

THE LAMB OF GOD AND ATONEMENT THEORIES

By George L. Carey

It is claimed by modern theologians that no atonement teaching is found in the Gospel of John. The famous passage in John 1:29, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world', is usually dismissed as untypical of the main stream teaching of the writer.

The argument of this paper is that the Gospel has a definite view of the significance of Jesus' death and that the saying of the Baptist has an important place within its teaching.

Our approach, however, has an unusual starting point; instead of anchoring the saying in a specific OT context we argue that it must be seen in the context of John's use of OT scripture generally.

I EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

For the modern biblical theologian the problem of arriving at a systematic understanding of the Bible's teaching on a given subject can no longer be limited to the understanding of the text. Twenty or thirty years ago the normal approach to doing theology was that of comparing text with text to conclude with a 'consensus' form of theology. Imposing theological edifices were built with texts quarried from the NT. Today, most scholars would agree, it is not so simple, because the text in itself represents not the beginning but the end of a process which began with an event. In a famous phrase Martin Dibelius signalled this revolution in NT interpretation: 'In the beginning was the sermon'. He meant that behind the texts of the NT lay the oral traditions, the received teachings of the churches and the preached word of the catechists, evangelists and prophets of the primitive community. While Dibelius' simple statement has since been developed considerably, to emerge as a modern *redaktionsgeschichte* approach to

the text, his revolutionary understanding that the theologian must go back behind the text has not been fundamentally challenged. The problem may be seen clearly in respect to the numerous OT quotations and images which reappear in the NT, forming the backbone of NT preaching and teaching. As long ago as 1916 J. Rendel Harris realized that there was a pattern about the way the NT used the OT material. He noticed that identical passages of the OT were used by NT writers who could not have had contact with one another. The puzzle was, however, more extensive than that; identical phrases and even identical words appeared to point to the conclusion that a common literary source was used by the first Christian writers. Harris concluded that there existed in the NT period at least one document of 'Testimonies' which contained a collection of texts used by early Christian teachers to show that the church's faith was rooted in the OT and to prove the messianic claims which the church made for Jesus.¹

Bendel Harris's theory held the floor for many years until the publication of C. H. Dodd's magisterial work, *According to the Scriptures*.² Dodd agreed with Harris that certain key passages were employed by the first Christians in their attempt to work out the meaning of Christ's life, death and resurrection, but he disagreed with Harris's conclusion that a 'testimony book' was at the centre of their work. Rather than suggesting a primitive anthology of proof texts, the use of the texts themselves indicated that they were being used to refer back to the whole passage from which the text came. The selection thus arose from the church's interpretation of the OT in terms of the *kerygma*. The work of other scholars in this field, such as Stendahl, Ellis, Lindars, Vermes, Wilcox and others, has with various degrees of modification and fresh insight confirmed the research of Dodd - that we must reckon with a Christian body which was at home in the biblical world and which sought to prove its faith from an OT corpus which was

1. J. Rendel Harris, *Testimonies I* (Cambridge UP, 1916).
2. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Nisbet, 1952).

common ground in the dialogue with Judaism. While a book of Testimonies was not the way the early Christians proceeded, it seems very likely that they quickly formulated their own *peshar* method of interpreting the scriptures. The key to this was the impact and authority of Jesus himself. The church's acceptance of the authority of Jesus, his words, deeds and above all his redemptive sufferings and mighty resurrection, enabled it to develop a *peshar* of the OT in terms of their Lord. It seems very likely that there were two aspects of this method which operated closely and sometimes inseparably: first, the evangelists, writers and preachers worked from the OT to Jesus; secondly, they worked back from Jesus to the text. Inevitably fresh understandings of the OT were bound to result. Barnabas Lindars agrees.³ He sees two forces at work in first century interpretation. The first is a shift of application from a historical base in the OT to the contemporary situation in the NT, and the second a modification of the text to spotlight the situation to which the OT quotation relates. 'There was nothing morally reprehensible about such treatment of the text', says Lindars, 'because it was felt that the real meaning of Scripture was being clarified by it. This is because the Church's interpretation is based on the rule that what God has done in Christ is the key to the understanding of all the Scriptures.'⁴

While the impact of Jesus upon the church's interpretation of the OT helps us to understand why the first Christians made their first theological explorations, the now more subtle approach to the questions of the origin of the NT text complicates the interpretation. After the writing of the NT it is now no longer possible to say simply that what the OT writer intended, the quotation in the NT intends or means. A whole new world of possibilities is now ushered in because of Jesus of Nazareth.

3. B. Lindars, *NTS* 23 (1976/7) 59-66.

4. B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (London: SCM, 1961) 17ff; quotation from pp. 27-28.

II THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND TO 'LAMB OF GOD'

A most difficult and problematical text which illustrates the problem well is John the Baptist's statement found in John 1:29, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away (ὁ αἴρων) the sin of the world (τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου).' This simple statement set at the beginning of the Fourth Gospel has given modern exegetes much trouble. It has long been recognized that three fundamental and overlapping problems are inherent in the saying. The first is that of *symbolism*. Jesus is compared to a 'lamb' - but what is the image that the Baptist is trying to evoke? How does this relate the image of the triumphant lamb (ἀρνίον) in the Apocalypse? The second issue is that of the text itself. What is meant by 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'? From which OT quarry does the text originate? The third problem is that of theological meaning. How does the Lamb 'take away the sin of the world'?

Jesus as a 'lamb' has a not insignificant place in the NT. Whilst there are only two references in the Fourth Gospel the image is crucial for the evangelist's message as we shall see later. It occurs frequently in the Apocalypse, although the Greek word is ἀρνίον instead of ἀμνός, and allusions to the imagery are found elsewhere in the NT (1 Pet. 1:19; Acts 8:32). The concept of 'lamb' is, of course, a very familiar one in the OT but that of 'lamb of God' is completely unknown, especially in its application to a person. Here then we see the principle of a shift in interpretation operating as Jesus becomes the locus for a familiar OT picture. Continuity with a theological tradition is retained but an astonishingly new idea is introduced, that of a person being God's instrument of redemption. This is no mere metaphor; the shift takes us from one concrete theological understanding to another. The problem of the meaning of the symbol 'lamb' is tied most closely to the question of the derivation of the idea. If we could separate the clause 'who takes away the sin of the world' from the christological title the matter would be greatly simplified. Then we could argue that the most obvious background is that of the Passover lamb. There are indeed scholars who argue that the phrase is due to a later redactionist but the evidence for this hypothesis is conjectural. The emphasis upon sin in John's Gospel, with its steady teaching that Christ came to deal with

man's guilt, evil and wrong, militates against the notion that the phrase is not integral to the 'Lamb of God' saying. We cannot take the easy way out; the cry 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' leads us into the world of OT imagery and thought forms and makes us wrestle with the problem of understanding what the Baptist meant.

The various theories and their drawbacks are well-known.

1. *The Passover lamb*

The theory that the background is the Paschal sacrifice still has adherents who appeal to the prominence given to the Passover in the Fourth Gospel.⁵ The evangelist's understanding that Jesus himself was the true Paschal lamb offered at the appointed hour in the afternoon of Nisan 14 is in significant agreement with Paul's statement that 'Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us'. (1 Cor. 5:7). However there are a number of weighty objections to the view that John is referring to Jesus as the Paschal lamb. First of all, the proper term for the victim was not 'lamb' but 'Passover' itself (πάσχα). 'Had the author of the Fourth Gospel intended this he would, like St. Paul, have used the correct and unambiguous designation.'⁶ The second objection is that the Passover lamb was not regarded by the Jews as an expiatory sacrifice. If the Baptist had cried, 'Behold the Goat of God which takes away the sin of the world', the connection with OT atonement theology would have been obvious to all. But the concept of a lamb conveying away sin was foreign to Hebraic ideas. Thus modern scholars who still favour the notion of a Passover understanding in the text usually combine it with other concepts as well. So Barrett notes: 'Probably John's primary

5. For discussion of the significance of the Passover as a theological element in the NT see H. Schürmann, *Der Paschamahlbericht Lk 22* (Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen 19.5. Münster: Aschendorff, 1953); A. J. B. Higgins, *The Lord's Supper in the NT* (London: SCM, 1952); I. H. Marshall in R. Banks (ed.), *Reconciliation and Hope* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1974) 153-169.
6. So G. Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the OT* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925) 397.

reference is to the Paschal lamb. . . but the reference cannot have been drawn directly from Judaism, since in Judaism the lamb sacrificed at Passover does not take away sins. The probable source of John's thought and language is the Paschal interpretation of the last supper and the eucharist. The eucharist is a Paschal meal and in it the death of Christ for the remission of sins is portrayed.⁷

2. *The tamid*

The same objection holds for the hypothesis that the starting point for John's cry was the *tamid* offering, the daily lamb sacrificed in the temple. But this is even less defensible than the Passover hypothesis. At least one could argue that the Passover was originally a redemptive event whatever the sacrifice meant for the Jews ever after, but the *tamid* sacrifice conveyed no redemptive idea whatever - it was part of Jewish ritual.

It is clear, then, that the expiatory notion inherent in the Baptist's statement presents us with a most difficult problem in the interpretation of what appears at first sight to be a familiar OT image. How may one combine such disparate notions as a lamb and an expiatory offering for sin? Three other theories now need to be mentioned.

3. *The Aqedah*

An interpretation which has become popular of late is the theory that the origin of John 1:29 should be sought not in the Passover but in the 'Binding of Isaac' (*Aqedat Yitshaq*) of Genesis 22.⁸ There are some attractive and interesting features in this assertion. A very general point is that the story of Isaac's deliverance by means of a victim supplied by God himself and not provided by man, is an obvious OT illustration, if not type, of the Son of God who is slain for us. J. E. Wood pleads that the word 'beloved' which is stressed at Christ's baptism appears in the LXX of Genesis 22:2, and that the juxtaposition of the baptism with the 'Lamb of God' saying

7. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1955) 147.

8. F.-M. Braun, *Jean le Théologien* III (Paris: Gabalda, 1966) 161ff; also T. F. Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel* (London: SCM, 1963) 95.

suggests that an Aqedah motif is in the background.⁹ Vermes adds another point: that we should not overlook the tremendous importance assigned in Jewish thought to the 'Binding of Isaac'. For the Jew it was a supremely significant sacrifice. He continues: 'For a Palestinian Jew, all lamb sacrifice, and especially the Passover lamb and the Tamid offering, was a memorial of the Akedah with its effects of deliverance, forgiveness of sin and messianic salvation'.¹⁰ However, it is acknowledged by proponents of this view that the evidence is hardly compelling. Why there should be so few allusions in the NT to an Isaac typology is mysterious, especially as in terms of atonement theology there are so many obvious parallels. It is, in fact, not until the Epistle of Barnabas (7:3) that the first explicit reference comes; thereafter in the early church the sacrifice of Isaac is a prominent OT type of the death of the Lord. It is clearly not possible that the NT writers were blind to the interpretative possibilities of Genesis 22. It is likely therefore that they chose to disregard it for other reasons. First, although the story is a most compelling episode of God's provision, as the quotation from Vermes hints, the story had so many complicated rabbinical interpretations that it is not likely that the Christian Preacher would have found it a simple story to apply to the death of the Lord. Second, in the *Aqedah* account the Provider provides an animal - and the son is set free. This is classical Jewish atonement theology being worked out. But the Christian story is vastly different - the knife falls on the son. Thus, the only way the early Christian exegete could treat the Genesis story would be in terms of differences and not similarities. While this is possible at a more settled time - witness its appearance in a second century writing - it is not likely that the Christian apologist would have chosen the passage as a type of the cross when it required more than a little explanation.

9. J. E. Wood, *NTS* 14 (1967/8) 583-589.

10. G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1961) 193ff; quotation from p. 225. Cf. J. E. Wood, *art. cit.* 585.

4. *The apocalyptic lamb*

It is in keeping with the penetrative mind of C. H. Dodd that his contribution to the discussion takes us into a wholly different area. The background he suggests is not cultic and sacrificial but apocalyptic. The 'lamb of God' on the lips of an eschatological prophet is the 'lamb' of the apocalyptic writings, the horned lamb, the bellwether of God's flock, the victorious leader who strides ahead of a triumphant people. The 'lamb of God' is thus a synonym for the Messiah. As eschatological leader the lamb 'takes away the sin of the world' by the eschatological act of dealing with sin and evil at the end-time. It was a function of the Jewish Messiah, he argues, to make an end of sin.¹¹ There is a great deal to commend this hypothesis. The eschatological interpretation ties in with what we know of the preaching of the Baptist and it may be seen as a suitable heralding of the breaking in of God's kingdom through the ministry of Jesus. But Dodd's theory is exposed to some powerful criticisms. First the narrow application of 'to take away the sin of the world' to mean the removal of evil does not do justice to the concept of sin in the Fourth Gospel generally. The writer clearly saw a continuity between the Baptist's concept of sin and his own which includes both moral evil and the personal guilt and sin which stop people knowing and finding God. Barrett, furthermore, argues that the phrase 'to take away sin', corresponding to the Hebrew **נשא חטא**, occurs often in cultic contexts to signify the removal of guilt.¹² Second, the 'lamb' of the Apocalypse of John should not be put alongside the 'horned lamb' of the Book of Enoch and used as the key to interpret the 'lamb' of John 1. As commentators point out, it is not at all sure that the 'horned lamb' concept of Enoch is pre-Christian anyway. As for the 'lamb' of the Apocalypse, Dodd has ignored the clear link between the removal of sin and the death of the Lord for others; the victorious lamb is he who has overcome death by his sacrifice and those who overcome are those 'who have washed their robes white in the blood of the lamb' (Rev. 7:14).

11. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge UP, 1953) 230-238.

12. C. K. Barrett, *NTS* 1 (1954/5) 210.

5. *The Isaianic servant*

The fifth and final theory finds the origin of the Baptist's saying in the servant of Isaiah 53. This as well as, and sometimes along with, the Passover interpretation has had a long exegetical tradition in the Church. So Cyril of Jerusalem writes: 'He of whom the prophet Isaiah did signify to us . . . whom of old the law of Moses typified, but then it saved in part, not extending mercy to all (for it was a type and shadow) but now he who of old was dimly pictured, the very lamb, the spotless sacrifice, is led to the slaughter for all, that he might drive away the sin of the world'.¹³ But the connection between Isaiah's picture of the suffering servant and John's statement about the lamb who 'takes away the sin of the world' is illusory rather than clear. The 'lamb' in Isaiah 53:7 illustrates the figure of the servant and his redemptive death rather than being in the foreground as a title. We can understand fully how *ex eventu* the early church saw the close parallels between the suffering of Jesus and that of the servant figure; but is it likely that it was the intention of this text to make the connection? Many scholars argue in the affirmative. This view depends upon a prior conclusion that an Aramaic core, source, or writing lay behind the Fourth Gospel. Burney was the first to suggest that a reference to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 has been obscured by a mistranslation of the Aramaic.¹⁴ Jeremias has developed Burney's arguments skilfully to state that the highly "singular genitive combination ὁ ἄμνος τοῦ θεοῦ can only be explained in the light of an Aramaic background. In Aramaic the word טליא has a twofold meaning of (a) lamb and (b) servant. Probably, Jeremias contends, an Aramaic דאלהא דאליא in the sense of עבד יהודה underlies the Greek ὁ ἄμνος τοῦ θεοῦ. When the Greek text of John was prepared the word טליא was misunderstood with the result that Jesus was called ἄμνος instead of παῖς.

13. Cyril of Jerusalem on St. John, Vol. I (A Library of the Fathers. Oxford: Parker, 1874).

14. C. F. Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1922) 107f.

Jeremias further argues that the Christian community exploited the double meaning of **טליא** to make the connection between the Isaianic servant and the Paschal lamb.¹⁵ This theory is not without some compelling points. It is the only hypothesis which convincingly links the 'sinbearing' activity of the lamb with an identifiable OT background of a person who 'bears the sins of many'. Furthermore Isaiah 53 played an important part in early Christian preaching and its appearance at the beginning of John's Gospel would not be a surprise as it also appears from time to time in the Gospel narrative.

But inevitably, objections to this theory are strong and need recognition.¹⁶ The first set of difficulties are linguistic. As Leon Morris points out, 'It is not easy to think that so well known an expression as "the Servant of the Lord" should be unrecognized, and should be translated by so difficult and unusual a phrase as "the Lamb of God".¹⁷ A. Negoitsa and C. Daniel agree and observe that the servant in Isaiah is known in the Hebrew as **עבד יהוה**; (Aram. **עבדא**) and there is absolutely no evidence of **טליא** (Hebrew **טלה**) being used of the servant. Furthermore, they argue, the Aramaic **טליא** which corresponds to the Hebrew **טלה** does not signify the sacrificial lamb or even the Paschal lamb (which is **כבש**) but the infant lamb which still suckled its mother's milk.¹⁸ Another point presents a different difficulty - could John the Baptist have arrived so soon at the understanding of Jesus as an expiatory victim which is indicated by this OT passage? Jeremias, Cullmann and Boismard with others believe that this is possible.¹⁹ But no clear evidence may be deduced from the NT. On the contrary some assert the Baptist's question to the

15. J. Jeremias, *TWNT* I 338.
16. E.g. S. K. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event* (Harvard Dissertations in Religion 2. Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975) 226f.
17. L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1971) 146.
18. A. Negoitsa & C. Daniel, *NovT* 13 (1971) 24ff.
19. J. Jeremias, *art. cit.*; cf. *idem*, *ZNW* 34 (1935) 115; O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the NT* (ET, London: SCM, 1959) ch. 3.a

Lord in Matthew 11 indicates that he was confused by Jesus's ministry which appeared to contradict what he expected of the 'one who was to come'. Yet, in spite of what appear to be major obstacles to this theory, commentators like Raymond Brown believe that there seems to be enough evidence to connect the lamb of God and the suffering servant.²⁰

Five major theories; but none provides an entirely satisfactory solution to questions of origin and meaning. Looking back over them the two which stand out with any plausibility are the first and the last - the Paschal lamb and the suffering servant.²¹ Is it possible, then, we ask, that the evangelist and/or the Baptist has combined both meanings in the cryptic saying? Scholars such as Barrett, Brown, Morris and others agree that a composite or multiform meaning is likely, that the lamb figure may well be intended to evoke memories of several of the suggestions we have mentioned above. But very strangely no steps are taken by such scholars to show how this was done. We must now go on to ask: If the lamb of the Passover and the servant of Isaiah were in the background of the Baptist's saying, how did the evangelist use this OT material? And what did he wish his readers to understand?

III HOW IS JOHN USING THE OLD TESTAMENT?

The first question takes us back to the question of how the NT writers used the OT material at their disposal. In John's case his use is often subtle, indirect and allusory. Compare, for example, the fact that in the Westcott-Hort list of OT references only 27 passages are listed for John, whereas there are 70 for Mark, 109 for Luke and 124 for Matthew. Twenty or so years ago this fact could be dismissed as being consonant with a Hellenistic background, but the Jewish provenance of John is well established today. Thus the small number of direct OT citations is a surprising fact. But, as Barrett

20. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to St. John I* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 61.

21. B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Oliphants, 1972) 109f.

points out, the infrequency of direct 'testimonia' is misleading.²² Many of the themes of the OT are woven into the structure of the Fourth Gospel very often without explanation. Some of them, indeed, are quite obvious and overlap with the Synoptic testimony to Jesus, such as the terms Lord, Son of man, Messiah, Son of God, Saviour. It is what the Fourth Gospel does with the great stories of the OT that evokes the greatest interest. Hoskyns has shown the way John has used the book of Genesis in chapter 1 to illustrate the new world ushered in by Jesus even though he never cites Genesis directly.²³ Then again we note how a Moses typology is at work in the Gospel. Some scholars, Sahlin for example, have argued that the whole of the Gospel is patterned on the book of Exodus.²⁴ This is hardly likely as after chapter 11 the attention is concentrated on the last days of Jesus and from this point on similarities between Moses and Jesus are lost. It is certainly true that the teaching of Jesus in John would remind his readers of the wilderness experience of the Jews: the manna (6:31f), water from the rock (7:38), the bronze serpent (3:14), and the tabernacle (1:14), to name but a few of the images evoked. Then again, we could look at Isaiah 40-55 as yet another quarry from which the writer drew his material.

Even the way John uses the OT shows his rather special approach to the extent that neither Matthew's more direct nor Paul's rabbinical exegesis offer a parallel. I wish to suggest that two factors contributed to John's use of the OT. First of all, he and other NT writers drew upon a common reservoir of OT terms, ideas and stories. The situation is not like that of a speaker at the beginning of this century, who might quote extensively from memory from the AV as a common literary source. Rather John assumes a knowledge of the OT which must not be confused with a literary knowledge. Just as a person today might know roughly the story of Alice in Wonderland, or most likely some of the incidents in the

22. C. K. Barrett, *John* 24.

23. E. C. Hoskyns & F. N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber, 1940) vol. I, 135ff.

24. H. Sahlin, *Zur Typologie des Johannesevangeliums* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 1950, 4).

book, because he has seen them on television, heard them read at school in the distant past, or (more rarely) read them himself, so the OT for Jesus and for first century Christian communicators was a common well on which to draw for illustrations to prove the claims of Christ and, above all, to connect with the thought-forms and conceptual framework of their society. Secondly, a text, or an OT theme, is used not because a written passage of scripture is before the writer and readers alike but because it is already in the mind through familiarity with the passage as a whole. Lindars claims, 'It is key passages considered *in extenso* which are the starting-point of Christian exegesis. They are chosen because they immediately appear relevant to the matter in hand.'²⁵

Two illustrations from John will, I think, make this clear, and show not only the subtle way he combines sources together but also that it is often difficult to establish which OT passage is being referred to. First the claim of Jesus to be the 'bread of life' (John 6:35). Jesus's words are clearly based on the story of the manna from heaven in the wilderness. The key idea is that of the manna supplied by Yahweh. Jesus, as reported by John, develops the simple idea in two ways. First, the phrase 'manna from heaven' as such is not in the Exodus story at all. It is Psalm 78:24 which uses the phrase. Second, there is an underlying appeal to the rabbinic tradition which expected the Messiah to repeat the miracle of the manna.²⁶ The 'bread of heaven' therefore appears to be a conflation of different ideas, but the basic story would have been immediately obvious to hearers and readers alike.

A similar pattern may be observed in the claim of Jesus to be the 'living water' in John 7:39. Here the story starts not from a written account but from the action staged at the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus's claim to give 'living water' which abounds into eternal life develops from witnessing the action of the priest who draws water from the fountain which fed the pool of

25. B. Lindars, *NT Apologetic* 19.

26. E. Lindars, *Behind the Fourth Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1971) 48.

Siloam and who has to convey it daily to the altar of burnt offering. To this symbolism Jesus adds: 'If any one is thirsty let him come to me, and let him drink who has faith in me. As the scriptures say "Out of his body shall flow rivers of living water".' Yet as with the 'lamb of God' pericope it is not at all clear what OT scripture is in the foreground. The account of Moses striking the rock and water proceeding from it is likely because of the frequency of the Moses typology in John.²⁷ And by way of parenthesis we add that Paul's more rabbinic exegesis of the Exodus passage, 'the Rock that followed them was Christ' (1 Cor. 10:4), indicates the significance of the story for the first Christians who were anxious to show the identity of their faith with that of Israel. Yet, it is equally possible that Zechariah 14:8 is the origin of the passage: 'And it shall be that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem.' This was one of the traditional lections for the Feast of Tabernacles. The passage illustrates once more how difficult it is to be sure of the actual source of John's quotation.²⁸ The sources are used at many different levels and conflated very often, to present a picture of the Lord which transcends the OT background while being in conformity with it.

I would like to suggest that one of our hermeneutical principles should be drawn from the way we use sources ourselves. The modern hermeneutical approach stresses the difference between the ancient text and the contemporary world. It is said that the different 'horizons' of culture, thought, expression and language make satisfactory exegesis sometimes very difficult and always hazardous. Without wishing to deny the general thrust of modern hermeneutics, I wish to make a plea for the identity of the ancient world with our own. We are not comparing a primitive culture with one totally

27. P. Borgen, *Bread from Heaven* (Leiden: Brill, 1965); E. D. Freed, *OT Quotations in the Gospel of John* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

28. For example, J. Daniélou looks at the various hypotheses, but prefers Ezek. 47 as the origin of the saying: 'Joh. 7,38 et Ezéch. 47,1-11', in *Studia Evangelica* II (TU 87. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964) 158-163.

different. The world which produced the Gospel of John cannot be accused of being uncultured. The modern writer is not unique in using stories, pictures, metaphors and sayings to convey truths, perhaps discarding part of an idea inherent in the borrowed image to make of it something new which is still consonant with the seed image.²⁹

This, I submit, is what John has done in using the 'lamb of God' terminology. It is a mistake to look for the origin of the phrase in an actual OT passage which we believe the Baptist is referring to. It is very possible that the Paschal lamb and the suffering servant passages are the closest to the passage in question, but the way they are combined, reinforced with the way that scripture is used in the Fourth Gospel, suggests that it is the combination of theological ideas that is uppermost in the passage.

Since coming to this conclusion I came across Max Wilcox's tentative remark in his chapter 'On Investigating the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament': 'We may ask whether an OT allusion in a NT passage may not be intended (1) as a pointer to (the) traditional interpretation(s) of the section of the OT from which it comes, and/or (2) as a peg upon which to hang subsequent development.'³⁰ We may say concerning his first point that, although we cannot specify an actual OT passage, it may be to a general OT idea that the 'lamb of God' idea refers and this we shall consider in a moment. However, I do agree that the evangelist

29. So H.-R. Weber, *The Cross* (ET, London: SPCK, 1979) 126: '(John) does not use individual passages from the OT as scriptural proof, but instead takes the OT as a whole, or at least its themes and images. In doing so, he does occasionally quote OT texts, but more as an example or model for an entire train of thought.' Cf. R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John I* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968) 124: '(For John) the OT is already a sort of fixed quantity, which the evangelist ponders and exploits, using it as one of the bases of his Christology and as a source from which to enrich it.'
30. M. Wilcox in E. Best & R. McL. Wilson (ed.), *Text and Interpretation* (Festschrift for M. Black) (Cambridge UP, 1979) 240-241.

uses the Baptist's statement to draw attention to the nature and character of the Son's work. It becomes a 'peg' upon which the Gospel is hung.

IV WHAT DOES JOHN WISH TO CONVEY?

This now leads on to the second question I raised: 'What did the writer want his readers to understand?'. I have argued above that the usual ways of interpreting the 'lamb of God' image by comparing with OT sources and types, whilst interesting and helpful, are not of great value in assisting us to discover the meaning that the Gospel intended. I wish now to argue that John's meaning is not lost if supposed allusions to OT antecedents are not picked up by the reader. What he wished to convey is threefold:

- (1) That Jesus as Lamb is God's Son sent to accomplish his Father's will.
- (2) That Jesus as Lamb is the Son sent to redeem mankind.
- (3) That Jesus as Lamb is the expiation of the sins of the whole world.

1. Jesus as Lamb is God's son sent to accomplish his Father's will

Dodd in *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* shows how chapter 1 forms a proem to the whole Gospel.³¹ It falls into two parts, verses 1-18, the Prologue, and verses 19-57 which Dodd describes as the Testimony. Dodd compares the latter section with the opening verses of Mark's Gospel, verses 1-15. In both, John the Baptist gives his testimony to the ministry of Jesus. Whereas in Mark the supernatural designation of Jesus as Messiah is not directly recorded, John gives his testimony as one who has seen the Spirit resting upon Jesus and who recognizes this as evidence of the one who will baptize men with the Holy Spirit. Dodd claims that here in the Baptist's testimony is a 'remarkable interweaving of Mark's account of the witness of the Baptist, "He will baptize with Holy Spirit", and of the Messianic designation of Jesus, "Thou art my Son the Beloved". The only peculiarly Johannine element is the

31. C. H. Dodd, *Fourth Gospel* 292ff.

title "Lamb of God", which the Baptist applies to Jesus along with the more usual title "Son of God". Then, as Dodd and other commentators point out, the testimony of John the Baptist is enlarged with a further set of witnesses to Jesus. They are narrated for the sake of the confirmatory testimony they offer to the figure of Jesus.³² The first confesses Jesus as 'Messiah' (v. 41), having earlier referred to him as 'Rabbi' (v. 38); the second names him as the one testified by Moses and the prophets (v. 45); the last addresses him as 'the Son of God, the King of Israel' (v. 49). This fourfold testimony constitutes a striking appeal to the OT tradition concerning the Messiah, claiming that Jesus is its fulfilment. Here then is a passage rich in Christological insights and allusions.

This has, I suggest, an important bearing upon the 'lamb of God' concept. Most exegetes are so obsessed with the soteriological importance of John 1:29 that they are blind to Christological possibilities. As Negoitsa and Daniel state, following Lagrange, it is difficult to believe that the disciples of John the Baptist would have left their master on hearing Jesus described simply as 'the lamb of God' but their action becomes more intelligible if the saying has a more profound, more cryptic meaning which includes the notion of an intimate relationship with God, since God alone can take away sin (Mark 2:7).³³ This is a helpful idea and puts the twofold reference to the lamb of God firmly within the intent of chapter 1 to announce the character, claims and nature of Jesus, the Word of God. Admittedly, there is no evidence from the first century or before that the term 'lamb of God' was used messianically, but this is not to say that such a usage could not have been coined by the Baptist." Certainly, within the context of

32. *E.g.* R. E. Brown, *John I* pp. LIX-LXI.

33. A. Negoitsa & C. Daniel, *art. cit.* 28.

34. F.-M. Braun, on the contrary, believes that the application of the 'lamb' terminology to the Messiah was clearly possible. 'Ii s'ensuit, persistons-nous à penser, que, dans le milieu judéen où Jean annonçait la venue imminente du Juge des derniers temps (*Mt* III,7-10; *Lc* III,7-9), la figure apocalyptique de l'agneau était appliquée à la personne du Messie, roi et juge: rien de plus.' (Jean le Théologien III 161).

chapter 1 the notion that the term as used by John has a christological significance makes a great deal of sense and may suggest a twofold meaning.

First, it may designate the nature of the son who as God's lamb will be the Father's offering for sin. The genitive may suggest, therefore, the lamb 'supplied' by God. We shall look at the offering of the lamb in a little more detail later but for the moment we notice the emphasis in the Gospel upon the obedience of the Son in fulfilling the Father's will. This is a strong Johannine element which does not contradict the very high christology in the Gospel. Jesus, Son of God and Word of God, is at the same time the obedient Son who patterns his life and ministry on that of the Father. So, 'My Father is working still and I am working' (5. 17); and again, 'The Son can do nothing of his own accord but only what he sees the Father doing, for whatever he does that the Son does likewise' (v. 19). If then we are entitled to see in the 'lamb of God' title an implicit christological intent we see it stressing the nature of the one who obeys.

Secondly, we may note the unity between Gospel and Apocalypse in the remarkable picture of the victorious lamb. Here the term ἀρνίον is clearly christological. In this writing the metaphor of the lamb reaches its most astonishing and sublime peak where as C. K. Barrett points out it emerges as a technical term for the Messiah. Barrett continues, 'It is proper for a lamb to be slain. . . . But lambs do not shepherd men, do not keep books containing the names of the elect, do not open the seals of destiny or celebrate their marriages, nor do they marry cities.'³⁵ True; but this is just to say that in Revelation the title has passed beyond symbolism to designate the Messiah defined purely and utterly in terms of his death. With some justification Mathias Rissi can point to the aorist tense in Revelation 5:5, ἐνίκησεν, as marking the centre of Revelation's christology. 'The aorist form points to the fact that the victory has already taken place once and for all at a historical moment in the past.' The hymn that follows in 5:9 expounds the victory in the

35. C. K. Barrett, *NTS* 1 (1954/5) 216.

'paradoxical shape of a lamb with the marks of slaughter upon him'. 'Here', states Rissi, 'we feel the heartbeat of the whole Christology of John.'³⁶

2. *Jesus as Lamb is the Son sent to redeem mankind*

In the last section we were arguing that the term 'lamb of God' cannot be disassociated from christology; in what now follows we will try to prove that it cannot be separated from the purpose of the Gospel. But what was its purpose? John 20:31 states that the aim of the book is 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name'. The two clauses unite christology with soteriology - that Christ is the Son, 'that believing you may have life'. Christology for John is not an end in itself but the very foundation stone of faith. It is not a man who offers hope and salvation but God himself. As such the offer comes with authority and assurance. But what is the message of hope? Many different themes have been suggested as being at the heart of the Fourth Gospel: life, knowledge, love, truth, revelation (to name but a few) have all been put forward as summing up John's central concern. They are all important, to be sure, but Jesus as 'Saviour' is surely the dominant theme in the Gospel.³⁷

It is not the Samaritan woman alone who announces Jesus to be the 'Saviour of the world'. The idea is clearly there in the Nicodemus story of chapter 3, in the 'eating of his body and drinking of his blood' in chapter 6, in the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep,

36. M. Rissi, *Interpretation* 22 (1968) 7-8. On the central christological significance of the lamb in Revelation see P. A. Hailé, *Etudes théologiques et religieuses* 31 (1956) 26ff, who argues for a close connection between Is. 53 and early Christian liturgy.

37. So R. Schnackenburg, *John I* 567: 'The Johannine faith, which is thus centred on Christ, gains its true significance only from the promise of salvation which Christ makes to believers.'

and elsewhere. John's world is one estranged from God and doomed to death unless it turns to the Saviour sent to save it. The topics of eternal life, love, truth, bondage, play upon this steady constant of a world in darkness needing light and the higher world of God where he and his people dwell. This dualism is nothing like a Gnostic dualism, however, because it is overcome by a Christ who unites in himself the two worlds and by his death gives life to men. It is well-known that Ernst Käsemann interpreted the Johannine Jesus as a 'god striding over the earth', with the theology of John as 'a naive and unreflecting docetism' and the passion narrative a 'mere postscript'.³⁸ This is commonly judged to be a warped and wildly idiosyncratic interpretation of a Gospel which on the contrary throbs with the theme of the importance of the cross of Christ.³⁹ There is in John, as J. Robinson observes, an emphasis upon the death of Jesus which warrants the description of *a theologia crucis*.⁴⁰ Paradoxically, death, the lowest point in Jesus' career, marks his exaltation. The lifting up of the Son is the point of triumph because it constitutes the giving of life to all men. 'Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground it remains alone.' (12.24) The evangelist links the exaltation with the free love of the Son. The way to the cross is marked by the voluntary stooping of the Son who chooses to wash the feet of his brethren and who chooses to die. Obedient Son he is, but his offering is freely given.

The cry of the Baptist therefore, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world', is not an isolated text which is quickly forgotten in the body of the Gospel. It introduces the theme which the evangelist, will explore as he narrates the ministry and work of Jesus. Far from the death being irrelevant to John's concern, or subsumed under another and by implication a

38. E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (ET, London: SCM, 1968).
39. For a trenchant criticism of Käsemann's view see R. T. Fortna, *NTS* 21 (1974/5) 489-504.
40. J. A. T. Robinson, *Twelve NT Studies* (London: SCM, 1962) 25.

more important theme, the heart of the Gospel is that the Saviour has come to give life to men and this comes through his redemptive sacrifice upon the cross.⁴¹ The Baptist's statement thus establishes the purpose of the Gospel itself.

3. *Jesus as Lamb is the expiation of the sins of the whole world*

Many writers on the Gospel of John insist that a vicarious or expiatory interpretation of John 1:29 in particular, and the Gospel of John in general, is impossible. So Dodd dismisses the idea of the lamb who dies as a sacrifice. 'It seems unlikely', he states, 'that the evangelist should have introduced in this allusive way a reference to an idea which otherwise does not appear in his gospel, that of the death of Christ as an expiatory sacrifice.'⁴² Barrett writes similarly, 'Although in the passion narrative John is at pains to draw out the analogy between Jesus and the paschal sacrifice (18.28; 19.36), he does not explain the death of Jesus in sacrificial terms, and this is not his characteristic thought.'⁴³ Raymond Brown also writes, 'True, the Gospel begins with the proclamation of Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin", but that need not be understood as accomplished by a redemptive death.'⁴⁴

Are writers like Dodd, Barrett and Brown correct in the assumption that the cross of Jesus in John is given a new understanding and that it is no longer the place of vicarious sacrifice? In what has been said already it has been made clear that the cross of Jesus holds a central place in the Gospel. As Dodd himself acknowledges, the Book of Signs finds its completion in the Book of the Passion, which from chapter 13 concentrates upon the 'lifting up' of the Son. But these writers contend that expiatory notions have been replaced by those that see his death in a much milder form, as the gateway to life, or as the seed which gives resurrection life.

41. So R. Schnackenburg, *John* I 299.

42. C. H. Dodd, *Fourth Gospel* 233.

43. C. K. Barrett, *John* 68.

44. R. E. Brown in *Text and Interpretation* (see note 30) 61.

But it is when we ask *why* it is that the public ministry in John is so directed towards Calvary, *why* the theme of his 'hour' is so strong, *why* the gift of his body and blood (6:53-56) is so important, *why* Jesus believes that 'love' drives him to the cross (15:12-13), why the power of Satan and evil is broken by the cross, that the views of those who deny the notion of a vicarious sacrifice in John appear so unsatisfactory.⁴⁵ The variegated richness of John's metaphors and allusions concerning the cross are united by the truth that the death of Jesus was a redemptive act. Thus the Baptist's cry, 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world', introduces a scarlet thread which will now run throughout the Gospel to culminate in the cross itself. As James Denney argues, 'It is not too much to say that the conception of Christ's death as a sacrifice for sin, found thus, at the very beginning of the Gospel, on the lips of the great witness to Jesus, is meant to convey decisively the evangelist's own conception of Jesus and His work. He is here to put away sin.'⁴⁶

Now we have already concluded that the term possibly combines a number of motifs; it is likely that the evangelist is using the saying as a 'peg' on which to hang a number of important theological ideas which would have been understood by his readers. One of these motifs may have been that of Jesus as the Passover victim. There can be little question about the fact that the Passover is a significant motif in John. The term occurs nine times and the writer appears to link the cross of Jesus with the Passover in his chronology, so that just when the paschal lambs are being slaughtered in the temple, Christ dies on the cross and none of his bones are broken (19:33). We referred earlier to the way OT scripture was used in the Christian Church and how significant shifts in interpretation take place in exegesis. Such a shift is possible with regard to the expiatory nature of the NT Passover victim. It is true that the annual killing of the Passover lambs was not considered expiatory and this, as we have seen, is a compelling argument against the

45. Cf. F.-M. Braun, *Jean le Théologien* III 166ff.

46. J. Denney, *The Death of Christ* (London: Tyndale, 1951) 141.

traditional theory which tries to tie John 1:29 too closely to the cultic sacrifice of the Passover. However, a vicarious, expiatory explanation is clearly at the heart of the Exodus and it is most probable that the first Christians would have seen the natural link with the Exodus Passover lamb and not with its interpretation in current Jewish theology, especially as Jesus himself was the first to unite his death with the Passover in the Words of Institution at the Last Supper. Jeremias' examination of the Last Supper leads him to conclude that Jesus saw his death as a vicarious sacrifice. 'By comparing himself with the Paschal Lamb Jesus describes his death as redemptive.'⁴⁷

As soon as Jesus was regarded as the Paschal lamb of the NT the thought of his vicarious death would have been inevitably connected because this lamb, unlike any other offering, does take away the sin of the world. Indeed, the verb 'take away' in John 1:29 is a strong echo of Isaiah's theme of the servant who 'bears' the sin of many. Thus, a second dominant motif is possibly in the foreground. George Ladd points out the difference between the two verbs αἴρειν and φέρειν, and argues, 'If this language were due to Christian interpretation we would expect it to be more explicit in referring to 'Jesus' death. The verb *airō* does not emphasize the means of removal of sin as *pherō*, would have done. . . ; it means "to take away", not "to bear".'⁴⁸ However, while there is a difference between the two meanings, the difference in theological significance is not great. MacGregor agrees that the verb αἴρειν means not 'to take upon oneself' but 'to take out of the way', yet he says, 'But the latter thought, while enriching the former, also includes it, for a lamb can only "remove" sin by vicariously "bearing" it, and this Christ did.'⁴⁹ As Schnackenburg also points out, 1 John 3:5 provides a useful cross reference for understanding the verb

47. J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (ET, Oxford: Blackwell, 1955) 146.

48. G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the NT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 43, n. 35.

49. G. H. C. MacGregor, *The Gospel of John* (London: Hodder, 1928) 28; cf. R. E. Brown, *John I* 61.

αἴρειν: 'You know that he has appeared to take away sins (ἵνα τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἄρῃ) and there is no sin in him.' The sense is perfectly clear: through the sacrificial death of Jesus the burden of sin that weighs upon mankind is lifted off.⁵⁰ Schnackenburg mentions elsewhere that John 1:29 'shows that the thought of the expiatory sacrifice was genuinely part of the Johannine theology. There can be no other way of understanding the strange metaphor, which still goes directly to the heart of the matter'.⁵¹

V CONCLUSION

A strange metaphor indeed; but I have a feeling that modern exegetes have not really got to what Schnackenburg calls 'the heart of the matter'. I wish to suggest that when the evangelist adopted the Baptist's statement and placed it in such a significant position in the framework of his Gospel he was seeking to express three things.

First, the *humiliation* of the lamb. Acts 8 shows how the passage from Isaiah 53 was used in early preaching. Philip preaches the good news of Jesus from the story of the sheed led to the slaughter. A lamb led to slaughter has no rights. It is abandoned and helpless. Expressing the feelings of the cultus it represents the helpless community which can only call for mercy. We have seen how the obedience of Christ is stressed in the Fourth Gospel. His work is to obey, yet it is an obedience voluntarily. given as the expression of love. He lays down his life; the Good Shepherd for the sheep, the lamb for men.

Second, the *sinlessness* of the lamb. It is part of the Johannine portrait of Christ to show him as one who does not deserve a criminal's death, and yet goes willingly to, death. The verb ἀγιάζειν is used twice in the Gospel for Jesus' consecration as 'Saviour' and as designating his consciousness of this task: first in 10:36 he is sanctified by the Father and sent into the world; secondly, it occurs in the context of the High Priestly prayer on his personal dedication as the victim who dies sacrificially for others. This aspect is also to be found in 1 Peter 2:18ff where Peter draws upon the suffering of Christ and applies it to the situation of his readers.

50. R. Schnackenburg, *John* I 298.

51. *Ibid.* 158.

Here we notice another shift in interpretation, as an image for the vicarious suffering of Jesus becomes applied to the life of the church as an example for the Christian to follow. 'He committed no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth.' (1 Pet. 2:22)

Lastly, the *efficacy* of his death. It is important for John to show that Christ's death was a complete and final atonement for sin. He has already described Jesus as claiming to be the way, the truth and the life; he has also asserted Jesus to be the door whereby the sheep go in; and he is the resurrection and the life. All these can only be true if the death of Jesus is correspondingly the final event which unites man to God irrevocably.

With John's simple cry, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world', we are indeed at the heart of the matter, the Gospel itself. This, I submit, has a significant bearing upon atonement theories because modern theologians are often afraid to take the bold images of the NT and use them with the same vigour and fervour as expressed originally. So often they are emasculated by a timid exegesis which does not do justice to the original text. This I have argued has been the case with the text in John 1:29. In this breathtaking notion that Jesus is sinbearer of the world the evangelist announces a full-blooded concept of the atonement which is of importance to our interpretation of the cross. Jesus, says the text, is the sacrificial lamb who goes as a substitute for sinners to death on the cross and by his innocent dying has removed the weight of sin which crushes us. The death is a full and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of all men. It was a death that we deserved to die and yet God's Son, the anointed Lamb, has taken the penalty for us. Thus, John's concept of Jesus as an atoning Saviour ties in the the NT doctrine of Christ's vicarious self offering; through his sacrificial deliverance from sin we are freed from sin and its power (8:36), born into the family of God, given the Spirit (7:39), and accepted (5:24; 15:4). Well does Charles Wesley rejoice:

Jesus! the name high over all,
In hell, or earth, or sky;
Angels and men before it fall,
And devils fear and fly.

His only righteousness I show,
His saving grace proclaim;
'Tis all my business here below
To cry: 'Behold the Lamb!'

Happy, if with my latest breath
I might but gasp his name;
Preach Him to all, and cry in death:
'Behold, behold the LAMB!'