 6:12, 14; 7:15). This young, but mature ram would be the dominant member of the flock, leading and protecting the other ewe-lambs (chasing, stamping, head down; cf. Ezek. 17:13; 31:11; 32:21; 39:18). It was this full-grown ram with horns that was used as the Passover sacrifice – not the "sweet little" one-month-old lamb in the pictures (cf. Exod. 12:5; **see pictures on page 9**). In Daniel, the male lamb (or ram) is used as a symbol of great power (cf. Dan. 8:3-4). In part of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition "the Maccabees are symbolized as 'horned lambs' [1 Enoch 90:9]. It is a *lamb* in the *Testament of Joseph* that destroys the enemies of Israel (19:8-9)" (Mounce on Rev. 5:6; cf. Carson on John 1:29). A lamb need not be a symbol of something weak and helpless, or even witless, and certainly not of something "sweet" and "cute." John sees this "*Lamb of God*" as possessing the

² This is not to say, of course, that John who was of the priestly family did not understand the meaning and the importance of sacrifice!

power of God. This is no “ordinary” lamb. This is *God’s Lamb* – the “*Lamb of God*.” This is an almighty and omnipotent Lamb.

But why a lamb and not, for example, a lion? The people of Israel are constantly pictured in the Old Testament as God’s “flock” or God’s “sheep.”

- Isaiah 40:11 — He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs [LXX, *aren*] in his arms.
- Psalm 95:7 (cf. Jer. 23:1; Mic. 2:12) — [the Lord] is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep [LXX, *probaton*] of his hand.
- Zechariah 10:3 (cf. Hos. 4:16) — The LORD of hosts cares for his flock [LXX, *amnos*/"lambs"], the house of Judah.

So when the Messiah is described as God’s lamb (almost certainly a mature ram with horns), John would have been reminded of his identification with the flock that He has come to deliver (the Messiah arises from out of Israel and is himself the true Israel; cf. Isa. 49:1-6). It wouldn’t have been unnatural at all to think of Israel’s Messiah as the *Lamb* who would lead and save and protect the *flock* (cf. Rev. 7:17; 14:1, 4; Beasley-Murray).

VII. The lamb as a symbol of purity

And then there’s the white wool of the lamb as a symbol of purity and righteousness (cf. Michaels).

- Isaiah 1:18 — Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.
- Daniel 7:9 — The Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool.
- Revelation 1:14 — The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow.

The Apostle Peter saw in the white wool of the lamb a picture of Christ’s sinless purity when he spoke of a lamb that is “unstained” or “without spot” (a word never connected in the Old Testament with the idea of sacrifice³; cf. 1 Pet. 1:19). Remember that John was preaching a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” in order to “make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (cf. Mk. 1:4; Lk. 1:17). So for John, the white wool of the lamb would symbolize the sinless righteousness of the coming, conquering Messiah who would *take away* the sin of the world. We read in 1 John chapter three:

- 1 John 3:5 — He appeared in order to take away sins, *and in him there is no sin*.

³ Peter uses the expression “like a lamb without blemish and without spot.” The Greek word for “without blemish” is used many times in the Greek translation of the OT to describe the fitness of a sacrificial animal. The word for “without spot (spotless/unstained),” however, is not once used in the Greek OT. Apparently, Peter saw even in the white wool of the lamb an appropriate picture of Christ’s sinless purity.

The point is that the one who takes away sin is Himself sinless; the one who takes away all impurity and unrighteousness is Himself wholly pure and righteous. And so here in John's Gospel, the point seems to be the same: "Behold, the *Lamb of God* who takes away the sin of the world." "Behold, God's conquering Lamb who delivers the flock, and who—as one who is Himself sinless—takes away the sin of the world."

VIII. How John's messianic Lamb takes away the sin of the world

It only remains, now, for us to ask how John would have conceived of this righteous, conquering Lamb *taking away* the sin of the world. That *John* was not envisioning the Messiah as a *suffering* and *sacrificial* Lamb should be clear from the account of His confusion in Matthew chapter eleven:

- Matthew 11:2–3 — Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

If John had already been *looking* for a Lamb who takes away the sin of the world by suffering and dying, then he wouldn't have needed to ask such a question. So how, then, does John envision the conquering, sinless Lamb taking away the sin of the world? When we hear about the sin of the world being "taken away" we automatically think in a positive way of the forgiveness of sin. But nowhere else in the Bible is this word for "takes away" (*airo*) ever used for the taking away of sin *through sacrifice*. There are other words used for this—words that John could easily have used here but didn't.⁴ John uses this same word for "taking away" in 1 John 3 and there the point seems to involve a "taking away" of sin *through judgment* (cf. Col. 2:13-14).

- 1 John 3:4–5, 8 — Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices *lawlessness*; sin is *lawlessness*. You know that he appeared **in order to take away sins** [if you practice the very lawlessness that He came to rid the world of, then you yourself can expect to be taken away in judgment; cf. Eph. 5:3-7; Col. 3:5-6]... Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was **to destroy the works of the devil [cf. to take away sin]**.

We can see today that this "taking away" certainly assumes the sin-bearing, sacrificial death of Christ, but in itself it refers not so much to the forgiveness of sins as it does to finally ridding the world and cleansing the world of *all* sin and lawlessness. And that also seems to be the point here in John chapter one. When John the Baptist says, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who **takes away** the sin of the world" he's thinking of that final day when the Messiah rids the world of all sin and cleanses the world of all wickedness.⁵ And how does *John* envision the conquering,

⁴ 1 Sam. 15:25 and 1 Sam. 25:28 both speak of one man pardoning or overlooking (*airo*) the sin/trespass of another. Other words used to express the concept of a redemptive taking away or bearing of sin are *aphaireo* (Exod. 34:7, 9; Num. 14:18; Isa. 6:7; 27:9; Ezek. 26:36; Rom. 11:27; Heb. 10:4) and *anaphero* (Isa. 53:11-12; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 2:24). *Exairo* is used once of Aaron bearing any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate (Exod. 28:36-38). John the Apostle could also have substituted *anaphero* for *airo*, but doesn't (cf. Carson).

⁵ This eliminates the appropriateness of using this verse in discussions of a limited atonement (particular redemption) versus an unlimited/universal atonement.

sinless Lamb accomplishing this mighty act of taking away the sin of the world? The answer is simple: “by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning.” We read in Isaiah chapter four:

- Isaiah 4:2–4 (cf. Isa. 1:24-26; 33:14-15) — In that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, **when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning.**

In Malachi 3, a passage that speaks of John the Baptist, we read this:

- Malachi 3:1–4 — Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.

How did *John* envision God’s sinless and conquering Lamb taking away the sin of the world? By sitting as a refiner and purifier of silver and burning and smelting away the dross. And so we read in Matthew chapter three:

- Matthew 3:7–12 (cf. Isa 33:14-15) — When [John] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Can you see, now, how John understood the revelation that God had given him? “Behold, God’s *conquering* and *sinless* Messiah!—The (“apocalyptic”) “*Lamb of God*” (the ram with horns!)—who takes away the sin of the world, and who does so by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning – by gathering the wheat into the barn (saving and delivering the flock) and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

IX. The “hidden glory” in John’s words

Was John deceived? Was John wrong to behold the Lamb of God in this all-glorious, all-conquering eschatological light? These are the questions that John himself was asking in Matthew chapter 11 (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12), and the answer is: “NOT AT ALL!” The truth is that even with the first coming of Christ, the final cleansing and purifying judgment has already begun in principle and even to a certain extent in its actual effect and outworking.

- John 3:18–19 — Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.
- John 9:39 — Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”
- John 12:31 (cf. Jn. 16:11) — Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.

The Apostle Peter also tells us that there’s a sense in which the purifying fires of the final judgment have already begun to burn:

- 1 Peter 4:12, 17 (see message on verse 17) — Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you... It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

In his understanding of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world John was not at all deceived. And yet there was still a “*hidden glory*” in his words that he himself would never live to see or fully understand.⁶ There was still a “*hidden glory*” in his words that’s only fully unveiled to us who live in these days of fulfillment – who look back, now, on the sacrificial death of God’s triumphant and conquering Lamb.

Conclusion

In Revelation chapter 5 we see Jesus portrayed as a Lamb⁷ “with seven horns and with seven eyes” (Rev. 5:6) – the horns symbolizing the Lamb’s “irresistible might” (Mounce) and the eyes symbolizing his perfect knowledge and ability to judge the world (cf. Zech. 4:10). In Revelation chapter 6 we hear people calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us... from the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev. 6:16). In Revelation chapter 14 we see the wicked being “tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb” (Rev. 14:10). In Revelation chapter 17 we hear that the armies of the beast “will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev. 17:12-14). *This* is the “apocalyptic” Lamb that John the Baptist had in mind when he spoke these words: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

But what John could not yet *see* was this same Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes “standing, as though it had been *slain*” (Rev. 5:6). What John could not yet *hear* was “the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb *who was slain*, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’” (Rev. 5:12). What John could not yet *comprehend* was the saints “[washing] their robes and [making] them white in the *blood* of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14) and even

⁶ *Amnos* (lamb) and *airo* (“takes away”) are both capable of being read in the light of an expiatory sacrifice.

⁷ In Revelation the word for “lamb” is always *arnion* whereas in John’s Gospel the word is *amnos*. Carson comments: “If ‘Lamb of God’ was not a well-recognized, technical expression, the fact that our text uses *amnos* instead of *arnion* offers no great difficulty.” Like *amnos*, *arnion* does not refer in itself to a Ram.

conquering “the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world... by the *blood* of the Lamb” (Rev. 12:7-11).

John the Baptist couldn’t yet see these things, but when John the Apostle looked back at these words and included them here in his Gospel, *he* could see the previously hidden glory of these words now fully unveiled.

John the Baptist was not wrong. We must learn today to *see with* John the all-conquering, all-glorious, righteous Lamb of God who will save and deliver God’s flock and cleanse the world of all sin and wickedness “by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning.” “**BEHOLD**, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Behold, and tremble. Behold, and don’t be afraid – as we live in this world still full of sin and lawlessness.

And yet how wonderful, too, to *see with* John the Apostle that this Lamb is the Lamb who was slain so that rather than be swept away before the wrath of the Lamb, our robes might be washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. “**BEHOLD**, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Behold, and trust. Behold, and be filled up with joy and gratitude and thanksgiving.

