

John 1:29-34

²⁹ *The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”* ³⁰ *He is the one of whom I said, ‘A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’* ³¹ *I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel.”* ³² *John testified further, saying, “I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him.”* ³³ *I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit.’* ³⁴ *Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God.”*

Context

In the prologue the Fourth Evangelist presented John as “*a man sent from God*” who “*came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.*” (John 1:6-8; see also 1:15; and later 5:33) This opening characterization sets the stage for the narration of John’s ministry in 1:19–34. John’s identity is further probed when he is called to account by a delegation sent by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Three times John denies being a particular end-time figure: the Christ (1:20; cf. 1:8, 15); Elijah (1:21a); the Prophet (1:21b; cf. 6:14; 7:40; cf. Deut. 18:15, 18).

After thus affirming three times who he is *not*, John in the present passage, at long last, is telling his interrogators who he *is*. Even though he is none of the scriptural figures expected to make their appearance in Israel in the last days, John does respond in terms of a figure spoken of in Scripture. He is “*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’*” (1:23) featured in Isaiah 40:3 (see the OT context of Isa 40:3 in a section below). In this characterization of John, the Fourth Evangelist joins together fully with the Synoptic portrayal of the Baptist (cf. Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). According to the Fourth Evangelist, John’s witness centered on Jesus’ role in the divine plan of salvation as the “*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (1:29, 36). At its very heart, the purpose of John’s baptism and ministry is described as being bound up with revealing Jesus’ true identity to Israel (1:31).

Each year in the Lectionary Cycle (A: Matthew; B:Mark; C:Luke) the gospel for the 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time is taken from the first chapter of the Gospel according to John. The purpose for this is essentially the same – following the baptism of the Lord, which reveals the relationship of the Father to the Son and to the Holy Spirit – this week’s gospel reveals the relationship of Jesus to the world. And perhaps no one does so more robustly than the Fourth Evangelist.

The fourth Gospel is a book of “signs;” namely things, events, and people who point to something else. Such “intermediaries” are generally necessary in this gospel in order to come to faith. Even Jesus is a type of intermediary as the *logos* -- the “Word” or “Revealer” of God. The theme and purpose of the “signage” becomes clear in John 20:31 – “*But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.*” This gospel itself is a “sign” to point us to the Messiah, who is a “sign” who points us to God. As O’Day (*John*, NIB, 524) states about this gospel: “... the story of Jesus is not ultimately a story *about* Jesus; it is, in fact, the story of God.”

It is to this that John testifies: “*Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God.*”

Commentary

After John’s interrogation by priests, Levites and Pharisees, the evangelist tells us, *The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’*

This is but the start of a short, compact testimony by the Baptist witnessing to the One he had just baptized.

- “*Behold the Lamb of God...* (1:29)
- *who takes away the sin of the world.*” (1:29)
- The one who existed before John (1:30-31)
- The one on whom the Spirit came *from the sky and remain upon him* (1:32-33)
- “*he is the Son of God.*” (1:34)

The Fourth Gospel does not record, as the Synoptic Gospels do, the baptism of Jesus by John. However, the coming of Jesus mentioned in this verse was not his coming for baptism, because, as 1:32–33 implies, John had already witnessed the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus when he had baptized him. John already knew who Jesus was, and therefore said to those around, “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” Christian readers of the Fourth Gospel naturally infer that this is an allusion to the sacrificial death of Christ by which he atoned for the sins of the world. However, it is not certain that this is what the Baptist meant by it. The indications are that he expected the Messiah to carry out judgment against sinners, not to offer himself as a sacrifice for their sins (*cf. Matt. 3:12: His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*”) John may have been identifying Jesus as the apocalyptic warrior lamb referred to in Jewish writings (e.g. *1 Enoch* 90:9–12; *Testament of Joseph* 19:8–9) as did the author of the book of Revelation (Rev. 5:5–10; 17:14), though the latter fused the idea of the powerful lamb/lion of Judah with the sacrificial lamb. By the time the Fourth Gospel was written Jesus had been recognized as the one whose death had atoned for human sins, and the evangelist probably hoped his readers might appreciate its double meaning.

But there are perhaps even more levels of meaning in the phrase “*lamb of God.*” The evangelist may have in mind the lamb led to the slaughter referred to in Isa. 53:7 which contemporary Judaism interpreted not with reference to a dying messiah, but as conveying the notion of substitutionary suffering for sin that fell short of actual death (*cf. Matt. 11:2–3; Luke 7:18–20*).

Another possible association is the lamb provided by God for Abraham when he was ready to offer up his son of promise, Isaac, in obedience to the divine command (Gen. 22:8, 13–14). This is especially suggestive because John 3:16 probably alludes to this scene, highlighting one important difference: what Abraham was spared from doing at the last minute, God actually did—he gave his one and only Son (*cf. Rom. 8:32*).

Less likely options are the gentle lamb of Jer. 11:19 (no overtones of bearing sin); the scapegoat that symbolically bore the sins of the people and was banished to the desert in Lev. 16 (a goat, not a lamb); and the guilt offering sacrificed to deal with sin in Lev. 14; Num. 6 (involving bulls and goats, not lambs).

The Fourth Evangelist, for his part, places the Baptist’s declaration into the wider context of his passion narrative, where Jesus is shown to be the ultimate fulfillment of the yearly Passover lamb (see Exod. 12), whose bones must not be broken (John 19:36; *cf. Exod. 12:46; Num. 9:12; Ps. 34:20 and commentary below; cf. also 19:14*).

This “lamb of God” will take away sin, presumably by means of a sacrificial, substitutionary death. According to the pattern set by the OT sacrificial system, the shed blood of the substitute covered the sins of others and appeased the divine wrath by way of atonement (*cf. 1 John 2:2; 4:10*). As the book of Hebrews makes clear, however, the entire OT sacrificial system was merely provisional until the coming of Christ.

Moreover, as God’s lamb, Jesus takes upon himself the sin, not merely of Israel, but of the entire world (*cf. 1:10*). The idea that the Messiah would suffer for the sins of the world (rather than merely for Israel)

was foreign to first-century Jewish ears; John, however, makes clear that Jesus came to save the entire world (John 3:17; 1 John 2:2), and that he is the Savior of the world, not merely Israel (4:42; 1 John 4:14). The NT's depiction of Jesus as "God's lamb" culminates in Revelation, where Jesus is the "lamb who was slain" who returns in universal triumph (see Rev. 5:6, 8–9, 12; 7:17; 12:11; 13:8; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:22–23; 22:1–3).

John's teaching on Jesus' substitutionary atonement builds on the evangelist's earlier reflection on Jesus' incarnation. For it is in the flesh that Christ suffered vicariously; his humanity was an indispensable prerequisite for his work on behalf of others. In fact, the atonement theme, far from being absent, is part of the fabric of John's Gospel: Jesus is the Bread of Life, who will give his flesh for the life of the world (6:51; cf. 6:32–33, 53–58); he is the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep (10:15; cf. 10:17–18); and his sacrifice fulfills Passover symbolism (e.g., 19:14, 31).

Notes

John 1:29 *the next day*: although broader than the context of this Sunday's reading, be aware that this simple expression "*the next day*" is part of a counting of days that occurs from 1:19–2:12 in which the Fourth Evangelist enumerates the seven days of a "new creation" in the coming and revelation of Jesus.

***lamb*:** The reference to Jesus here as 'the Lamb of God' uses the word *amnos* for 'lamb'. It is one of only four references in the NT (John 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32; 1 Pet. 1:19) that do so. The word *amnos* is found 101 times in the LXX, of which 82 are references to sacrificial lambs. The two uses of *amnos* in the NT outside the Fourth Gospel are clear references to Jesus, who died as a sacrificial lamb: one speaks of Jesus as the servant of the Lord, who 'was led like a sheep to the slaughter, / and as a lamb before the shearer is silent' (Acts 8:32); the other refers to 'the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect' (1 Pet. 1:19). In the light of all this we are probably correct to say that the evangelist would be happy if his readers took John's witness to Jesus as 'the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' to have a double meaning. He was both the apocalyptic lamb who judges unrepentant sinners, and the atoning sacrifice for the sins of those who believe. Perhaps the evangelist believed John spoke more than he knew, just as Caiaphas and Pilate were to do later on (11:50–52; 18:39; 19:14–15, 19, 21–22).

John 1:30 *he existed before me*: Some have suggested that the Baptist thought he was preparing for the coming of Elijah (cf. Mal 3:12) and therefore the statement *he existed before me* would be a simple matter of history since Elijah lived 900 years before John. But in the wider context of the Prologue of this gospel, this clause clearly refers to the preexistence of Jesus. Thus the Baptist is speaking a more profound truth than he realizes, a common occurrence in this Gospel.

John 1:31 *I did not know him*: this gospel shows no knowledge of the tradition (Luke 1) about the kinship of Jesus and John the Baptist. ***the reason why I came baptizing with water*:** in this gospel, John's baptism is not connected with forgiveness of sins; its purpose is revelatory, that Jesus may be made known to Israel.

John 1:32 *like a dove*: a symbol of the new creation (Genesis 8:8) or the community of Israel (Hosea 11:11). ***remain*:** the first use of a favorite verb in John, emphasizing the permanency of the relationship between Father and Son (as here) and between the Son and the Christian. Jesus is the permanent bearer of the Spirit.

John 1:34 *Son of God*: This expression is the strongest of the textual traditions, but there are some important manuscripts (Sinaiticus, P⁵) which read the "chosen one of God." "Son" is more in harmony with the Johannine language and theology.

Sources

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The OT Context of Isaiah 40:3

Isaiah 40:3 constitutes the opening of the second of four well-defined speeches in Isa 40:1–9. The entire passage serves as a prologue that sets the tone for Isa 40–48, and indeed for the rest of the book, by announcing the intentions of Yahweh. After all the judgment and condemnation sounded in Isa 1–39, the opening of chapter 40 marks a major shift in orientation, introducing the theme of comfort that represents the leitmotiv for the remainder of the book.

The precise identity of the calling voice is unspecified, but the context makes clear that reference is made to a human messenger. In light of the fact that several elements of Isa 40:1–11 are reminiscent of Isa 6:1–13, it is likely that the present passage describes not a new call of a new person, but rather an expansion and adaptation of the single Isaiah's original call. The lack of a clear identity of the messenger focuses attention on the substance of the message.

Interestingly, the Hebrew Isa 40:3 has a different punctuation that we are used to hearing. In John 1:23 it is the voice of the one crying out in/from the wilderness – in other words, telling us the location of the messenger. In the Hebrew the messenger cries out, “*In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.*” – in other words the messenger is speaking to those who are in the wilderness. (It is the LXX which transposes the punctuation; John 1:23 is clearly taken from the LXX)

In the NT, reading “*in the wilderness*” in conjunction with the “*voice crying*” adapts Isaiah's message to the person of John the Baptist. If the way for Yahweh is to be prepared in the wilderness, it makes perfect sense for the voice to cry in the wilderness to call for such preparations. Another important part of the voice's message is that Yahweh will come to his people through the wilderness. It is possible that this notion is grounded in Sinai traditions (cf. Hab. 3:3). The desert is also a fitting figure for the desolate condition of God's people.

Just as the calling voice is not identified, no recipients of the message are explicitly stated. Most likely these are the “*my people*” mentioned in Isa 40:1, namely, Jacob/Israel of the captivity (cf. Isa 40:12–44:12). No longer is Israel referred to as “*this people*” (Isa 6:9; 8:6); once again the language used is that of the covenant (cf., e.g., Exod. 6:7; 19:5; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 26:17–18). The message to God's people is that they are to prepare Yahweh's way in the wilderness and make straight in the desert a highway for

their God. This would be in keeping with normal procedure for preparing for a visiting dignitary. The prophet Ezekiel had depicted Yahweh as abandoning Jerusalem (Ezek. 9–11); now Yahweh will return to take up residence in his city once again, which calls for “extraordinary preparation, including a highway (see Isa 35:8–10; cf. 35:1).

How are God’s people to prepare the way for his return? While, again, not explicitly stated, the probable answer is by way of repentance. If Yahweh is to return, his people must prepare the way by repenting of the sins that caused them to be led into exile. This is borne out clearly by the Baptist’s own message: “*Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance.*” (Mt 3:8). As Isa 40:1–2 makes clear, God’s ultimate purpose for his people is not judgment but salvation, life rather than death (cf. the Fourth Evangelist’s words in John 3:17–18; and Jesus’ words in John 12:47). All is forgiven.

Yet comfort for God’s people is grounded not in anything they do, but solely in the activity of Jesus’ coming into the sphere of human activity. The purpose for these preparations is the revelation of God’s glory (one of the principal themes throughout Isaiah), not merely to Israel and Judah, but to all of humanity (Isa 40:5; cf. 60:1–3). This points back to the exodus, where God’s glory was revealed as well (Exod. 16:10; 24:16–18; 33:18; 40:34). That all humanity will witness Yahweh’s triumphant return to his lowly people is part of the prophetic defiance of political realities (cf. Isa 49:26; 66:16, 23–24).

Later, Isaiah also speaks of the coming “Servant” (esp. Isa 52:13–53:12), who will provide an even greater deliverance which is consummated in the new heaven and new earth (Isa 65–66). Similar to other OT prophetic writings, Isaiah’s vision draws heavily on exodus typology (e.g., Jer. 2:6–7; 7:22, 25; 11:4, 7; Hos. 2:14–15; 11:1; 12:9, 13; 13:4–5; Amos 2:9–10; 3:1–2; 9:7; Mic. 6:4; see also Isa 10:24, 26; 11:15–16). The Messiah and his redemption will bring about a new exodus in which God’s glory will be revealed.