

Jesus, Lamb of God

The powerful symbolism of sacrificial lambs goes right back to the early history of Israel. In Genesis 22:8, Isaac asks where was the lamb that would be required for the burnt offering which he and his father Abraham were preparing? We cannot imagine the anguish with which Abraham replied that (as he believed) the lamb that “God will provide” would be Isaac himself. At the Passover, the people were commanded to sprinkle lamb’s blood on the doorposts and lintels of each house. The angel of death took the lives of all Egypt’s firstborn, but passed over the houses marked with lamb’s blood on the door (Exodus 12:22–23). To this day, Jews all over the world sacrifice lambs at Passover.

In John 1:29, John the Baptist recognises Jesus, at first sight, as ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world’. The people who heard John’s description of what Jesus could do must have been very confused. They were familiar with the lambs that were sacrificed by the priests in the temple at Jerusalem in the morning and evening of every day (Exodus 29:38). For hundreds of years, Jews brought lambs to the temple as sacrifices for their sins. They kept coming back year after year, because no lamb could take away all their sins. How could a living man do that?

John was steeped in First Testament prophecy, especially Isaiah 54:7 which describes God’s Suffering Servant as ‘like a lamb that is led to the slaughter’, who ‘bore the sin of many’ (v. 12). The Baptist describes his vision of the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, landing on Jesus (John 1:32-34), confirming that he is indeed the Messiah, God’s Suffering Servant foretold by Isaiah.

On Thursday, Nisan 14 AD 33, the Day of Preparation, Passover lambs were slaughtered in the Temple and in households all over Israel. According to Mathew, Mark and Luke, Jesus celebrated a Passover lamb

supper with his disciples on the evening of that day, and died the next morning, Friday, Nisan 15. John's version has Jesus dying at noon on "the day of Preparation of the Passover" (John 19:14), i.e., at the same time as the lambs in the temple. Either way, the key message is John's (and our) belief in Jesus as the Lamb of God, the true and final Passover sacrifice who redeems us all.

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