

BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD

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There was a tailor named Mendel and he was worried about his business. Mendel was down to his last \$50 and was torn between buying a sign and getting food for his family. Mendel decided to pray. "Dear God," he said, "I don't know what to do. If I buy a sign it may bring in business, but I need to buy groceries for my family...and if the sign doesn't bring in sales, we will starve." God replied, "Mendel, buy the sign. Don't worry, your family won't starve." So, Mendel bought the sign and business took off. The tailor fed his family and all was well. However, as time passed it became evident that Mendel couldn't keep up with orders all by himself. He contemplated hiring on a helper, but wondered if he could afford it. So, he asked God if getting help would be a prudent move. "Go ahead," God tells Mendel, "hire some help, you'll do okay." And so Mendel did. And business took off beyond his wildest dreams. After a time, the tailor decided to move to a larger site that would accommodate the growing demands of his business. As he surveyed certain locations, he found a perfect storefront, but the rental price was really steep. "God," Mendel again prayed, "I found the perfect place to relocate my business. But the cost of the lease worries me. I don't want to get in over my head." "Go ahead and get a lease on the store, Mendel," said God. "Trust me, you'll be okay--I haven't steered you wrong yet, have I?" So Mendel signed a lease on the 5th Avenue store and profits from his business went through the roof. Out of heartfelt gratitude, Mendel proposed to the Almighty that he dedicate the store to Him. "How do you like the name 'Yaweh and Mendel,'" the tailor asked. "Nah," God said. "Let's go with 'Lord and Taylor.'"

If a biblicist ever backs you into a corner and emphatically declares that "you have to take the Bible literally, word for word, or not at all," then ask him or her: When John the Baptist sees Jesus and calls him the "Lamb of God," does that mean that Jesus ate grass and shed wool?...What did John the Baptist mean, or John the Evangelist through John the Baptist, when he addressed Jesus in this way? What do we know about sheep? In the 23rd Psalm, the Psalmist speaks as a sheep: "The Lord is my shepherd." Since sheep are bad at finding good places to graze, "He makes me lie down in green pastures." Since sheep will not drink from moving water, but only from pools, "he leads me beside still waters." Sheep stray, they're directionless, so "He leads me in right paths." Sheep will not lower their heads into buckets or troughs, so "my cup overflows." What is interesting to note is that sheep were probably the first animals to be domesticated, and they are certainly the most hyperdomesticated of all animals. Without a shepherd, they are incapable of surviving. They are more "human" than any other animal. Sheep need human care just as each of us needs human care. You can heighten these attributes all the more upon recognizing that a "lamb" is a young, even more dependent sheep. (*Synthesis*, Jan 20)

To see the lamb as an image of the Lord God of Israel, however, was unthinkable to the Hebrews. God was anything but lamblike. God slays the firstborn of the Egyptians; the Lord is not the lamb that was slain. The Lord leads the Hebrew people to victory over their oppressors; and Moses exults in the Lord God as a Divine Warrior. This God exhibits anything but a lamblike, passive dependency, a critter easily tricked or outwitted. While tender and merciful, the God of Israel remains a warrior, not a lamb. In fact, when the Lord God is spoken of in animal imagery, the picture is that of a "lion."

God is a warrior; Jesus is a lamb. God is the victor; Jesus is the victim. What gives...Why did John call Jesus the "Lamb of God"? In traditional teaching, Jesus as the Lamb of God is the surrogate sufferer--at once the Passover Lamb, the spotless offering killed on the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem of the Day of Atonement. It is explained in the following story. Professor Bruce Riggins of McCormick Seminary in Chicago once met a very dedicated Christian woman when he was working with the poor in London. He wanted to know what inspired her Christian faith. So she told him her story of how she had been converted by the faith of another Christian. It is a story in which Christ's sacrifice takes away the power of sin. The woman, a Jew, was fleeing from the Gestapo in France during WW II. She knew she was about to be caught and she wanted to give up. In desperation, she ran into a house owned by a widow who was a French Huguenot. Within hours, the Gestapo was in the neighborhood, and they knew it was time for the Jewish woman to flee to a new place. She said, "It is no use, they will find me anyway; they are so close behind." The widow said, "Yes, they will find someone here, but it is time for you to leave. Go with these people now. I will take your identification and wait here." Professor Riggins said that the Christian woman of Jewish descent looked him in the eye and said, "I asked her why she was doing that and the widow responded, 'It is what Christ has already done for me...and more. And I want to do that for you.'" The widow was caught and imprisoned in place of her sister Jew, allowing time for her to escape. Within six months, the widow was dead. The Jewish woman never forgot this ultimate sacrifice on her behalf."

In other words, traditional Christianity has understood Jesus' death on the cross as Jesus climbing up on the altar in the Temple and allowing the priests to kill him. In doing so, the tradition has taught, God's demand for justice is satisfied and you and I no longer have to be rejected and eternally punished for our sins. But what if this traditional teaching does not make sense to you? What if your experience and understanding of God is one of infinite compassion and love? What if you cannot imagine God demanding that someone "pay the price" for their sins and imperfections through either a blood sacrifice or eternal damnation? What if your experience of God does not fit with the idea of God as Gestapo coming after you and demanding your or someone's life? Is there an alternative way of thinking about all of this?

I think so, but I am out of time for today so you'll have to come next week. See you then.