

Epiphany 2 2025

John 1.29-42

Look, here is the Lamb of God!

Al-asma ul-husna refers to the ninety-nine beautiful names of Allah, beginning with the most familiar *ar-rahman*, *ar-raheem* (“the beneficent, the merciful”) all through to *as-saboor* (“the patient”), which one must be to listen to the faithful recite so long a list.

The idea that divine names contain in themselves some special truth is hardly unique to Islam. Judaism famously hallows the name of God so much that devout Jews neither recite nor inscribe it. Indeed, while we know the consonants of the name—*yod*, *he*, *vav*, *he* in Hebrew; YHWH in English—we don’t really know how it is meant to be pronounced. We commonly say “Yahweh” now, but many of you might be familiar with the more old-fashioned “Jehovah”, which adds a vowel and hardens the /y/ to a /dʒ/, /w/ to a /v/. Besides the Jehovah’s Witnesses, this version of the name still survives also in names like Joshua, Jonathan, and indeed Jesus—*īēsous* in the Greek of the New Testament, *Yeshua* in the underlying Hebrew.

The Christian interest in divine names finds its greatest advocate in an enigmatic neo-Platonic thinker of the fifth or sixth century, now known only as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, an anonymous author whose pseudonym is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. He is obsessed with the names of God, not only as they are found in Jewish and Christian writings, but also in pagan Platonist texts. His entire theology can be said to be based on interpretations of divine names. It makes for trippy reading—I sort of love it. There’s an icon of Pseudo-Dionysius in my office.

A modern—and more scholarly—version of this obsession with names and titles can be found among historical scholars of the New Testament, who are interested specifically in *christological titles*, that is those used for Jesus. There are a few of these, which will be familiar. “Christ” is the most obvious; Greek for “anointed one”, whose Hebrew equivalent gives us the word “Messiah”. “Lord” is another, which like “Christ” has political resonances, but also divine ones, *kyrios* being one way the aforementioned unspeakable Hebrew name for God was rendered into Greek. The pairing of “Son of Man” and “Son of God” has also intrigued historians, who want to know—among other things—what the earliest Christians believed about

Jesus and his relationship to divinity and humanity.
Entire books have been written about *each*
christological title.

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“Lamb of God” is also familiar to us, who recite it
weekly in our liturgies.

It occurs, in this exact form, only in John’s
gospel. The most obvious Old Testament background
to the title is the idea of the sacrificial lamb. In Exodus,
the Passover Lamb is a yearling without defect, which
the Israelites in Egypt were commanded to roast and
eat, and whose blood they were to smear on their
doorframes, lest the angel of death strike them down.
And before that in Israel’s mythic history, is the lamb
that God provides to Abraham, just in time before he
sacrifices his son Isaac as he believes God demanded.
The sacrificial lamb has been a theological trope in
Jewish thought, most powerfully perhaps in Isaiah’s
prophecies of the suffering servant, who is silently led
like a lamb to the slaughter.

But upon closer inspection, this does not quite
work within the narrative of John’s gospel. At this
point of the story, John the Baptist does not yet know
that Jesus is to be the Saviour who dies for the sake of

the world. The author does, of course, and has been known to make his characters speak inadvertent truths. But even this implies a double meaning to the utterance. The sacrificial lamb may be one—but that leaves another.

The clue is in the Book of Revelation. I realise that that sounds like something some crazed conspiracy theorist would say... But really, Revelation makes great use of the imagery of the Lamb, though the exact phrase “Lamb of God” never appears there. An uncannily similar one does, though—itself also a part of the clue. At the beginning of the book, the author, John, is given a scroll sealed not once, not twice, but seven times. And he weeps, because no one is found worthy to break the seals and read the scroll. Just then, he is told “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals”.

The Lion of Judah. Lions and lambs—almost opposites, *almost*. The idea, for example, that in paradise the lion will lie down with the lamb in peace, feels so familiar: it rolls off the tongue, the lion and the lamb. But what the prophecy in Isaiah actually says is that the *wolf* and the lamb shall live together, the leopard shall lie down with the kids—the lion does come in, but it is with the calf and the fatling. I don’t

know for sure, but I suspect that it is this couple of verses in the Book of Revelation, admittedly obscure, that contributes to our cultural pairing together of lion and lamb, a vestigial notion from the days when we all knew our Bibles rather better than we do now.

In any case, the turn from Revelation 5.5 to 5.6 might just be the most compelling dramatic shift in all of Scripture—I remember that the first time I read it, a chill went down my spine. John is weeping; he is told not to, and to behold the Lion of Judah; he turns, and sees “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered”. Not a conquering lion, then. Quite the opposite.

At first glance, this is just the sacrificial lamb again, just within a bait-and-switch narrative: and I suppose that that’s so. But the pairing of conquest and sacrifice—lion and lamb—is hardly accidental. It turns out that the lamb is not only a sacrificial animal—is not even the most obvious sacrificial animal: in ancient Israelite religion that would be the bull, which the Levitical laws prescribe for the atonement of the sins of the whole people of God. But also, in the Jewish literature written in the centuries just before the time of Jesus, there is some precedence for the lamb as a messianic figure who will lead Israel into victory. This is a sort of leader-of-the-flock image: what we have is

not a shepherd, who is of a different species from his sheep, but one of their own, our own.

The lamb is therefore an image of solidarity as well as of sacrifice. The lesson here in the inversion of lion by lamb is not just a repudiation of violence for peace, not just a redefinition of might into sacrifice, but also an assertion that this sacrificial saviour is one of us. When John turns, looking for a saviour from beyond—the proverbial *deus ex machina*—what he finds instead is one who insists that he is one with those whom he is saving: a lamb among sheep, the human being among human beings, a creature among creatures.

Look, here is the Lamb of God!—*Ide ho Amnos* thus proves to be synonymous with a structurally identical phrase towards the end of John's gospel, the *Idou ho anthropos* from Pilate's lips: Look, here is the human being! It is an assertion of that profound humanism that is the theme of Christmas, which we have been exploring, and now in salvific key. We are not saved by an other, but by one amongst us. A baby in a manger; a man on the streets, chewed and spat out by powers that be. It has always been so, and will ever be so. By the grace of God, salvation is found in humanity itself.