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"THE LAMB" IN THE APOCALYPSE

by NORMAN HILLYER

THIS paper by Mr. Hillyer, Warden of Ponsbourne College, Hertford, was originally read to the Tyndale Fellowship at Tyndale House, Cambridge, some years ago.

I

THE Book of Revelation paints a vivid and dramatic picture of the events of the last days. The contrast is all the more startling, therefore, when we notice that the title applied twenty-eight times¹ to the Lord Jesus Christ as the central glorious figure of power and authority is—the *Lamb*.

It was observed long ago that John consistently uses the Greek word *arnion* for "Lamb" in the Book of Revelation, but prefers another word, *amnos*, in the Fourth Gospel—in the passage where the Baptist points out the Lamb of God (John 1: 29, 36). The Evangelist does use *arnion* once, however, in reference to young Christians (John 21: 15), but otherwise this word does not recur in the N.T.²

So far as John is concerned, therefore, when speaking of Christ as the Lamb he makes exclusive use of *arnion* in Revelation and of *amnos* in his Gospel.

The distinction has been dismissed as without significance, or explained away on the ground that the Evangelist is not the author of the Apocalypse.

As, however, the figure is almost certainly taken from the Passover Lamb and from Isaiah 53, where *amnos* is used in the Septuagint, the alteration of the word is evidently deliberate. It is less likely that the writer has in mind Jer. 11: 19 ("I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter") where the LXX word is *arnion*.

¹ Rev. 5: 6, 8, 12, 13; 6: 1, 16; 7: 9, 10, 14, 17; 12: 11; 13: 8; 14: 1, 4(2), 10; 15: 3; 17: 14(2); 19: 7, 9; 21: 9, 14, 22, 23, 27; 22: 1, 3. The word is also used (13: 11) for a satanic counterfeit.

² For completeness it may be added that *amnos* is elsewhere used only twice in the New Testament—by Luke (Acts 8: 32) in quoting Isaiah's prophecy of the lamb dumb before the shearers (Isaiah 53: 7, LXX); and by Peter in his First Epistle (1: 19), speaking of those "redeemed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot".

The diminutive ending *-ion* in the word *arnion* is probably not to be pressed, although this could emphasize the idea of meekness and innocence, or convey a term of endearment equivalent to "precious Lamb". This would express the new relation in which Christ now stands to us, as a consequence of His previous relation as the *sacrificial* Lamb.

The Septuagint uses *amnos* about a hundred times in connection with lambs for sacrifice. In this sense alone *amnos* is insufficient for the Apocalypse, where the Lamb is more than a sacrifice. He is also the triumphant warrior, trampling His enemies under His feet. The Lamb is not only the lamb that was slain; He is also the horned lamb (Rev. 5: 6).

In the period between the two Testaments there is a strange use of the symbolic lamb. In the Book of Enoch the great champions of Israel are horned lambs. The picture is used of Samuel and David, and in particular of the Maccabees (Enoch 89, 90). In the Greek version (89: 45) the word used is *arēn*, not the diminutive, but otherwise the same word. It has been suggested that this is the source for *arnion* in the Book of Revelation. The writer is depicting Christ not only as the sacrificial Lamb but also as the horned Messianic, triumphant lamb of the intertestamental literature.

We may agree that *amnos*, the sacrificial lamb, is an insufficient term for the glorified Christ: the note of submission and substitution is inappropriate in the Apocalypse. The same title is required to express the sacrificial basis of Christ's work, but a different Greek word is chosen to include the idea of authority and triumph. It is probably not without significance that when the Evangelist quotes the risen Christ's command to Peter to feed His lambs (John 21: 15) he uses *arnion*, and not *amnos* with its purely sacrificial associations. John has deliberately chosen the special word of Revelation to describe young Christians, viz., those who share Christ's risen life and who are entitled to enter upon His triumph over the works of Satan.

The frequency with which "the Lamb" appears in Revelation emphasizes that this is no mere title, but more a description of our Lord's relation to men through His redemptive death on the Cross. If in fact "Christ" is substituted for "Lamb", wherever the latter term occurs in the Book of Revelation, something indefinable but very real drops out.

Delitzsch has finely said (in a comment on Isaiah 53: 7): "All the utterances in the N.T. regarding the Lamb of God are derived from this prophecy, in which the dumb type of the Passover now

finds a tongue”.

Paul has already made this point explicit in a passage written before either 1 Peter or Revelation, viz. 1 Cor. 5: 7, “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us”.

At the institution of the Passover, indeed, the blood of the Paschal lamb was not primarily expiatory or redemptive: it was sprinkled on the doorposts that the destroying angel might “pass over” the house (Ex. 12: 13). Nevertheless the conception of its redemptive efficacy prevailed in later Jewish thought; and Hort quotes an apposite Jewish comment on Ex. 12: 22: “With two bloods were the Israelites delivered from Egypt, the blood of the Paschal lamb and the blood of circumcision”.

Again, the association in Rev. 15: 13 of the “Song of Moses” and the “Song of the Lamb” suggests that, as in 1 Peter 1: 19, the slain Lamb of Revelation is compared with the Paschal lamb, rather than with the lamb of daily sacrifice, which may be more strictly the thought behind Isaiah 53: 7.

It is certain that the early Christians soon found in Isaiah 53 a forecast of the sufferings and redemption of Christ. The passage is directly applied to Him by Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 32), and phrases from the same prophecy are treated as having Messianic significance by others.

Peter in fact goes further by identifying the Servant-Lamb of Isaiah 53 with the Shepherd of Israel (1 Peter 2: 22-25), whereas in Isaiah 49 the Servant is distinguished from the Shepherd, who is God Himself.

In Revelation the Paschal lamb, the Servant, and the divine Shepherd of Israel are all fused together. This ascription of deity to the paschal victim, who conquers the dragon and his armies (Rev. 12; 17: 14; 19: 11-21; 20: 7-10), and who is enthroned with God (Rev. 5: 6; 7: 17; 22: 1), has an effect which prepares the way for the reader of the Fourth Gospel. Here the sacrificial sufferings of the Saviour are no longer thought of in terms of humiliation or, as in Hebrews, of probation. They are in themselves glorious, and the Evangelist does not hesitate to describe Christ’s death as His glorification.

By bringing together in one the most emphatic and inclusive Messianic and soteriological titles, John in his Gospel describes Jesus as the Lamb of the *world*, thus indicating that Christ’s redemptive purpose embraces both Jew and Gentile. Further, the Lamb “newly slain” (Rev. 5: 6) is yet the Lamb “slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13: 8). The Cross was no afterthought, but was predetermined before all ages in the comprehen-

sive and loving purpose of God, and that same Lamb who was slain has invaded and conquered history.

The suitability of the title "Lamb" to define Christ's work of triumphant redemption is startling.

Certainly the initial aspect of a lamb is its meekness, a thought echoed by Jer. 11: 19 (Hebrew), "I was as a *gentle* lamb led away to be slaughtered", and Isaiah 53: 7, "as a lamb before her shearers is dumb". Although the idea of meekness is insufficient to explain how the Lamb of God *takes away* the sin of the world, yet Christ told His disciples to learn that virtue from Him (Matt. 11: 29), not as one virtue among several but as His chief. For sin, as self-exaltation and pride, is the contradiction of meekness. It is worth noticing that where the figure of meekness is explained, it is always in a sacrificial sense (Acts 8: 32; 1 Peter 1: 18, 19; Rev. 5: 6, 12, etc.). The Lamb of Revelation, however, is not a figure of weakness. He who "was led as a lamb to the slaughter" now has "seven horns"—symbolic of absolute power, the horn representing authority (Psa. 75: 4-7) and royal dignity (Zech. 1: 18-21)—and "seven eyes", indicating omniscience: perfect knowledge and perception. The Lamb is indeed the Lion of the tribe of Judah. It is noteworthy that the Apostle John who had known Jesus on earth so intimately that he could lean on His breast at supper, now at the sight of Him falls at His feet *as dead* (Rev. 1: 17).

At the same time, however, as the spectacular visions unfold, John is doubtless prepared to hear Christ described as the all-prevailing Lion of Judah who shall "open the Book and loose the seven seals thereof". Yet as John turns to look he sees not a Lion but a Lamb. The experience of the Baptist had been parallel. He proclaimed in vivid terms that One was coming to "baptize . . . with the Holy Ghost and with fire, whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor and . . . the chaff He will burn with fire unquenchable" (Luke 3: 16f.). Yet as Christ is baptized John sees the Holy Ghost as a *dove* and Jesus as the *Lamb*.

The figure of the lamb was a familiar one to the Jews. It was used by Isaiah (11: 6; 62: 25) to describe a feature of the Messianic age. The book of Wisdom (19: 9) takes the gambolling lambs as an illustration of joyful liberty. Speaking of the Exodus the writer says the people "skipped about like lambs, praising Thee, O Lord, who wast their deliverer".

As the Lamb and as the Shepherd, the Messiah understands the

need of care for the flock (Isaiah 40: 11), and Jesus uses this figure in His instruction to Peter (John 21: 15).

The flesh of the lamb was a well-known delicacy among Eastern peoples (Deut. 32: 14; Amos 6: 4), and in applying to Himself the thought of sustenance for His People, Christ scandalized His listeners (John 6: 52). The title of "Lion" would have been wholly out of place to cover this point.

The lamb is a domestic animal, and unlike the lion is thus available to all. It may not be straining the figure to see in Paul's expression about putting on the Lord Jesus Christ another thought which could suitably apply to a lamb, its usefulness in providing clothing, something which again is inappropriate to a lion.

II

In the Book of Revelation the uses to which the title "Lamb" is put may be grouped around six themes. Christ is seen as Redeemer, as the Supreme Object of Worship, as Ruler, as Judge, as Pastor, and in His relation with His Church.

1. THE LAMB AS REDEEMER

John sees "in the midst of the throne", conspicuous among the group comprising the throne, living creatures and elders, a Lamb standing, ready for action, but a Lamb "as it had been slain". What symbolized His fatal wounds we are not told, but the Redeemer's work—atonement for sin—was clearly represented to John. Neither are we told in what sense John saw Jesus as a "lamb" with "horns and eyes". It is enough to recognize that John is using a metaphor so familiar that its pictorial form does not appear. The Baptist did not see an actual lamb when pointing out the Christ, but was referring to His moral attributes and coming sacrifice.

It is the slain Lamb who is able to open the book and bring God's redemptive purposes for men to their divine consummation. Thus history and eschatology are inseparably linked in the Person of the Redeemer through His title of the Lamb.

It is on the ground of His shed blood that the great multitude, which no man can number, are able to wash their robes and make them white (Rev. 7: 14). No other reason can be given why any of the human race are in heaven.

I ask them whence their victory came,
They, with united breath,
Ascribe their conquest to the Lamb,
Their triumph to His death.

In the reference to the "song of Moses, the servant of God, and

the song of the Lamb” (Rev. 15: 3) there is an obvious propriety in bringing the two names together in that both were deliverers. The genitives “of Moses”, “of the Lamb”, are objective: dealing with Moses, dealing with the Lamb. The meaning is not that the identical song is to be sung, but that as Moses taught the people to celebrate their deliverance with an appropriate hymn of praise, so the redeemed are to celebrate their deliverance and redemption in a similar manner.

2. THE LAMB AS SUPREME OBJECT OF WORSHIP

The elders, the living creatures, the redeemed—all orders of beings bow down and worship the Lamb, as One who is infinitely worthy (Rev. 5: 8, 12f.; 7: 9, 10). The wisdom, glory, riches, etc., ascribed to Him are His in virtue of all that He was and of all that He has done. The Lamb is seen sharing the throne of honour with God (Rev. 3: 21; 22: 1, 3).

“The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb” are not only the joint objects of worship in heaven. They are also the sanctuary in the holy city of the redeemed society (Rev. 21: 22). Ultimately the new creation’s sphere of worship is none other than God Himself, who is rendered accessible to His worshippers through the present sacrifice of His Son.

The Lamb is both sacrifice and sanctuary. A sanctuary exists for sacrifice and communion. The sacrificed Lamb of God is not only the ground of our communion with God, but also the sphere in which that communion takes place; in other words, the sanctuary (Rev. 21: 22). The Evangelist returns to this theme (John 2: 19-21) when Jesus cleanses the Temple at Jerusalem and refers His questioners to the coming destruction of the temple of His body.

3. THE LAMB AS RULER

The Lamb “in the midst of the throne” (Rev. 5: 6) symbolizes by His very position the result of His sacrificial work. A throne speaks of order and administration; the wounded Lamb on the throne, of order restored by sacrificial death.

The authority and power of the Lamb is revealed in His ability to open the seals of the book (Rev. 5: 8; 6: 1), in His proclaimed title “King of kings and Lord of lords”. These “kings” and “lords” are the Lamb’s loyal vassals—“they that are with Him” (17: 14)—described as “called” by the gospel, “chosen” from all eternity, “faithful”, trustworthy. How these can be called “kings” and “lords” (a synonym) appears from 1 Peter 2: 9 (“a

royal priesthood") and Rev. 1: 6 ("hath made us kings and priests", that is, by hendiadys, "priestly kings"). The Lamb is the conqueror, and the saints share in His victory by His blood (Rev. 12: 11).

As ruler, the Lamb rules by and in love, for such is His sceptre. Opposition to such rule is thus malignant and unprovoked.

4. THE LAMB AS JUDGE

The key of the ages, the clue to history, is the Lamb of Revelation who enables us to penetrate behind the guilt and wrath of history and discern the veiling and unveiling of God's Kingdom in it all.

If the thought of the Lamb being a Judge is unexpected, the apparent incongruity of the expression "the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6: 16) brings out the thought even more sharply.

In Revelation "wrath" can be defined as "the working out in history of the consequences of sin". The Lamb is the living representative of the sacrificial love of God. So the "wrath of the Lamb" is the working out in history of the consequences of the rejection and crucifixion of the Messiah.

The wrath of the Lamb is the counterpart of His meekness as the Suffering Servant, for He suffered that sin might be utterly consumed by God's love. The phrase is pregnant with the grave irony already expressed in the juxtaposition of Lion and Lamb (Rev. 5: 5, 6). But the situation at the Judgment will be reversed. The Lion standing before the throne is the Lamb. The Lamb in the great day of His appearing is once more the Lion, in the terribleness of His wrath.

In the Gospels wrath is attributed to Christ only once (Mark 3: 5), but His scathing denunciations of the Pharisees and stern warning of the doom of the impenitent reveal that the Sacred Humanity is capable of an awful anger. Sinners dread not death so much as the revealed presence of God, a truth illustrated when Adam and Eve "hid themselves" (Gen. 3: 8), and to be repeated in the cry "to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth upon the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6: 16; Hosea 10: 8; Luke 23: 30).

The punishment of the Lamb's enemies is said to take place in His presence (Rev. 14: 10). It is not necessary to suppose that heaven will be "spoilt" by a continuous sight of hell. The evident sense of *enōpion* ("in the presence of") is forensic, that angels and the Lamb acquiesce in the perfect justice and the necessity of God's awful judgments.

The Lamb's perfect ability to judge is symbolized by the "seven eyes" (Rev. 5: 6). The expression is figurative. The Lord's omniscience is like an infallible record. So, "the Lord knew (*egnō*) those that are His" (2 Tim. 2: 19), and the corresponding word to unbelievers: "Never did I know (*egnōn*) you" (Matt. 7: 23). The inscription of a name in the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev. 13: 8; 21: 27) implies divine certification of a position and of corresponding rights with the Lord. Erasure means the loss of both.

5. THE LAMB AS PASTOR

"The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them", literally "shepherd them" (Rev. 7: 17)—sustain, watch over, provide for, lead. Even in heaven all the blessed are dependent on the Lamb for life.

This verse epitomizes the "Lamb of God Christology"³ which is perhaps the main link, suggested in the writings of John, between the Old and New Testaments. In Isaiah we find the following sequence of thought: the voice in the wilderness (40: 3) proclaims that the divine Shepherd (40: 11) will open the waters (41: 18) to His flock (49: 10) through His Servant (41: 8-20; 49: 1-13) who is the sin-bearing Lamb that is slain.

In the Book of Revelation we see the Lamb-Shepherd paradox coming to a focus. Jesus is both the Lamb slain in the redemption-drama, and by His resurrection the Shepherd who leads to living fountains of waters.

6. THE LAMB IN RELATION TO HIS CHURCH

The theme of Divine Marriage is deeply rooted in the O.T., where God is the Bridegroom of Israel (Hosea 2: 19-21; Isa. 54: 6). In Psalm 45, applied to the Messiah by many Jewish scholars (cf. Heb. 1: 8f.), the nuptials of the King are described at length. All this imagery is applied in the N.T. to Christ and His Church, not least in Revelation (3: 20; 19: 9; 21: 2, 9; 22: 17).

To depict the Church as the Bride of the Lamb suggests at once the peculiarly intimate relationship between them, one which is tender and indissoluble. "The Bridegroom of the soul and of the Church, although infinite in power, wisdom, goodness and truth, is a Lamb." There is, remarks Charles Hodge, a world of consolation in that.

The Book of Revelation foretells God's ultimate triumph in its

³ L. S. Thornton, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ* (1946), p. 417n.

several aspects. There comes the final victory of the Lamb over the powers of evil and darkness. The city of the Lamb is the scene of the final re-creation. The perfect fellowship of the Lamb is established as the crown of reconciliation.

The Cross shall never become out of date. For ever the Lamb is in the midst of the Throne surrounded by the redeemed, who find their true destiny in serving and worshipping Him.

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