

“BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD”



DAVID ROLPH SEELY

JO ANN H. SEELY

“Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!” (1 Nephi 11:21).

The scriptures contain many metaphors to teach us about the Lord Jesus Christ, and a particularly appropriate symbol at Easter time is that of the lamb. The Savior is referred to as the Lamb of God from His premortal life through His triumphant millennial reign. The symbol of the lamb is appealing for its simplicity, and yet it is multifaceted, providing insights to help deepen our understanding of the Savior. The eighteenth-century poet and artist William Blake has given us a wonderful depiction of a lamb, delightfully portrayed in this little poem:

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, wooly, bright;

Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
 Little Lamb who made thee
 Dost thou know who made thee
 Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,
 Little Lamb, I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
 Little Lamb God bless thee.
 Little Lamb God bless thee.¹

Blake has poetically described *a lamb* as well as our relationship to *the Lamb*. Lambs are innocent and pure, tender, meek, and mild—all characteristics we attribute to the Lord; they make a wonderful metaphor for the Savior. Yet Blake also relates us to the Lamb as we are His children, enjoining us to become like the Lamb.

The metaphor of the Lamb is introduced by the prophet Enoch in his vision of the Savior of the world, “The Righteous is lifted up, and the Lamb is slain from the foundation of the world” (Moses 7:47), establishing the lamb as a symbol of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ hundreds of years before His birth. Nearly six hundred years before Christ, Nephi records in the Book of Mormon his marvelous vision of the Lamb of God beginning with His birth and concluding with the vision of John the Revelator concerning the events at the end of time (see 1 Nephi 11–14). Nephi desires to understand the things his father Lehi had seen in a vision and is blessed with a glorious vision of his own. He is shown Mary with the Christ child in her arms, to which the angel announced, “Behold



Fig. 1. William Bouguereau, *L'innocence* (Innocence), 1893. Image thanks to Art Renewal Center;® www.artrenewal.org. The lamb is portrayed to convey the idea of the innocence of the Christ child.



Fig. 2. Leonardo da Vinci, *Saint John the Baptist*, 1515. Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY. Louvre, Paris, France. “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!”
(1 Nephi 11:21).

The vision continues in which Nephi sees the Lamb of God baptized and ministering among the children of men,

His Crucifixion, the persecution of the Apostles of the Lamb, and His ministry among the Nephites. The gospel of the Lamb is seen coming forth in the latter days to “make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world; and that all men must come unto him, or they cannot be saved” (1 Nephi 13:40), and the vision concludes with the final battle against the church of the Lamb of God (see 1 Nephi 14). Thus, prophetically, the Lamb is the image through which Nephi sees the ministry of Jesus Christ and the history of His kingdom on the earth before the Savior was even born.

At the commencement of the mortal ministry of the Savior in the Gospel of John we are introduced to John the Baptist, who is baptizing in the wilderness and bearing witness of Jesus Christ. Following an interchange with questioning Pharisees, John recognizes Jesus approaching and declares, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). It is interesting that in his first formal introduction of Jesus, John uses the simple metaphor of the Lamb of God—which tells us much about Jesus and about His Atonement. He is the sacrificial Lamb, and He will take away our sins. The implications have eternal significance. The image of the lamb is a very rich and compelling one. A brief examination of this metaphor will illuminate many aspects of this symbol and provide a model for each of us. We will then trace how this image is used in scripture to describe the Messiah’s mortal ministry, His atoning sacrifice, His return in triumph, and His eternal place in the celestial kingdom. We have divided our topic into four categories: (1) Sacrificial Lamb; (2) Passover Lamb; (3) Jesus Christ as Suffering Servant and Passover Lamb; and (4) Apocalyptic Lamb.



Fig. 3. Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Bound Lamb*, 1635–40. Rights reserved © Museo Nacional del Prado–Madrid.

The Sacrificial Lamb

“This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth” (Moses 5:7).

Adam and Eve were given a commandment to offer of the firstlings of their flock to the Lord (see Moses 5:5). They were obedient although they did not yet understand the reasons for this sacrifice until taught by an angel, “This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth” (Moses 5:7). Therefore, the lamb was a symbol of the Savior from the beginning. It is the pure, unblemished firstling of the flock, and in making a sacrifice there is an act of obedience, freely offered in accordance with the will of the Lord, where blood is shed and life is given. These principles of sacrifice continue throughout the scriptures, and much can be learned from several significant accounts of sacrifice and offerings. The story of Cain and



Fig. 4. *The Sacrifices Presented by Abel, Melchizedek, and Abraham*, early Christian mosaic in San Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, Italy. Scala/Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 5. Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1603. Scala/Art Resource, NY. In this scene our eyes move from one figure to the next trying to grasp the meaning of the sacrifice about to take place. We are struck by the horror on Isaac's face with the knife just inches from his neck. Next we look at Abraham, who is portrayed as perfectly silent. The angel directs our attention to the ram that is prepared and almost seems to be offering a protective covering for Isaac. The animal will be offered as a substitution, a sacrifice given in place of Isaac.

Abel demonstrates the necessity of the proper motivation in making an offering as Abel's firstlings were received and Cain's offering commanded by Satan was not accepted (see Moses 5:18–21). Abraham brought offerings of all he had unto Melchizedek and was blessed by him: "And he lifted up

his voice, and he blessed Abram, being the high priest, and the keeper of the storehouse of God” (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 14:37). The ultimate example of sacrifice in the Old Testament is the story of Abraham and his son Isaac, through which much of the meaning of sacrifice can be learned.

Abraham was called by the Lord and commanded to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. There is no explanation given, and reason is insufficient to provide complete understanding for this command. Abraham, a man of faith, responds simply, “Behold, here I am” and proceeds to fulfill the Lord’s instruction with no further comment (see Genesis 22:1–3). Arriving at the appointed place, the wood and fire ready, Isaac calls to his father and asks, “*Where is the lamb?*” Abraham replied, “My son, God will provide himself *a lamb* for a burnt offering.” Then “they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood” (Genesis 22:7–9; emphasis added). This text is rich with meaning and “fraught with background”² providing the basis for numerous discussions on faith, obedience, and man’s relationship with God, but we are going to concentrate on the symbol of the lamb and the meaning of sacrifice. What is Abraham saying when he suggests to Isaac, “God will provide himself a lamb” (Genesis 22:8)? God has commanded Abraham to offer Isaac, and yet Abraham tells Isaac that God will provide a lamb. Is Abraham trying to allay the fears of Isaac, or is he prophetically foretelling of future events? Or perhaps he is doing both.

In Jewish literature this chapter of scripture is referred to as the *Akedah*, or “binding,” referring to the fact that Abraham “bound Isaac his son” (Genesis 22:9).³ Abraham clearly understood what was demanded of him, yet Isaac was spared. The ram caught in the thicket was offered instead of

Isaac, Abraham's beloved son. The blood of the animal was shed for Isaac, foreshadowing the great sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ for all. Before Abraham and Isaac were aware of the substitution sparing Isaac's life, they manifested incredible faith and action without hesitation. An acceptable offering is one that entails great sacrifice on the part of the giver, not simply substance provided from abundance. After Abraham and Isaac have proven worthy, the life of the animal is given in behalf of Isaac, just as the Father will offer His Beloved Son in behalf of all mankind.

When the angel called to Abraham to prevent the sacrifice from taking place he tells Abraham, "For now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me" (Genesis 22:15). And here is the key—Abraham was willing to give the Lord his son, his beloved Isaac. To sacrifice is to give your very best, your most treasured possession, to the Lord.

Sacrifice at the temple. Sacrifice, introduced by Adam, became part of the formal worship, first at the tabernacle in the wilderness and then at the temple under the law of Moses. Lambs are specifically mentioned to be offered as the burnt offering at the morning and evening sacrifices and additionally on sabbaths, special feasts, and holy days (see Exodus 29:38–42; Numbers 28; 29). The Lord instructs the children of Israel to bring their sacrifices "without blemish" of their "own voluntary will," and the offerer "shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him" (Leviticus 1:3–4). The concepts of purity, without blemish, given freely, and giving the life or blood as an atonement all to point to Christ. Blood sacrifice was poignant in its emphasis on the life being offered as atonement: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for

your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul” (Leviticus 17:11). The animal is offered in place of the offerer, providing the life of the lamb or other animal as a substitution. The sanctifying effects of sacrifice are evident in the promise given to Israel following the instruction for the morning and evening sacrifices: “I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory. . . . And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the Lord their God” (Exodus 29:43, 45–46).

The Passover Lamb

“In the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to the house of their fathers, a lamb for an house” (Exodus 12:3).

The Passover Lamb becomes the most interesting image of the sacrificial lamb. At the sacred Passover meal, the children of Israel relived and commemorated the events of redemption from Egypt. The elements of the Passover meal: the lamb, the blood, the unleavened bread, and the bitter herbs all pointed toward the coming of the Messiah and the redemption He would offer from sin, death, and hell. Note the characteristics of the lamb: “Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year, . . . neither shall ye break a bone thereof” (Exodus 12:5, 46). All are symbolic of the Savior. Each family chose a lamb and killed it on the fourteenth day of the first month. They took the blood of the animal and daubed it around the frame of the door as a “token” to their obedience to the Lord’s commandments. When the Lord came in the night He would acknowledge the obedience of the household, as evidenced by

the blood on the door, and would “pass over” them and spare their firstborn (Exodus 12:13).

According to the Bible, the central symbol of the Passover was the sacrificial lamb which could only be sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem. Thus the Passover was to be eaten in a family group or by a collection of families who had made their way as pilgrims to Jerusalem and would consume the whole lamb. The family gathered and roasted the lamb and ate it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They were to eat the meal in haste representing their departure from Egypt with their loins girded, with shoes on their feet, and with their staffs in hand. Although the customs surrounding the Passover meal evolved over time, the Passover service itself continued in Jerusalem until the destruction of the temple in AD 70 when there was no longer a proper place for the sacrifice of the lambs. After this time families continued to celebrate Passover with its powerful reminders of the intervention of God in their behalf, but they were unable to participate in the blood sacrifice. The idea that the lifeblood of the animal was substituted for the life of another was only recounted to teach the children their heritage.

Samaritan Passover. Although the Jews have forbidden blood sacrifice since the destruction of the temple, the Samaritan people still continue the Passover tradition of sacrificing a lamb. They are descendents of the Samaritans of New Testament times, a people of mixed heritage who were despised by the Jews and currently live in two villages in present-day Israel and Palestine. They have a yearly Passover festival in which the families join together to pray and sacrifice their lambs. Observation of this service is a very moving and insightful experience. Animal sacrifice is foreign to our society; it is an odd concept for a modern mind. It is fascinating to watch through the eyes of folks who not only



Fig. 6. Samaritan boys with lambs preparing for Passover sacrifice. Courtesy of Jo Ann H. Seely.

feel at home with it culturally but consider it a worshipful experience.

The Samaritans gather together once a year on the top of Mount Gerizim with extended families, relatives, and friends greeting one another. They are dressed in their best attire, and there is a festive atmosphere much like our Thanksgiving holiday. The preparations for the feast begin early in the day in the various homes as well as in the public square where the sacrifice will take place. The roasting pits are prepared and the fires lit well ahead of time to provide a hot bed of coals for roasting the lambs. The Samaritan priests chant the ritual liturgy beginning several hours in advance. It is most interesting to see them bring the lambs for the sacrifice. They are not herded as animals in a slaughterhouse; the lambs are brought to the public square individually, usually by young boys who call them by name and stroke them affectionately. The lambs are their prized possessions that they are offering to God.



Fig. 7. Passover lambs sacrificed and Samaritan people celebrating fulfilling God's requirements. © Hanan Isachar/isachar-photography.com

The throat of the lamb is slit right at sunset, the exact moment determined by the Samaritan high priest. The people raise a great shout, and there is joy and clapping and hugging and kissing. The people wipe their hands in the lamb's blood and smear it on each other's foreheads from the grandparents to the young; they are exulting in the blood of the lamb which manifests their obedience to the commandments of God. They share a bond in fulfilling the requirements of God together.

The carcasses of the lambs are examined by the priests to be sure there are no blemishes, and then they are prepared for roasting whole in the fire pits. The feast is shared by families and neighbors together as they recount the Passover story. There is great joy among the people in fulfilling the principles of sacrifice taught from the very beginning: an act of obedience to the commandments, the shedding of blood and giving of life, and a free will offering of a most precious possession.

Passover was particularly singled out as a moment for teaching the significance of the Exodus to the next generation: “When your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses” (Exodus 12:26–27). The Passover meal was a remembrance of the great deliverance from bondage in Egypt, and they were commanded to celebrate it with their posterity to remind them of the Lord’s intervention in their behalf.

Jesus Christ as Suffering Servant and Passover Lamb

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7).

Isaiah describes the Messiah as a meek and humble servant and describes His Atonement as a lamb “brought . . . to the slaughter” who “openeth not his mouth” in His defense (Isaiah 53:7). In the Passion Week, Jesus would fulfill His role as the Passover lamb in conjunction with Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering Servant.

The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record that Jesus and His Apostles met in an upper room and celebrated the Passover meal at the Last Supper (see Matthew 14:13–15). In the morning Jesus sent Peter and John to prepare for the feast. They went into the city of Jerusalem, full of throngs of pilgrims, and purchased an unblemished Passover lamb which they took to the temple. As it was customary for the offerer to kill the animal, one of the Apostles slit the throat of the bound lamb and passed him to the priest, who caught the blood in a basin and splashed it against the



Fig. 8. Walter Rane, *In Remembrance of Me*. Courtesy of Museum of Church History and Art, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc., used by permission. Jesus and the Apostles ate the Last Supper together according to the custom of their time reclining around a table.

altar—reminiscent of Moses, who sprinkled the blood on the altar and the people at Sinai when they made the covenant with the Lord (see Exodus 24:6). They then took the prepared lamb to the upper room, where it was roasted whole without breaking a bone (see Exodus 12:46). At sundown Jesus and His Apostles reclined around the table and, while reciting the story of the miraculous deliverance of the first Passover, ate the Passover meal consisting of the lamb, unleavened bread, the bitter herbs, and cups of wine—all symbols that pointed back to the redemption from Egypt centuries before.⁴

After the meal Jesus took two symbolic elements of the Passover meal—the unleavened bread and the wine—and blessed them and sanctified them to represent His body and His life: “Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and

gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it” (Matthew 26:26–27). While Westerners commonly associate blood with death, it must be remembered that in ancient Israel and throughout the Bible blood represents life. For example, Deuteronomy 12:23 teaches, “For the blood is the life.” With the bread and the wine, Jesus offers His followers life through His Atonement. So on that spring evening Jesus and His Apostles ate the Passover lamb—celebrating through symbols the ancient act of redemption when Jehovah delivered His people from physical bondage in Egypt and death at the Red Sea. Then Jesus gave to the Apostles the bread and the wine and transformed them into the sacrament—the symbols of the Redemption that was shortly to come. From the Last Supper Jesus would retire to the Garden of Gethsemane where the Atonement would begin.

Unlike the synoptics, John records in his Gospel that the Last Supper occurred the day before Passover (see John 13:1; 19:31) and thus portrays Jesus being bound and crucified on the cross precisely at the time that the Passover lambs were being killed at the temple.⁵ John is the only Gospel writer to call Jesus the Lamb of God—though it is echoed in Paul, who refers to “Christ our passover [who] is sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7), and in Peter, who taught that sanctification occurs “with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:19). Furthermore, John, in his Gospel, explicitly identifies Jesus as the Passover Lamb, and he dramatically shapes his narrative to frame the ministry of Jesus the Christ as the Lamb of God—from the first witness of John the Baptist, “Behold the Lamb of God!” (John 1:36), to the testimony of John the Beloved upon the death of the Savior that He was the Passover Lamb: “For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken” (John 19:36).



Fig. 9. Gerrit van Honthorst, *Christ before the High Priest*. © National Gallery, London. Artistic depictions of Jesus at His trial often include the detail of the hands of Jesus bound—reminding the viewer of Isaac and of the binding of the animals for sacrifice at the temple.

After Christ began to fulfill the will of the Father by drinking the bitter cup of the Atonement in the Garden of Gethsemane, John records that Jesus was betrayed by Judas, “then the band and the captain and the officers of the Jews took Jesus, and bound him” (John 18:12). The binding of Jesus is a central symbol in all of the Gospels—most dramatically in Mark, when the Jews, after the trial before the high priest, “bound Jesus” and sent him to Pilate (Mark 15:1; see also Matthew 27:2). But in the Gospel of John, Jesus was bound when He was arrested. The binding of Jesus reminds us of the binding of Isaac in the *Akedah*—from the Hebrew word *‘aqad*, “to bind,” that only appears in the Bible in Genesis 22:9, but in postbiblical Hebrew the word means “to bind the legs of an animal for sacrifice.”⁶ In the case of animals, the binding was to keep them from struggling at the moment of slaughter. In the case of Abraham and Isaac, commentators have noted that the binding of the youthful Isaac by his elderly father serves as a symbol of the willingness of Isaac to submit himself to the will of his father.⁷

Then began the series of trials in which Jesus, as Isaiah prophesied, would meekly stand before His judges—bound like a lamb to the slaughter—and open not His mouth.

First He appeared before Annas, then the high priest Caiaphas, and later before Pilate. Initially Jesus did solemnly answer His accusers in declaring His Messiahship. In the second part of the trial before Pilate (see Mark 15:3–5) and especially before Herod Antipas, as prophesied by Isaiah, Jesus literally “opened he not his mouth” (Acts 8:32; see also Luke 23:8–9). The story is well known. As a result of the dynamic interchange between the Jewish and Roman leaders and the people, Jesus was eventually condemned to die. When Abraham was about to kill his son Isaac, the Lord provided a substitute—a ram in the thicket—but when Pilate

suggested the custom of the paschal substitution to save the life of Jesus, Barabbas, whose Aramaic name means “son of the father,” was freed. When Isaac, on the way to Moriah asked his father, “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham replied, “My son, God will provide himself a lamb” (Genesis 22:7–8). Jesus was that lamb promised and prepared from the premortal existence, the “ram in the thicket”—to die so that we may live.

John mentions several symbols of Passover in his account of the Crucifixion that highlight Jesus as the Passover Lamb.⁸ First, John notes that the Jews, as they led Jesus before Pilate, did not enter into the judgment hall “lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the passover” (John 18:28). With this simple note, John, with his sharp sense of irony, shows that while the Jews are acutely aware of keeping the purity of the Passover, they are ignorantly participating in the actual killing of Jesus the Messiah—the true Passover Lamb. Second, the reader can see from this chronological note that Jesus will in fact be killed on the cross during the time when the Passover lambs were being killed at the temple.⁹

Third, John notes, “After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled saith I thirst.” To quench His thirst someone at the foot of the cross “set a vessel full of vinegar [Greek *oxos*]: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth” (John 19:28–29). The scripture that Jesus is fulfilling is either Psalm 22:1 or Psalm 69:21, both of which speak of a righteous one suffering thirst in persecution. The Greek word translated in the King James Version as “vinegar” actually refers to a kind of sour wine—perhaps another ironic allusion to the wine drunk at the Passover meal—sanctified at the Last Supper to represent the life of the Savior. A reader might recall that the ministry of Jesus began with the miracle



Fig. 10. Matthias Grünewald, The Isenheim Altarpiece. Musée Unterlinden, photo by O. Zimmermann Colmar. The lamb at the foot of the cross reminds us of John’s image of Jesus as the Lamb of God. Here the Lamb is collecting the blood in a goblet that symbolizes the sacrament—the ordinance through which Jesus is able to pass His life to us by our partaking of His flesh and blood.

at Cana when Jesus turned the water to wine—and now at the end of His life Jesus will partake of the bitter wine just before He dies and water will flow from His breast (see John 9:34). Fourth, the rod used to put the sponge to the Savior’s mouth was *hyssop*, the plant that was prescribed to be used in Exodus 12 to daub the blood of the lamb on the door of the houses of the faithful (see Exodus 12:22). And finally, when



Fig. 11. Limbourg Brothers, *Saint John on Patmos Contemplating the Vision of the Lamb Enthroned, the Four Beings, and the Twenty-four Elders*, from *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, 1416. Manuscript on vellum, Musée Condé, Chantilly, France. Reunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY. Christian art often portrays John's vision of the Lamb on His throne in heaven surrounded by the twenty-four elders and the four beasts that attend His heavenly throne.

Pilate ordered the legs of the two criminals at the sides of Jesus to be broken to hasten their deaths, they instead pierced the side of Jesus to make sure He was dead. Thus came forth water and blood—the living water and the blood of the life of Jesus that had been given for the children of men. This led John to witness, “For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken,” (John 19:36) as a fulfillment of the Exodus prescription for the Passover lamb (see Exodus 12:46).

Thus, in the words of Isaiah, the Lamb of God “was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. . . . He made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death” (Isaiah 53:5, 9). But three days later the Lamb of God conquered sin, death, and hell—He resurrected from death and ascended into heaven.

Jesus Christ as Apocalyptic Lamb

“And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth” (Revelation 5:6).

In the writings of John, we next meet Jesus as the Lamb of God in the book of Revelation. Much of the imagery and many of the symbols that John has used to describe Jesus find their culmination in the book of Revelation. When reading the book of Revelation we should remember that it is a retelling of the cosmic story of salvation, known anciently to Israel only through the Old Testament, through the lens of the life and Atonement of Jesus Christ. Thus many of the symbols of the Old Testament find their fulfillment in Revelation. John sees a vision of God sitting on His heavenly throne surrounded by



Fig. 12. Victorious lamb Agnus Dei with cross staff. Lid of relic shrine, donated by the Esturian King Alfons the Great (866–910). Cathedral of Astorga. Drawn by Hans-Ruedi Weber, in *The Way of the Lamb: Christ in the Apocalypse, Lenten Meditations* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988).

twenty-four elders, a sea of glass, and the four beasts known from Ezekiel. John sees a book sealed with seven seals, and He sees Christ whom He describes as “a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes” (Revelation 5:6). This is Christ as the meek Suffering Servant Lamb and the Passover Lamb. The Lamb, through the Atonement, is triumphant over death and victorious over sin and hell. All of creation bows before the triumphant Lamb and praises Him because He has the power to open the seven seals of the book to reveal the history of the world and He has the power to defeat the beast, a symbol of Satan.



Fig. 13. Lion with cross staff. *Liber floridus*, 1250–70. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

There is a profound paradox regarding the image of the meek and lowly Lamb, who has now become victorious and has the power to conquer and cast out the beast. The paradox is the same as the Suffering Servant—that the victory over sin, death, and hell could only be accomplished through humility and submission to the will of the Father and self-sacrifice on behalf of others.

In this vision the Lamb of God is also equated with “the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David”—the Old Testament imagery of Christ as the Davidic Messiah (Revelation 5:5). The image of the lion is a wonderful reminder of the dignity and noble and royal power of Jesus as the Davidic Messiah. The image of the lion is a reversal of the paradox of the lamb reminding us that Jesus, the mighty Lion of Judah,

the God of Heaven and Earth, would come to earth and in humility, like a lamb, meekly give His life. And while the lion reminds us of His strength and power, it is Christ in the image of the Lamb that was slain that will ultimately overcome the forces of Satan: “These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them” (Revelation 17:14).

In his books, John identifies titles and metaphors describing the Savior that teach us both of His nature and atoning sacrifice as well as of the nature of our relationship to Him and thus our role in the gospel plan. For example, Jesus taught His Apostles, “I am the vine, ye are the branches” (John 15:5), “I am that bread of life. . . . If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever” (John 6:48, 51), and “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). This same pattern occurs in the book of Revelation, and we can learn much about the imagery used to explain our relationship, through the Atonement, with the Lamb.

The sanctifying blood of the Lamb. In the course of the opening of the sixth seal John sees the Restoration of the gospel and the sending forth of the 144,000. He describes the gathering of the faithful followers of Christ as they come to the throne where the Lamb sits. They are described as “they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them” (Revelation 7:14–15). Thus John describes the paradox of the Atonement and the doctrine of sanctification. Those that wash their robes—stained with the blood of their sins—in the blood of the Lamb are sanctified, and their robes become white in the blood of the Lamb allowing them to dwell in the presence of God forever.


The Lamb as Shepherd. Furthermore, John describes those in the presence of the Lamb, that “they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, not any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Revelation 7:16–17). The meaning of this passage draws much from the Old Testament. Here the Lamb has become the Shepherd—described with the imagery of Psalm 23—drawing together much Old Testament imagery where God is the Good Shepherd who gathers His sheep (see Ezekiel 34), and yet His sheep need to become shepherds, as Jesus taught in the parable of the lost sheep, who must sacrifice to find the missing sheep and rejoice when they find them.¹⁰ The idea of the lamb that becomes the shepherd simply captures the profound meaning of the incarnation of the Savior—that God becomes flesh, that He knows how to succor us in the flesh (see Hebrews 2:18; Alma 7:12). Who could be a better shepherd than a lamb who knows the needs, wants, and inclinations of sheep? Who could become a better father than a son, a better mother than a daughter, and a better master than a faithful servant? And thus we are simply taught here that we, too, as sheep must follow the Lamb, our Shepherd, to become shepherds to His sheep. That the Lamb has the power to “wipe away tears from off all faces” is meaningful to those who know Isaiah’s prophecy of the Second Coming of the Messiah, who “will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away the tears from off all faces” (Isaiah 25:8). Who is better to give comfort than the Lamb who has suffered on our behalf?

The Lamb and the waters of life. Finally in John’s vision of the holy city of Jerusalem at the end of time he says, “I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are



Fig. 14. Jan van Eyck, *The Adoration of the Lamb*, detail from the Ghent Altarpiece, 1432. Scala/Art Resource, NY. Cathedral of St. Bavo, Ghent, Belgium. This painting depicts the Lamb of God on a raised altar with the fountain of life before it surrounded by the prophets, apostles, and other followers of Christ.

the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof” (Revelation 21:22–23). In this vision many of the symbols of John’s Gospel find their culmination. John saw flowing forth from the throne of God and the Lamb “a pure river of water of life,” which goes forth to water the tree of life and bear fruit “for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1–2). The Lamb as the heavenly temple is the culmination of the doctrine of the incarnation. In his preface John described Jesus’s coming to earth to take a body as “tabernacling” among us (see John 1:14)—literally pitching His tent (the same Greek word used in the Old Testament for the Tabernacle). Later Jesus referred to his body as a temple; “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise



it up” (John 2:19). That the heavenly city has no need of the light of the sun is the fulfillment of Jesus’s saying, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). From the body of the Lamb on the cross, when the soldier stuck a spear in His side, came forth “blood and water” (John 19:34): the blood is to be drunk in conjunction with the Bread of Life (see John 6:51–53) and the “living water” was to spring forth from the belly of the Messiah (see John 7:38). The waters that flow out from the throne of the Lamb to water the tree of life are the heavenly fulfillment of the prophecies of Ezekiel (see Ezekiel 47) and Zechariah (see Zechariah 14:8), who saw the waters that would flow out of the earthly Jerusalem temple to heal the Dead Sea. They also fulfill the prophecy of Nephi, who saw the rivers of living water flow out by the tree of life, “which waters are a representation of the love of God” (1 Nephi 11:25). These living waters represent the life made possible through the Atonement, which gives life. They also water the tree of life “for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2). And those who worship before the throne “shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads” (Revelation 22:4).

“Behold the Lamb of God”—in this simple sentence we see from the Gospel writers the whole of the meaning of the mission, message, and Atonement of Jesus Christ. In the spring in Palestine, throughout the Near East, Europe, and America—indeed throughout the world—as we travel through the countryside, we can witness and wonder at the new life exuberantly manifested in the myriad of innocent newborn lambs. It is the time of the Jewish Passover and the Christian Easter—when we can behold a lamb and marvel at the grace of God shown forth in the Lamb of God.

We who accept the Atonement of Jesus Christ are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb (see Revelation 19:1–9; D&C 58:1–11). We can then join with all of the heavenly

hosts that bow before the triumphant Lamb in singing the hymn immortalized with the music of Handel: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. . . . Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever” (Revelation 5:12–13).

Notes

David Rolph Seely is a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University. Jo Ann H. Seely is a part-time instructor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

1. William Blake, “The Lamb,” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 8–9.

2. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 12. Auerbach discusses the concise brevity with which the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 is presented, yet how “multilayered” Abraham’s silent obedience actually is and how “fraught with background” the biblical characters are in comparison to characters in other western literature—for example the Homeric heroes.

3. See Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 111.

4. By the time of Jesus, cups of wine had become an important part of the Passover. For a more detailed account of the Last Supper as the Passover meal, see David Rolph Seely, “The Last Supper According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke,” in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ: From the Last Supper through the Resurrection*, ed.

Richard Neitzel Holzzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 82–94.

5. Many attempts have been made to reconcile the chronology of the two sources. It may be that they are both correct in that there was more than one day on which to celebrate Passover, and it may be that the difference is due to the deliberate shapings of the different narratives. For a more complete discussion of this issue, see David Rolph Seely, “The Last Supper,” 64–74.

6. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 110–11.

7. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16–50* (Dallas: Word Books), 109.

8. A good review of Jesus as Paschal Lamb can be found in Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:1133–57.

9. There is much discussion of the timing of the paschal sacrifices and John’s chronology on the day of the Crucifixion. Most agree that Jesus is killed during the time lambs were being killed at the temple (see Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 2:1100–103).

10. For a comprehensive study on Jesus Christ as Shepherd, see Dana M. Pike, “Jesus, the Great Shepherd-King,” in *Celebrating Easter: The 2006 BYU Easter Conference*, ed. Thomas A. Wayment and Keith J. Wilson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 2006), 61–86.

