

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S "LAMB OF GOD" AFFIRMATION IN ITS CANONICAL AND APOCALYPTIC MILIEU

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The designation of Jesus as the Lamb of God has become inextricably woven into the fabric of Christianity.¹ The title has seemed especially appropriate, given Jesus' atoning death. Consequently Christians generally acclaim the foresight of John the Baptist in identifying Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb of God and link John's statement with Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering servant (Isaiah 53). But that conclusion is open to serious objections.

Understanding the Baptist's affirmation retrospectively—that is, from a post-passion advantage and with the OT alone as the interpretive context—is insufficient and misleading. To understand the NT correctly the importance of the formative years of the second Jewish commonwealth cannot be ignored.² And to understand John the Baptist correctly the intent of his words and their meaning to his hearers must be carefully distinguished from the later significance of his words to the Evangelist and his readers.³ For the Lamb of God metaphor, a careful examination of the OT context balanced with the significant developments within Judaism in the second temple period will demonstrate that John the Baptist's logion was not itself referring to Jesus' substitutionary atonement.

Of the nine different interpretations of the significance of the lamb metaphor in John 1:29, 36 four will illustrate the diversity of opinions:⁴

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¹ E.g. the music of the Church: "Behold the Lamb of God" in Handel's "Messiah," "Agnus Dei" by Bizet and other composers, and contemporary Christian songs such as "Lamb of Glory" (Nelson and McHugh), "Worthy Is the Lamb" (Wyrzten), and "Behold the Lamb" (Rambo). Many hymns include references to the lamb: Charles Wesley's "Hail the Day that Sees Him Rise," Fanny Crosby's "Near the Cross" and "Redeemed," Isaac Watts' "Am I a Soldier of the Cross," P. P. Bliss' "Hallelujah! What a Savior," George Bennard's "The Old Rugged Cross," Adoniram Judson's "Come, Holy Spirit, Dove Divine," and so forth.

² Note the increased attention in the last several decades to this crucial period. For a helpful overview with bibliography see A. J. Saldarini, "Judaism and the New Testament," in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters* (ed. E. J. Epp and G. W. MacRae; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989) 27-54.

³ E. W. Burrows underscores the need to make this distinction ("Did John the Baptist Call Jesus 'The Lamb of God'?", *ExpTim* 85/8 [May 1974] 249). For a clear discussion of the two stages of interpretation see S. Virgulin, "Recent Discussion of the Title 'Lamb of God,'" *Scripture* 13/23 (July 1961) 74-80.

⁴ For a summary of the various conclusions on John 1:29 see E. E. May, *Ecce Agnus Dei! A Philological and Exegetical Approach to John 1:29, 36* (Studies in Sacred Theology 5; Washington: Catholic University of America, 1947) 50-91; L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*

(1) It has been argued that John could not have recognized Jesus as the suffering servant and did not, according to his inquiry from prison. Thus the Baptist's statement is unhistorical.⁵ (2) Some have suggested that *amnos* ("lamb") is a mistranslation of an Aramaic word: *ṭly* ("servant") was misunderstood as *ṭl* ("lamb").⁶ Thus the Baptist had identified Jesus as "servant," but in the course of the Christian transmission of that saying it was changed to "lamb." (3) The traditional view maintains that John the Baptist was predicting Jesus' sacrificial atonement as the lamb of Isaiah 53.⁷ (4) It has been argued that "lamb" symbolizes a deliverer, and thus John was only declaring that Jesus was the Messiah.⁸

Two of these views merit closer examination. On the one hand this study will raise additional objections to the interpretation that John the Baptist's statement was anticipating Jesus' redemptive death, and on the other hand this study will add support to the interpretation that John was proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah who would restore the kingdom. From the OT and intertestamental contexts it will be shown that sheep symbolize a diversity of

(NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 144–147; G. L. Carey, "The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories," *TynBul* 32 (1981) 101–107. For bibliography in addition to the citations in this paper see E. Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1–6* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 150–151; P. J. Du Plessis, "The Lamb of God in the Fourth Gospel," in *A South African Perspective on the New Testament: Essays by South African New Testament Scholars Presented to Bruce Manning Metzger during His Visit to South Africa in 1985* (ed. J. H. Petzer and P. J. Hartin; Leiden: Brill, 1986) 148.

⁵ J. N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (ed. B. A. Mastin; New York: Harper, 1968) 93; B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 108–109; "A Bull, a Lamb and a Word," *NTS* 22 (1976) 483–486. For a similar view see R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John: Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1–4* (Freiburg: Herder and Herder, 1968) 300–301.

⁶ C. J. Ball, "Had the Fourth Gospel an Aramaic Archetype?," *ExpTim* 21 (1909–10) 92; C. F. Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1922) 104–108; J. Jeremias, "Amnos tou theou—pais theou," *ZNW* 34 (1935) 115–123; *TDNT* s.v. *amnos*.

⁷ Statements abound representing this view, appearing widely in older commentaries (e.g. F. L. Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978 (1886)] 310–313) but continuing to the present: R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Commentary* (ed. C. F. Evans; Oxford: Clarendon, 1956) 96–97; R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 95–96; E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3, 351 (Young's comment, in regard to Isaiah 53, is typical: "Possibly the mention of lamb reflects upon the sacrificial lamb of Exod 12:3; and John the Baptist, in designating our Lord the Lamb of God, based his language upon this present verse"); F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 52–53. For variations on this view see Morris, *Gospel* 147: The lamb of God is a "general allusion to sacrifice"; Haenchen, *John 1* 152, 155: The reference is primarily to the paschal lamb, yet the breadth of the symbolism in "lamb" forms a new image as it is applied to Jesus.

⁸ This idea was apparently first suggested by F. Spitta, *Streitfragen der Geschichte Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1907) 172–224. C. H. Dodd advanced the idea in *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1953) 230–238. R. E. Brown gives the clearest presentation of the view in "Three Quotations from John the Baptist in the Gospel of John," *CBQ* 22/3 (July 1960) 292–298; *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) 58–60. Others who accept the deliverer view include J. H. Roberts, "The Lamb of God," *Neot* 2 (1968) 41–56 (though Roberts prefers a kingly Messiah lamb), and G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987) 24–25. C. K. Barrett fails to distinguish clearly between the lamb of God phrase in the mouth of the Baptist and in the pen of the Evangelist and, though

concepts (from submissiveness to aggressiveness), that the lamb in Isaiah 53 is not predictive of sacrificial atonement, and that apocalyptic passages present a lamb as a victorious conqueror. The clearest evidence against the Baptist giving a prediction of a suffering Messiah comes from the gospels, where it is apparent that John the Baptist did not understand Jesus' role as personal redeemer. Thus John the Baptist should be understood to be saying, "Look, here is our deliverer who will purge the world of evil."

I. THE OT CONTEXT

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 (Isa 53:7).

Isaiah 53 has had much to commend it as the interpretive locus for John 1:29, 36, for it has long been cherished as a magnificent song about the Messiah as a suffering servant and atoning sacrifice.⁹ Consequently John the Baptist's reference to a lamb and the removal of sin calls up Isaiah's whole poem about the suffering Messiah. For Christians the paschal lamb seems to have been clearly forecast by both Isaiah and John the Baptist.

A closer inspection of Isaiah 53 raises serious doubts, however, concerning whether Isaiah's reference to a lamb in the context of the Messiah is the correct background for John the Baptist's affirmation. Isaiah brackets his references to the servant as a lamb and a sheep by the phrase, "he did not open his mouth" (Isa 53:7).¹⁰ Isaiah is describing the demeanor of this unique person when he is despised and afflicted, but he is apparently not designating the servant as a sacrificial lamb, for he does not use the common terms for sheep associated with sacrifices.¹¹ Isaiah predicts one thing: The servant will be silent like a sheep getting sheared or like a lamb on the way to being slaughtered.¹² This term for sheep, *rhl*, occurs

speaking against Dodd's conclusion, essentially agrees with him on what the Baptist meant by the phrase: "The Lamb of God," *NTS* 1/3 (February 1955) 210-218. Barrett addresses only the Evangelist's use of the phrase in *The Gospel According to St. John* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 176-178.

⁹ That early Christians accepted Isaiah 53 as a prophecy of the Messiah is evident from Acts 8:32-35; *1 Clem.* 16:7; *Barn.* 5:2; etc.

¹⁰ Isaiah's repeating the idea of the lamb's silence has been variously defended: "The repetition of ['he did not open his mouth'], so far from being a rhetorical defect, is highly graphic and impressive" (J. A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecy of Isaiah* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953] 299). Köhler considers this the most beautiful and expressive *Nachklang* in the whole writing (L. Köhler, *Deuterocesaja [Jesaja 40-55]: Stilkritisch Untersucht* [BZAW 37; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1923] 94-95). "Such repetition is characteristic of [Deutero-Isaiah]" (C. R. North, *The Second Isaiah* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1964] 229).

¹¹ The most common terms associated with sacrifices are *kbs* (or by metathesis *kšb*), "sheep, lamb," and *ʔyl*, "ram."

¹² "The metaphors in v. 7b suggest being taken into court or something of the kind" (C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969] 264). R. N. Whybray concludes that the point of comparison in the simile of the lamb is the silence of the victim (*Isaiah 40-66* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 176).

only three other times in the OT and never as a sacrificial animal. The term for lamb, *śh*, though used for the Passover lamb (Exod 12:3–5), is not used for the sacrificial animal itself. Roberts correctly notes that the LXX inverts the terminology and has a lamb (*amnos*) getting sheared and a sheep (*probaton*) being slaughtered. He is mistaken, however, when he argues that the Hebrew associates the slaughtered lamb with an atoning sacrifice.¹³ Furthermore Isaiah is not referring to sacrificial slaughter, for instead of *zbh*, which is a slaughter for sacrifice, Isaiah uses *tbh*, which is a slaughter for food. (Accordingly Joseph instructed that an animal be slaughtered and dinner be prepared for his brothers [Gen 43:16], and God promised to slaughter the nations in his wrath [Isa 34:2]). So Jeremiah can say of himself that he was “like a lamb led to slaughter” (Jer 11:19). Isaiah 53, therefore, does not provide an intersection of the metaphor of a lamb with a sacrificial animal. As Dodd notes, it was the blood of bulls and goats, not of a lamb, that took away sin.¹⁴ The lamb of Isaiah 53, then, is an animal that is silently submissive when it is killed.

This does not deny the vicarious emphasis of this messianic song. The idea of a guilt offering is clearly present in the passage (Isa 53:10), and the reference to a lamb in v. 7 cannot be completely divorced from the wider sacrificial context. Significantly, the song concludes with the victory of the servant (v. 12), yet that conclusion does not include the lamb motif. And though “lamb” is a meaningful simile for “servant,” the comparison here is in the context of the servant’s silence when subject to abuse. Isaiah does not link the servant to a sacrificial lamb.

In the retrospective view of the early Christians, however, Isaiah 53 became a forecast of the dark climax to Jesus’ public ministry, but that was a viewpoint based on a knowledge of the passion week. There is no evidence in the NT, until well after Jesus’ death and resurrection—when Philip explained to the Ethiopian magistrate the text he was reading in Isaiah (Acts 8:32)—that anyone other than Jesus understood the significance of Jesus’ messiahship in light of Isaiah 53. Though rabbinic sources indicate that some Jews accepted Isaiah 53 as messianic,¹⁵ there is no indication in the NT that Jesus’ followers entertained the idea of a suffering servant before his suffering.

Elsewhere in the OT, sheep are an important and common motif in religion and politics as they are throughout the ancient Near East.¹⁶ That is no surprise for a pastoral culture that found many needs met by a healthy flock of sheep: food, clothing, tent material, medium of exchange, sacrificial ani-

¹³ Roberts, “Lamb” 46.

¹⁴ Dodd, *Interpretation* 233.

¹⁵ S. R. Driver and A. Neubauer, *The Fifty-third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters* (2 vols.; New York: KTAV, 1969 [1877]); C. R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical and Critical Study* (2d ed.; London: Oxford, 1956) 6–22; Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 298. On the interpretation of Isaiah 53 at Qumran see n. 38 below.

¹⁶ See e.g. W. M. Hallo, *Early Mesopotamian Royal Titles: A Philological and Historical Analysis* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1957); D. L. Fowler, “The Context of the Good Shepherd Discourses” (dissertation; Grace Theological Seminary, 1981) 8–70.

mal. A man's wealth was commonly measured in the size of his flocks. And the unaggressive, relatively defenseless nature of sheep, in constant need of care and supervision, served as a fitting literary symbol for people. A variety of Hebrew and Aramaic terms is used in the OT for this ruminant mammal known in English as sheep, a close relative of the goat.¹⁷ Though several of the terms are nearly synonymous, they sometimes distinguish between male and female (ram and ewe) and the young (lamb). In Greek, however, as in English, the choice of terminology is more limited than in Hebrew.¹⁸

What is essential for a proper perspective on the Lamb of God statement is the variety of concepts that sheep symbolized in the OT. Jews who heard a lamb used as a metaphor were not limited to the context of Isaiah 53. In the Torah sheep figure most prominently in the context of Passover or sacrifices, but in the Psalms and the prophets sheep were a common metaphor for people, whether sheep being tended by the master shepherd or sheep being destroyed by the righteous judge. Thus Israel is the sheep of God's pasture (Ezek 34:2–31), but the Babylonians are sheep that are dragged off to destruction (Jer 50:45; 51:40). The idea of submission and docility, however, is not the only figure suggested by sheep: In Ps 114:4, 6 the mountains skip like rams and the hills like lambs, and, more significantly, in Ezek 34:17–21 rams and goats are paired together as symbols of the rich and powerful in Israel. The most surprising metaphor is in Daniel's vision of the successful expedition of one kingdom against another (Dan 8:3–22). The ram, though ultimately defeated by the goat, was so powerful that no animal could stand against it as it charged toward the west, north and south.¹⁹ A sheep as a conqueror is a role reversal that is altogether striking, a role that is most vividly presented in the Apocalypse of John where the Lamb is a victorious conqueror.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE EXTRA-BIBLICAL CONTEXT

In the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, sheep continue to be a figure for people: Sheep are like God's devout among the nations (*Pss. Sol.* 8:23); out of many sheep the Lord chose one for himself, which is Israel (2 Esdr 5:26); Israel is like skipping lambs in the wilderness (*Wis* 19:9). But in 3 *Apoc. Bar.* 9:3, 4 (Greek) Baruch has a vision where oxen and lambs symbolize angels. And in two texts lambs are victorious over other animals (1 *Enoch* 90; *T. Jos.* 19:8–10), indicating that sheep continue to be a metaphor for conquerors (see below for detailed discussion).

In QL the references to sheep are infrequent, but they continue the idea of a sacrificial animal and the symbolism of God's elect.²⁰ In Philo

¹⁷ Eight Hebrew roots occur in the OT: *kbś/kśb*, *ʿtwd*, *šʿn*, *rhl*, *śh*, *ʿyl*, *ʿlh*. In addition two Aramaic roots occur: *ʿmr*, *dkd*.

¹⁸ The LXX translators represented the ten different Semitic roots by four Greek words: *arnos*, *arnos/arnion*, *probaton*, *krios*. A Greek term for sheep not used in the LXX is *aren*.

¹⁹ A ram is associated with Persia in a Persian zodiac and in other extra-Biblical sources.

²⁰ E.g. *Damascus Rule* 9.14; *Commentary on Psalm 37* 2.6; 19.8–9.

and Josephus sheep are mentioned in the context of sacrifices, food, and the natural ability of an animal to defend itself.²¹

In the rabbinic sources, in addition to the common references to flocks of sheep, to a lamb for sacrifice, and to the horn of a ram (*šôpār*), sheep occasionally symbolize people (*Roš Haš.* 18a) and specifically the Jews (*Midr. Lev. Rab.* 4:6; *Midr. Exod. Rab.* 5:21). The most vivid sheep metaphor, which is used twice in the Mishna, is a sheep/deliverer: "A ram came to help me with an aged man leading it." When the ram is asked if he is a prophet, his response is affirmative (*Yebam.* 121b; *B. Qam.* 50a; cf. *Midr. Gen. Rab.* 56:9; *Midr. Lev. Rab.* 29:10). Here the concept of deliverance is clearly associated with a male sheep.

The symbolism of sheep is perpetuated in the apostolic fathers and subsequent Christian literature.²² The imagery of Isaiah 53 becomes especially popular among Christians for the death of Christ.²³ But in the *Shepherd of Hermas* sheep are symbolic of all kinds of people.

The figurative use of sheep is not of course limited to Jewish and Christian writings. From Greek and Latin sources it is clear that much of the Mediterranean world was affected by pastoral life. Sheep were widely raised, slaughtered for food, and offered as sacrifices. Consequently sheep were symbolic for people, especially people needing a guide or those characterized by laziness and stupidity.²⁴ In Mesopotamian literature the sheep motif is one of the earliest metaphors recorded.²⁵

The lamb motif as a background to the NT is therefore multifaceted: Sheep can represent people or a deliverer/conqueror; sheep can suggest weakness/helplessness, patience/submissiveness, deliverance, atoning sacrifice. Clear distinctions cannot be made between sheep, ram, and lamb in this symbolism, for lamb can symbolize each of these concepts (cf. John 10: For his sheep Jesus lays down his life; John 21: Peter is to tend the lambs and the sheep; 1 Pet 1:18–19: "You were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without spot or blemish"; the Apocalypse: Jesus is designated a lamb twenty-eight times: ruling the universe, defeating foes, and officiating at a victory celebration in his honor, with creatures pictured as lions and eagles acquiescing at his feet).

III. ENOCH AND THE TESTAMENTS OF THE TWELVE PATRIARCHS

Of the extra-Biblical texts mentioned above, two merit closer examination as a background to John 1:29, 36. In 1 *Enoch* 85–90 Enoch has a zoomorphic vision in which individuals appear in the guise of various

²¹ E.g. Philo *Mut. Nom.* 159; *Leg. ad Gaius* 317; 362; Josephus *Ant.* 3.221, 226, 239; 7.382; 8.228.

²² E.g. *Barn.* 2:5; 2 *Clem.* 5:2–4.

²³ See n. 9 above.

²⁴ Demosthenes 25:40; Plutarch *Cleomenes* 33; Polybius 5.35.13; Epictetus *Diss.* 1.23.7; 28.15; *Diss.* 3.22, 35.

²⁵ Cf. M. H. Farbridge, *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism* (New York: KTAV, 1970 [1923]) 53–86.

animals—for example, David is pictured as a lamb that became a ram and ruled the sheep.²⁶ This history of the conflicts and occasional successes of the sheep against the wild animals is clearly a history of the Jews in their conflict with the Gentiles. Many times the lions, leopards and wolves attack the sheep and devour them. But the sheep are not always easy prey. When the Lord intervenes and raises up a ram to lead the sheep, the sheep become victorious over all wild beasts in the land (1 *Enoch* 89:41–50). More than a history of the Jews, however, this vision is a form of prophecy characteristic of apocalyptic, often called rewritten history.

The portion of this vision that summarizes the Maccabean conflict with the Seleucids pictures ravens smashing and eating the sheep until one lamb grows a large horn and is able to defend himself against the ravens (1 *Enoch* 90:12, 19):

Those ravens gather and battle with him (the horned ram) and seek to remove his horn, but without any success. . . . Then I saw that a great sword was given to the sheep; and the sheep proceeded against all the beasts of the field in order to kill them; and all the beasts and birds of heaven fled from before their face.

In the following scene, a victory celebration occurs around the throne with all the animals falling down and worshiping the sheep.

The lamb in the vision that grew a great horn and prevailed over the Seleucids clearly represents Judas Maccabeus.²⁷ For the Jewish nation that had suffered for centuries without a political or religious hero, Judas was quickly accepted by many as the fulfillment of God's promises to send a deliverer. Though he met a premature death, he became representative for the Jews of a national salvation. The link here between the lamb metaphor and the Jewish deliverer is a significant development of the second temple period, especially in light of the predictive intent of this rewritten history. But it must be noted that it is not a new idea that a sheep can be a leader and even a conqueror. As observed above, in Ezekiel 34 and Daniel 8 a ram is a symbol of power. The tendency to move from ram to lamb—though the lamb grows a horn, a symbol of power—is a significant shift in this developing motif.

Though the date of the *Similitudes* of 1 *Enoch* has especially been open to controversy, the dream visions of Enoch are securely dated to the second century B.C., soon after the time of the Maccabees.²⁸ Furthermore, Hebrew and Aramaic fragments of four of the five sections of 1 *Enoch*, including the dream visions, have been found at Qumran, confirming the early date and popularity with that community. And Jude's quotation of 1 *Enoch* 1:9 illustrates the recognition of 1 *Enoch* by the Christian community.

In *T. Jos.* 19:8–11 a vision of a lamb attacked by a lion, reptiles and other animals is described. The lamb conquers the wild animals and is

²⁶ 1 *Enoch* 89:46; cf. Dodd, *Interpretation* 232.

²⁷ So APOT, 2. 258, and subsequent interpreters.

²⁸ J. C. Vanderkam, *Enoch and the Growth of an Apocalyptic Tradition* (CBQMS; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1984) 161–163.

praised by men and angels (and, in the Armenian version, by bulls and stags).

And I saw that a virgin was born from Judah, wearing a linen stole; and from her was born a spotless lamb. At his left there was something like a lion, and all the wild animals rushed against him, but the lamb conquered them, and destroyed them, trampling them underfoot (*T. Jos.* 19:8).

The verses that follow include instructions to "honor Levi and Judah, because 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."

In a similar passage in *T. Benj.* 3:8 the lamb metaphor is again used for the Messiah. Jacob is recorded as saying to Joseph:

Through you will be fulfilled the heavenly prophecy concerning the Lamb of God, the Savior of the world, because the unspotted one will be destroyed by lawless men, and the sinless one will die for impious men by the blood of the covenant for the salvation of the Gentiles and of Israel and the destruction of Beliar and his servants.

The apparent Christian elements in these passages raise the question of the date of *T. 12 Patr.* and/or the possibility of Christian interpolation. Internal evidence suggests a date before the Maccabean revolt or during the reign of John Hyrcanus. That is confirmed by the discovery at Qumran of Aramaic and Hebrew fragments of testamentary literature linked with the sons of Jacob, though these Aramaic and Hebrew testaments apparently served only as loose models and not direct sources for *T. 12 Patr.* In any event, the pre-Christian date of *T. 12 Patr.* can hardly be denied.²⁹

The more complicated question is that of Christian interpolations. Ashbey simply dismisses the relevance of these passages because of the inherent problem of interpolations and because he questions the scope of circulation of the Pseudepigrapha.³⁰ But the problem of Christian editing is not unsolvable. Generally, the ten to twelve Christian interpolations in *T. 12 Patr.* are differentiated from the rest of the document by their uniquely Christian terminology and by their literary incongruity—that is, where there is only loose and sometimes awkward connection with the context.³¹ In the case of *T. Jos.* 19:8–11 the conquering lamb does not appear to be a Christian interpolation. The content of vv. 8–10 is compatible with the eschatological expectations of the Testaments and is not incongruous with the literary flow of the passage.³² Furthermore, if a Christian had inserted a lamb he would probably have removed the lion

²⁹ J. H. Charlesworth, *The Pseudepigrapha and Modern Research with a Supplement* (Septuagint and Cognate Studies 7S; Chico: Scholars, 1981) 212–213.

³⁰ G. Ashbey, "The Lamb of God," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 21 (1977) 63–65; "The Lamb of God—II," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 25 (1978) 62–65.

³¹ J. H. Charlesworth, "Christian and Jewish Self-Definition in Light of the Christian Additions to the Apocryphal Writings," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* (ed. E. P. Sanders et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 2. 27–55.

³² H. C. Kee, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1. 777.

to avoid association with the dual messiahship view of some Jews.³³ This does not deny, however, the presence of Christian interpolations here. For example, the reference in v. 11b to the Lamb of God saving the Gentiles may be a Christian interpolation. In the case of *T. Benj.* 3:8 it is unlikely that a Christian would have inserted a reference to the lamb descending from the tribe of Joseph.

The literary context for lamb motifs in second temple Judaism must take into account, then, a wide range of symbolism. These two passages from the Pseudepigrapha demonstrate an imagery rooted in Daniel and Ezekiel's prophecies but developed in the second temple period: A lamb prevails over other animals; the victory of the lamb deserves a large celebration; the lamb is predictive of a future event in the last days; and the lamb represents the deliverer of the Jews. An interpretation of John the Baptist's statement that is restricted to Isaiah 53 is clearly problematic, in light of all that a lamb symbolized and in light of Isaiah's use of the lamb motif.

IV. TAKING AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD

If the Baptist's use of the lamb motif may be imaging something other than the Messiah's redemptive death, what is the explanation for the second half of John's statement: "who takes away the sin of the world"? From the *post facto* perspective of the Christian community, Jesus' mission was at least partially the provision of personal salvation. But without the advantage of hindsight, what did John the Baptist mean and his listeners understand when he spoke of the removal of sin?

Widely associated with messianic expectations were beliefs that the Messiah would remove from his kingdom the sinners and their sinful deeds:

He will purge Jerusalem and make it holy as it was from the beginning (*Pss. Sol.* 17:30).

Sinners shall be judged for their sins and driven from the face of the earth. . . . He shall crush the teeth of the sinners (1 *Enoch* 38:1; 46:4).

In his priesthood sin shall cease and lawless men shall rest from their evil deeds (*T. Levi* 18:9).

And it will happen after he has brought down everything which is in the world, and has sat down in eternal peace on the throne of the kingdom, then joy will be revealed and rest will appear. . . . Judgment, condemnation, contentions, revenge, blood, passions, zeal, hate, and all such things will go to condemnation since they will be uprooted (2 *Apoc. Bar.* 73:1, 4).

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked (*Isa* 11:4).

³³ J. C. O'Neill, "The Lamb of God in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," *JSNT* 2 (1979) 2-30. O'Neill argues convincingly that the metaphor of conquering lamb for the Messiah is pre-Christian.

[John the Baptist speaking] His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matt 3:12; Luke 3:17).

Thus the Baptist's statement, "who takes away the sin of the world," need not refer to Jesus' atonement for sin. If the Lamb of God is a messianic deliverer, then the removal of sin and evil is consistent with that.³⁴

Support for this meaning of *aireō* with *hamartia* comes from the LXX and most significantly from John's epistles. In 1 John 3:5, 8 there is an apparent parallel between the purpose clauses using *aireō* and *lyō*: "he was revealed to take away sin," and "he was revealed to destroy the works of the devil." Therefore semantic and contextual evidence suggest that removing the sin of the world is appropriate activity for the Messiah.

V. JOHN 1:29, 36 AS TESTIMONY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST³⁵

What John the Baptist intended by his declaration, "Behold the Lamb of God," and/or what his hearers understood by that statement, must be determined by more than literary precedents. Are there indications that John expected his Messiah to die and to be a sacrifice for sin? Or was John's and his listeners' understanding of Jesus controlled by their expectation that the Messiah would restore the kingdom and deliver the Jews from political oppression? Might John have had in mind a collage of symbolism from the OT and the Pseudepigrapha?

The most important criterion for evaluating what John the Baptist understood by his proclamation about Jesus is the sum of John's statements and experiences as recorded in the gospels. According to the synoptic gospels, John's ministry of repentance was a fulfillment of Malachi 3 and Isaiah 40. Luke records that John's father Zechariah was informed that his son would be a forerunner in the spirit and power of Elijah. Perhaps the multitudes that responded to John's preaching confirmed in John's mind that he was indeed preparing the way for the Messiah to set up the kingdom, though he staunchly denied that he was Elijah or a prophet (John 1:21). Furthermore, John's harsh castigation of the Pharisees and Sadducees is certainly evidence of his confidence in his unique role. In effect John was preaching an eschatological message as evident in his severe warnings: Beware of the wrath that is coming (Matt 3:7; Luke 3:7); the axe is already cutting down the trees that do not bear fruit, and they will be thrown into the fire (Matt 3:10; Luke 3:9); after threshing the wheat, the Lord is going to burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matt 3:12; Luke 3:17). Consequently, as a result of John's testimony that Jesus was the Lamb of God, and based on a day spent with Jesus, Andrew announced to Simon:

³⁴ The use of *airein* cannot be used as evidence for expiatory sacrifice (Brown, "Three Quotations" 296; *Gospel* 61).

³⁵ Josephus' narrative about John, though not mentioning the "Lamb of God" declaration, is in basic agreement with the NT record (*Ant.* 18.116-119).

"We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41). Yet even though John knew that he must decrease and the Messiah increase, he was not prepared for imprisonment nor for the uncertain signals about what Jesus was doing. From prison John sent disciples inquiring of Jesus if he really was the Expected One or if someone else was going to be the Messiah. This last recorded act of the Baptist is a certain sign of his disappointment.³⁶

This does not deny the possibility that John could have received revelation identifying Jesus as the suffering servant. Beginning with his conception, the supernatural featured prominently in the Baptist's life. And Bernard correctly points out that John understood some of Isaiah's prophecies, at least as they applied to himself as the forerunner.³⁷ Nevertheless Bernard's appeal to revelation to explain the origin of John's proclamation is an argument from silence, and more importantly it contradicts what the gospels reveal about John's perception of himself and the Messiah.

Therefore, even though John could proclaim that Jesus was the Son of God, that he was preexistent, and that he would baptize with the Holy Spirit, John's understanding of Jesus was primarily that he would set up the kingdom and rule as Messiah. There is no indication that John was prepared for Jesus' role as a suffering servant.³⁸

VI. JOHN 1:29, 36 AS TESTIMONY OF JOHN THE EVANGELIST

Though it is not the point here to analyze what John the Evangelist intended his readers to understand by his use of the Lamb of God proclamation, it is appropriate to note that the Evangelist's meaning was probably broader than but inclusive of the Baptist's. It is noteworthy that the LXX has *probaton* and *amnos* in Isaiah 53 while John 1:29, 36 also has *amnos*. The use of the same term in John 1 as in Isaiah 53, though not evidence for the Baptist's statement (since he probably spoke Aramaic), may reveal something about John the Evangelist, for the Evangelist is in a position to see the passion implication of the Baptist's affirmation, now that the Christian community has adopted the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53. So he may have seized *amnos* for the Baptist's statement in light of Isaiah 53.³⁹ In contrast to the synoptic gospels, where John the Baptist's statements about Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Son of God, and the preexistent one are not

³⁶ Barrett goes further and declares that John's inquiry from prison proves that John did not receive revelation that Jesus was the Messiah ("Lamb" 213).

³⁷ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1928) 45.

³⁸ While the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 is evident at Qumran, the notion of suffering in Isaiah 53 was apparently applied to the suffering of the Qumran community (J. Carmignac, *Christ and the Teacher of Righteousness* [Baltimore: Helicon, 1962] 48-56; H. Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963] 196-198; Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 298 n. 46; Roberts, "Lamb" 55 n. 51).

³⁹ Isaiah 53 is relevant, then, for the Evangelist's account of the Baptist's statement but not for the historical statement itself. For the Evangelist's use of the Baptist's statement see Barrett, *Gospel* 176-177; Virgulin, "Recent Discussion" 75-78.

recorded, the gospel of John's use of what the Baptist said about Jesus may have been key to the Evangelist's presentation of a theology of Jesus.⁴⁰ Certainly by the time the Evangelist composed the fourth gospel the Church had come to understand the Baptist's title for Jesus, the Lamb of God, in a new way: A lamb was a spotless sacrifice whose death atoned for sin, even as Jesus was the sinless Son of God who atoned for sin by his death on the cross. It is hard to imagine that "lamb" could be restricted in the Evangelist's or his readers' thinking to what the Baptist meant. Thus the Evangelist saw the lamb metaphor in the wider context of Isaiah 53 and Passover.⁴¹ The Evangelist may also have appealed to apocalyptic imagery in light of his emphasis on kingship.⁴² It is likely, then, that John the Evangelist enriched the Lamb of God statement with a complex collage of symbolism. As suggested by Haenchen, "the various forms of the portrait of Jesus are kaleidoscopically reflected in verse 29, in which all the details subconsciously work together to form a new image in its own right."⁴³

VII. CONCLUSION

The traditional view that John the Baptist's proclamation, "Behold the Lamb of God," was anticipatory of Jesus' rejection as the Messiah and subsequent redemptive death has largely found its support in Isaiah 53. The mention of a lamb in the context of a guilt offering and atonement is the strongest evidence in support of this interpretation. On the other hand, seven reasons argue against this view and in favor of the messianic deliverer view: (1) The lamb in Isaiah 53 is not predictive of a sacrificial atonement. (2) Lamb in the OT symbolized a variety of concepts, including the powerful and victorious. (3) In the second temple period, lamb was a metaphor for a deliverer, as demonstrated in apocalyptic texts referring to the Messiah. (4) The phrase "who takes away the sin of the world" can legitimately refer to the Messiah's cleansing the world of sin and evil. (5) The account in the gospels does not suggest that any of Jesus' associates connected their Messiah with a suffering servant as described in Isaiah 53. (6) Most importantly, John the Baptist nowhere confirms the possibility that he understood Jesus' role as personal redeemer. John's life ended prematurely and in disappointment because Jesus had not fulfilled his expectations of what the Messiah was to be. (7) John the Baptist's proclamation

⁴⁰ Though *amnos theou* is unique to John 1:29, 36, Jesus is identified with *amnos* in Acts 8:32; 1 Pet 1:18–19. In the Apocalypse, John uses a synonymous term, *arnion*, for the victorious Messiah. On the synonymity of terms see Roberts, "Lamb" 50.

⁴¹ Lindars, *Gospel* 108–109; Beasley-Murray, *John* 25; Brown, *Gospel* 63; Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 300.

⁴² Against the notion that the Baptist was expecting a slaughtered Messiah, Roberts argues that a kingly Messiah was expected ("Lamb" 44). Dodd's thesis that the Evangelist used the metaphor in essentially the same way as the Baptist—as a kingly Messiah—has not been widely accepted (*Interpretation* 230–238). Du Plessis, however, argues from the structure of John 1 that the Evangelist uses lamb as a royal title ("Lamb" 136–147).

⁴³ Haenchen, *John* 1 155.

took on new meaning after the resurrection, and the Evangelist's preservation of the statement is partially because it fits the theological purpose of his gospel.

"Behold the Lamb of God" was a seminal statement, both for John the Baptist and his listeners and for John the Evangelist and his readers. But in the Evangelist's discourse the meaning was clearly enriched by the events that occurred between the spoken and written versions of the statement. Therefore to understand what John the Baptist intended by his affirmation in light of what it would have meant after Jesus' death and resurrection is both anachronistic and superficial. But to understand the Baptist's statement in light of its OT and apocalyptic milieu is to move closer to the intent of the speaker and to the perception of the initial hearers.