

John 1:29, 36: The Meaning of ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ and John's Soteriology

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1. Introduction

In John 1:29 John the Baptist when seeing Jesus exclaims “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου).¹⁾ In 1:36 the words “Behold, the Lamb of God” (Ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) are repeated.²⁾ The expression “lamb of God” (ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) for Jesus occurs only in these verses. Many exegetes assume that the image of Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away sins of the world” refers to the sacrifice of Jesus’ atoning death and explain it with the help of Old Testament imagery. However, they are not always in agreement about the particulars of this imagery: some claim that John is thinking of the Passover lamb, others say he must have had Isaiah 53 in mind, again others make a connection with Genesis 22 (the binding of Isaac), Leviticus 16 (the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement), or the daily *tamid* offering in the Tabernacle. Whatever the solution, it is almost always taken for granted that the words “who takes away the sin of the world” (ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου) refer to atonement or expiation and that the image as a whole refers to some sort of sacrifice.³⁾ Only few have asked the question whether the Old Testament

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1) The quotations from Old and New Testament are taken from the RSV, except where the Septuagint deviates from the Masoretic text.

2) In 1:36 “who takes away the sin of the world” (ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου) is lacking in most textual witnesses; these words have been supplied here in a number of witnesses from vs 29.

3) B. A. Newman and E. A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1980), 36 (ad Joh 1:29): “Originally, the Passover lamb was not looked upon as a sacrifice, but since the priests had taken over the responsibility of killing the lambs, it is

sacrificial terminology fits within the whole of John's theology.

My reason for revisiting the exact meaning and function of the phrase "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" was its translation into Turkmen. In the Old Testament, Turkmen uses three terms for "lamb": *guzy*, which is a small lamb (less than a year old, mostly up to six months), a *tokly* (a young sheep, a lamb of approximately one year old) and a *janly*, which is a more general term for "sacrificial animal". The term *tokly* is more technical than *guzy* and perhaps generally less familiar to the average Turkmen reader. Still, in the Old Testament translation, the term *tokly* has been chosen to render the fixed phrase "one year old lamb (goat)". When we were working on the revision of the New Testament, the team simply followed the rendering for "lamb of God" (ἄμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) from the previous Turkmen New Testament from 1992, which had used *guzy*. However, in the Old Testament translation the term *guzy* was never used for a sacrificial animal. But according to the team this was exactly what John was referring to: Jesus was sacrificed as a lamb to take away the sins of the world. As a result, there was now a discrepancy in terminology between the Old Testament and John 1:29 and 36, and so the team decided to change the translation. Because the term *tokly* was considered too technical for "lamb of God" (ἄμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) they chose the very general term *janly* ("sacrificial animal").

2. The discussion about the rendering of "lamb"

The discussion about the rendering of "lamb" raised several questions for me. Is John really speaking about the lamb as an offering? Is atoning in view here and are the words "who takes away the sin of the world" (ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου) indeed referring to the notion of an expiating sin offering, as many exegetes assume? Traditionally we take for granted that New

probable that in New Testament times many people would look on it as a kind of sacrifice. Although the Passover lamb was not looked upon as a sin offering in Judaism, it is easy to see why Christians would view it this way, on the basis of their understanding of Christ's death."

Testament soteriology *in general* focuses on Jesus' death for our sake, but is this true for the Gospel of John? To find an answer to these questions, it is important to try to unravel as much as we can ideas that have coalesced in later, post-biblical theology. That is, we have to try to distinguish the different traditions which New Testament authors used and developed to express Jesus' salvific role each in his own way. We need to avoid the trap of looking at single lexemes, isolating them from their context and filling them with theological content even before we have considered the context.⁴⁾ Trying to reconstruct what John's intention was with the phrase "the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" brought me also to other, related exegetical and translation issues in his Gospel. I will mention them later on.

As mentioned, the phrase "Behold, the Lamb of God" (Ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) occurs twice, in John 1:29 and 1:36; in 1:29 the phrase is followed by the words "who takes away the sin of the world!" (ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου). The term "lamb" (ἀμνός) is used by the author only in these two verses. Elsewhere the author uses words as "sheep" (πρόβατον) and "lamb" (ἀρνίον). πρόβατον is used in John 2:14-15 (the pericope of the cleansing of the temple), John 10:11ff (Jesus as the Good Shepherd) and John 21:16-17 (Jesus' words to Peter "take care of my sheep"). The term ἀρνίον is used only in John 21:15 where it is a synonym for πρόβατον: "take care of my lambs". John 10 uses the plural πρόβατα in a metaphorical sense for the community of believers. The related terms in John do not shed any light on the meaning of ἀμνός ("lamb") or ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ("lamb of God") in John 1.

In the rest of the New Testament there are only two further occurrences of ἀμνός: Acts 8:32 and 1 Peter 1:19, but in neither of them the specific Johannine combination ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ is used.

Acts 8:32 is the passage about the meeting between Philip and a eunuch. The eunuch is reading from the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 53:7: "As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth" (Ὡς

4) J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). See also C. Schlund, *Kein Knochen soll gebrochen werden*, Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 107 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag 2005), 11-13.

πρόβατον ἐπὶ σφαγὴν ἦχθη / καὶ ὡς ἀμνός ἐναντίον τοῦ κείραντος αὐτὸν ἄφρωνος, / οὕτως οὐκ ἀνοίγει τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ).⁵⁾ The quotation follows *verbatim* the LXX translation. Of course the interpretation of the Hebrew text of Isaiah 53 is bound up with its own major exegetical issues, especially the identification of the so-called “suffering servant”. In any case, Isaiah 53:7 refers to the total submission and endurance of this “suffering servant”. In the context of Acts 8 the quotation functions as a reference to Jesus. Elsewhere in Acts Luke always explains the Old Testament texts he uses, but not so here. Here, the specifics of *how* exactly Isaiah 53:7 should be linked to Jesus, are not given. Only the wider context can give some clues. Acts mentions the divine necessity of Jesus’ suffering repeatedly, often in the double formulas that mention both suffering and resurrection, e.g. Acts 17:3 “it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead.” It seems that in Acts 8:32 the quotation of Isaiah 53:7 should also be read as a reference to Jesus’ death and suffering. But that still leaves open the question whether a similar context should be supposed for the Gospel of John.

The other New Testament text in which ἀμνός is used is 1 Peter 1:19. Here the author states that we have been ransomed by the blood of Christ. His blood is then compared with (*not* identified with) the blood of a perfect lamb offering: “you were ransomed ... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (ἐλυτρώθητε ... τιμίῳ αἵματι ὡς ἀμνοῦ ἀμόμου καὶ ἀσπίλου Χριστοῦ). It is highly likely that 1 Peter is using Old Testament terminology here, since the expression “an unblemished (one-year old) lamb” is used frequently in the Old Testament. However, here too the question remains whether the same applies to the use of ἀμνός in John 1:29 and 36.

In short, it is widely assumed that the Johannine image of the “the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” refers to Jesus’ death for others and that this image has to be traced back to the Old Testament.⁶⁾ This is done either

5) The Hebrew uses the word לְחֵן (for which *HALOT* gives the meaning “ewe”) where the Greek of the LXX has ἀμνός; elsewhere the term is translated with πρόβατον, “sheep”.

6) Among those who tone down the sacrificial and atoning meaning of John’s soteriology in general or “lamb of God” in particular, are K. Berger and J. Schröter. Berger doubts that “lamb of God” necessarily refers back to Jesus’ death, see K. Berger, *Theologieggeschichte des*

by referring to Old Testament sacrificial terminology or by referring to Isaiah 53. But there are also other ways in which the verse has been explained. Let us first look at the most widespread ones. I will mention four, each having their own variations which in some cases overlap. The four are: 1) the lamb as the animal mentioned in Isaiah 53 (compare Act 8:32), 2) the lamb as the Passover lamb, 3) the lamb as a reference to an Old Testament sacrifice, and finally 4) the lamb as the Apocalyptic lamb. I will work my way backwards through these four suggested options.

The apocalyptic Lamb is mentioned some twenty times in the book of Revelation, e.g. Revelation 5:6: “I saw a Lamb (ἀρνίον) standing, as though it had been slain”. Against this background, it is assumed that ἀμνός (“lamb”) in John does *not* refer to a sacrificial animal, but just as in Revelation to an apocalyptic leader, the Messiah, who delivers his people from evil.⁷⁾ The image of lamb as leader is then supposed to fit well into the apocalyptic preaching of

Urchristentums. Theologie des Neuen Testaments (Tübingen; Basel: Francke Verlag 1994), 188. For Schröter, see below, n. 32 and 39. See also J. Schröter, “Sühne, Stellvertretung und Opfer. Zur Verwendung analytischer Kategorien zur Deutung des Todes Jesu”, J. Frey and J. Schröter, eds, *Deutungen des Todes Jesu im Neuen Testament. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 181 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 51-71, see 64.

7) *1 En.* 89:1ff and *T. Jos.* 19:8 are mentioned in support of this view, but both texts have their problems. In Enoch the terms ἀρνίον (“lamb”) and κριός (“ram”) are used, not ἀμνός; the passage compares the afflicted people of Israel with a flock of sheep under attack by ravens until one sheep delivers them. It is debated whether this one sheep has to be interpreted as a reference to Judas Maccabaeus or to the Messiah himself, see C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 232. *T. Jos.* 19:8 speaks about an ἀμνός ἄμωμος that will bring the final victory in the “last days” (ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις). Apart from the difference in vocabulary (*T. Jos.* comes closer to 1Pe 1:19), the passage has too many problems, both textual and interpretational, to make a positive connection with Revelation stand. For a detailed discussion, see M. de Jonge, “Christian Influence in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs”, M. de Jonge, ed., *Studies on the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudipigrapha* 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 193-246, 227-228. In *Test. Benj.* 3:8 the phrase ἀμνός τοῦ θεοῦ is used (“In you shall be fulfilled the prophecy of heaven concerning the Lamb of God, and the Saviour of the world, that he shall be given up spotless for transgressors ...”), but this verse is Christian in origin: Joseph’s attitude towards his brothers is depicted as Jesus’ suffering for others, see M. de Jonge, “Test. Benjamin 3:8 and the Picture of Joseph as ‘a good and holy man,’” M. de Jonge, *Jewish Eschatology, Early Christian Christology and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. Collected Essays of Marinus de Jonge*, *Supplements to Novum Testamentum* 63 (Leiden; New York; Copenhagen; Cologne: Brill, 1991), 299.

John the Baptist, who on this supposition would be announcing a great leader. However, a clear connection between John and Revelation in their use of “lamb” is difficult to ascertain. In Revelation another term is used for “lamb”, τὸ ἀρνίον and not ὁ ἀμνός, and the qualifying genitive τοῦ θεοῦ (“of God”) is lacking: there is no ἀρνίον τοῦ θεοῦ in Revelation. And while in Revelation τὸ ἀρνίον (“the Lamb”) is the most important Christological title, in the Gospel of John ἀρνίον is used only once, as a synonym for πρόβατον. Moreover, the phrase ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ is used only twice and does not play a significant role in the rest of the Gospel, unlike τὸ ἀρνίον in Revelation.⁸⁾ In short, τὸ ἀρνίον in Revelation on the one hand and ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ in John on the other are too diverse to use one as an explanation for the other.⁹⁾ It looks as if the victorious Lamb in Revelation has an altogether different tradition history than the Lamb of God in John.

Another way to explain ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ is to assume that the imagery of Jesus as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world has its origins in the Old Testament sacrificial imagery. Jesus' death is then to be explained as a sacrifice that brings atonement. Some have traced the origin of the lamb of God back to Leviticus 16 and compared it with the goat that is sent into the desert on the Day of Atonement.¹⁰⁾ However, it is highly questionable whether the two traditions can be connected. For the atonement ritual, several animals are used: a bull that is being sacrificed to atone for the sins of the family of Aaron, a ram for a burnt-offering,¹¹⁾ and two goats¹²⁾ (for which the LXX uses the term χίμαρος): one is sacrificed as a purification offering,¹³⁾ the other one sent into

8) The most important titles in the Gospel are “Messiah”, “Son of man” and “Son of God”.

9) Pace Th. Knöppfler, “Das Blut des Lammes. Zur soteriologischen Relevanz des Todes Jesu nach der Johannesapokalypse”, J. Frey and J. Schröter, eds., *Deutungen des Todes Jesu im Neuen Testament*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 181 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 477-511, esp. 478 n. 3 and 482.

10) See e.g. U. Busse, “Theologie oder Christologie im Johannesprolog?”, J. Verheyden, et al., eds., *Studies in the Gospel of John and its Christology. Festschrift Gilbert Van Belle*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 265 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 31.

11) In Hebrew an קָדָשׁ, a “whole-offering”; the animal is an אֵז (‘‘ram’’), which in the LXX is rendered as κριός.

12) The Hebrew has שְׁעֵי רְמֵשׁ “(two) bucks of goats”, meaning he-goats or bucks; the LXX has rendered this literally with χίμαροι ἐξ ἀίγων (“goats from bucks”)

13) The Hebrew has חַטָּאת which is sometimes translated as “sin offering”, sometimes as

the desert with Israel's sins. The four animals used for the Day of Atonement ritual (the bull, the ram and the two goats) are not very plausible candidates to explain the single "lamb of God" in John. Moreover, in Leviticus 16:10 the action of "carrying the sins of the people away" is described with a future tense of the verb λαμβάνω,¹⁴⁾ while John 1:29 uses the verb αἴρω and does not have the words "upon him" (ἐφ' ἑαυτῷ).

Others have pointed at Genesis 22, the "binding of Isaac".¹⁵⁾ But the LXX does not use ἀμνός ("lamb") for the animal, but πρόβατον ("sheep") in 22:8 and κριός in 22:13.¹⁶⁾ Moreover, Genesis 22 does not mention any removal of sin or sins by the ram, nor do I know of any pre-Johannine text or tradition which describes the ram as removing sin.¹⁷⁾

As to the תמיד offering (the sacrifice brought daily by the priests) described in Exodus 29:38-39 and Numbers 28:3, this does not help either to explain John's expression "lamb of God". It is true that the sacrificial animal in this case is called an ἀμνός in the LXX,¹⁸⁾ but the sacrifice does not have the intention or the effect of removing sin. Finally, the sin or purification offering (חטאת) described in Leviticus 4:32 does not shed much light on John's phrase either. Although the Hebrew text uses the same term as with the tamid offering, the LXX has rendered חטאת in this case as πρόβατον, not as ἀμνός.

The words "Lamb of God (ἀμνός τοῦ θεοῦ) in John have also been explained as referring to the Passover lamb. This suggestion has something to recommend it. In fact, in his passion narrative John moves the moment of the slaughtering of the Passover lambs from the Thursday on which Mark, Matthew and Luke have it, to the Friday, the moment of Jesus' death. Jesus dies at the moment the lambs

"purification offering".

14) Leviticus 16:22 LXX: λήμψεται ὁ χίμαρος ἐφ' ἑαυτῷ τὰς ἀδικίας αὐτῶν ("The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him").

15) E.g. H. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 6 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 118-123.

16) πρόβατον ("sheep") in Genesis 22:8 is a rendering of Hebrew פֶּזֶז which usually refers to a small livestock beast, a sheep or a goat (*HALOT*), and κριός ("ram") in Genesis 22:13 of Hebrew לֶמֶד, see note 8.

17) Pace H. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 121-123.

18) Exodus 29:38-39 and Numbers 28:3-4 use a phrase that returns in 1 Peter 1:19: ἀμνός ἀμώμος. The Hebrew in both Exodus and Numbers has חטאת.

are killed for the Passover meal and John thus creates a chronological agreement between the killing of the lambs and the death of Jesus (see e.g. Joh 19:14, 19:36).¹⁹⁾ However, nowhere in the LXX the Passover lamb is called an ἄμνός,²⁰⁾ nor so in the synoptic Gospels; in most instances the word πάσχα is used.²¹⁾ Moreover, many supporters of the connection between the Passover lamb and the Johannine “lamb of God” interpret the Passover lamb as an atoning sacrifice. But the Passover lamb is not offered to God as an atonement for sins, but is roasted and served as dish of a family meal.²²⁾

The only time an explicit identification between Jesus and the Passover lamb is made in the New Testament is 1Corinthians 5:7 “For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed.” (καὶ γὰρ τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν ἐτύθη Χριστός). Here too the word πάσχα is used, not ἄμνος. In this passage Paul deals with unruly behaviour of one individual in the Corinthian community and compares this individual’s bad behaviour with the effect leaven has on dough: a little leaven affects the whole batch of dough. To remain pure and unblemished, to become “unleavened bread”, they should get rid of the leaven. Paul then continues the imagery of Passover and compares Christ with the Passover lamb, the πάσχα. The context does not mention the death of Jesus, let alone the removal of sin. The only thing Paul is doing here is to present Christ as the one with whose

19) In the synoptic Gospels the Last Supper on the Thursday evening is a Passover meal. The Friday on which Jesus dies is the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Lev 23:4-5). In his Gospel, John has moved the Passover meal to the Friday creating an overlap between the preparations for Passover and those for the Sabbath. John 19:36 may be read as another reference to the Passover lamb (cf. Exo 12:46, Num 9:12), but can be just as well an allusion to Psalms 34 (33):21.

20) Exodus 12:5 uses the term πῦ, one of a flock or small livestock (“kleinvee” in Dutch), and mentions that this can be either a goat or a sheep, as long as it is one year old. For πῦ the LXX uses the word πρόβατον (“sheep”) and then mentions that it can be taken ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρνῶν καὶ τῶν ἐρίφων (“from the sheep and the goats”). In this context πρόβατον has the more general meaning of “an animal from the flocks”, a piece of small livestock, rather than “a sheep” (as the species *Ovis aries*). At the end of the passage, in Exodus 12:21, the animal is called a πῦ (in Greek πάσχα). For a detailed discussion of the comparison between “lamb of God” with the Passover lamb, see C. Schlund, *Kein Knochen soll gebrochen werden*, 173ff.

21) See Mark 14:12 (par. Mat 26:17 and Luk 22:7).

22) The imperative θύσατε τὸ πάσχα (“kill the Passover lamb”) as in Exodus 12:21 does not mean “offer” in the strict sense of sacrificing the animal on the altar of the Temple, but more generally “slaughter” (that is: kill it in order it can be prepared for the Passover meal).

death the festive time of the new community has begun. Paul mentions Christ as *πάσχα* here just as the one who inaugurates the new era.

None of the sources (Jewish and early Christian) in which the Passover lamb is mentioned, uses the word *ἀμνός*. Where the Passover lamb is connected with “the Lord”, the LXX of the Old Testament uses *πάσχα κυρίῳ* (e.g. Exo 12:11: “It is the Lord’s Passover.”).²³⁾ Even though at first glance the Passover lamb seems an attractive explanation of John’s “Lamb of God” (*ἀμνός τοῦ θεοῦ*), there are too many objections to make it a likely one.

Finally, the expression “lamb of God” has been explained with the help of Isaiah 53, especially vs 7 where the LXX uses the term *ἀμνός*.²⁴⁾ As mentioned above, the interpretation of the Hebrew text of Isaiah 53 is in itself an exegetical crux. I will leave this matter aside. For now I would like to concentrate on the possibility of its being the background of John 1:29 and 1:36. Isaiah 53:7 is probably the best candidate as background for the occurrence of “lamb” in these verses. However, it should be stressed that, whereas Isaiah 53:7 speaks explicitly about the lamb’s death, it remains to be seen whether John 1:29 does the same. If John has used *ἀμνός* with Isaiah 53:7 in mind, there is no need to assume that John refers to anything more than the notions of the lamb’s obedience and its acceptance of suffering.²⁵⁾

Looking at the Greek text of Isaiah 53, it is not surprising that the Christian community has made extensive use of the chapter and has applied it to the atoning suffering and death of Jesus. However, that does not mean that the *idea* of atonement is taken from this chapter. In former days, the origins of the New Testament idea of Jesus’ atoning death were traced back to Isaiah 53.²⁶⁾ More

23) C. Schlund, *Kein Knochen soll gebrochen werden*, 174 n. 280.

24) The LXX of Isaiah 53:7 uses the term *ἀμνός*: ὡς πρόβατον ἐπὶ σφαγὴν ἤχθη καὶ ὡς ἀμνός ἐναντίον τοῦ κείροντος αὐτὸν ἄφωνος οὕτως οὐκ ἀνοίγει τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ (“like a *sheep* that is led to the slaughter and like a *lamb* that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.”)

25) See also A. Schenker, *Knecht und Lamm Gottes (Jesaja 53). Übernahme von Schuld im Horizont der Gottesknechtlieder*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 190 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2001), 105; C. Schlund, *Kein Knochen soll gebrochen werden*, 175. J. Zumstein, *L’Évangile selon Saint Jean*, 79-80, assumes that both the Passover tradition of Exodus and Isaiah 53 are the backgrounds for John’s use of “lamb of God.”

26) Exegetes have pointed especially at Isaiah 53:4 οὗτος τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν φέρει καὶ περὶ

recently however the atoning effect of Jesus' death is explained more convincingly from another tradition, namely the Hellenistic-Jewish notion of the death of the martyr. In addition, it has been shown that both Isaiah 53 and the Old Testament sacrificial terminology have been used only in later, secondary support for an already existing idea. The earliest expressions of the idea of Jesus' death as atoning for our sins can be found in the letters of Paul. Paul describes the atoning effect of Jesus' death with so-called "dying" and "surrender formulas," such as "he died for us/our sins" or "he gave himself over for us/our sins." Salvation was brought to us because Jesus "died for us" or "gave himself up for us" or "for our sins" – though for Paul this is not an isolated concept but is part of the larger idea of the believer's corporate unity with the dying and rising Christ. The fact that these dying and surrender formulas occur independently also in e.g. the Mark, John, and Hebrews shows, by multiple attestation, that they are of very early, pre-Pauline origin. This is confirmed by the fact that Paul himself quotes a dying formula indicating that he himself received it from tradition (1Co 15:3). Moreover, his use of the surrender formula in Galatians 2:20 indicates that he is dependent here on early-Christian, pre-Pauline tradition. The dying and surrender formulas can be traced back to the language of Greek speaking Jews of the Hellenistic period. We can find them in e.g. Josephus and the Greek books of the deuterocanon (1 and 2 Mac), where the idea of an individual dying for the benefit of a group occurs several times. The dying and surrender formulas form the standard terminology to describe the death of the Jewish martyr who by giving his life for the Law brings about peace between God and the community. In their turn the phrases were taken from pagan Greek, where they were used to describe the death of a hero who dies for the freedom of his city or fatherland or who gives his life for the benefit of other

ἡμῶν ὀδυνᾶται ("He carries our sins and suffers for us"), 53:5 αὐτὸς δὲ ἐτραυματίσθη διὰ τὰς ἀνομίας ἡμῶν καὶ μεμαλάκισται διὰ τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν ("He was wounded because of our iniquities and is weak because of our sins"), 53:6 κύριος παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ἡμῶν ("The Lord gave him up for our sins"), 53:12 παρεδόθη εἰς θάνατον ἢ ψυχῇ αὐτοῦ ("His life was handed over to death") and καὶ διὰ τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν παρεδόθη ("Because of our sins he was handed over"). Isaiah 53:6 and 12 should probably be seen as translations influenced by an already existing tradition of the death of a martyr; in both cases the Hebrew text has something different.

people.²⁷⁾ For now, my main point here is that the origins of the belief in the atoning effect of Jesus' death are not to be found either in Isaiah 53 or in any sacrificial notions. The interpretation of Jesus' death in terms of Isaiah 53 or sacrificial language is demonstrably a secondary development.²⁸⁾

Thus far, I have tried to show that "lamb of God" does not refer to any sacrifice but that the phrase, probably modelled on the traditional title "Son of God", is used exclusively as an indication of Jesus' obedience to God.

That brings us to the another, related issue, namely the question what exactly the phrase ὁ ἄρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου means. In the discussion of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16:10 and 16:22 above, we have seen that John's choice of words is radically different from the LXX's "he shall take on himself the sins of the people" (λήμψεται ὁ χίμαρος ἐφ' ἑαυτῷ τὰς ἀδικίας αὐτῶν). Instead

27) It is important to understand that the death of the martyr does not describe *substitution* but *representation*. Substitution assumes that the death of the martyr was intended by God beforehand and that further satisfaction by the believers is no longer needed. Representation on the contrary seems far more likely in the light of other strands of Paul's theology, for instance the idea of corporate unity. The atoning effect is brought about because the martyr is part of a larger group: he dies as the group's representative but that leaves the rest of the group still liable to punishment.

28) Only 1 Peter 2:21-22 connects the dying formula with Isaiah 53. Another example of this secondary influence of Isaiah is Matthew 8:17, where a quotation of Isaiah 53:4 is adduced whereas Matthew's source, Mark 1:34, does not have this quotation. Even Mark 10:45 (λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν = a ransom for many) cannot be traced back to Isaiah 53, as is done by some (e.g. J. Jeremias, "Das Lösegeld für Viele (Mk 10:45)", *Judaica* 3 (1947), 249-264, also in J. Jeremias, *Abba. Studien zur Neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), 216-229; E. Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht. Untersuchungen zur urchristlichen Verkündigung vom Sühntod Jesu Christi*, *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments* 46 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963). It is of course attractive to assume influence of Isaiah 53 in this verse, because Mark refers repeatedly to Isaiah in his passion narrative. But the reasons for doing so here in 10:45, are not convincing. Lohse traces the word λύτρον back to the Hebrew term חַטָּאת (guilt offering, sin offering) in 53:10. However, a λύτρον (ransom) is something quite different from a guilt/sin offering. And though both Jeremias and Lohse interpret the surrender formula in Mark 10:45 as old tradition, it is more likely that Mark's formulation of the surrender formula (with its use of λύτρον and the preposition ἀντί) shows a "tradition-historically" later stage of an already existing formula: Mark here combines the early-Christian formula (ἔδωκεν ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ) with another existing phrase, current in the Greek of his days: λύτρον ἀντί (e.g. πάντων, Josephus, *Ant.* 14.107). And the early Christian tradition has indeed linked Isaiah 53:7 to the Passover lamb, but again, this has been done only secondarily, after the identification of Jesus as the Passover lamb.

of λαμβάνειν (“take up, take away”) John uses the verb αἶρειν; αἶρειν occurs in John about 25 times, most often with the meaning “to take away, to remove”.²⁹⁾ Neither does John have ἐφ’ ἑαυτῷ “upon him”. Therefore, reading the words ὁ αἶρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου (“who takes away the sin of the world”) along the lines of Leviticus 16 and interpret them as “to take *on himself* the sin of the world” is reading too much into αἶρων.

In the same way, the LXX wording of Isaiah 53:4 “he carries our sins” (οὗτος τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν φέρει) is different from John’s phrase. The wider context of Isaiah shows that the emphasis is on the suffering and death of the servant. Also, the verb is different: Isaiah has φέρειν, and not αἶρειν, and John uses a singular ἁμαρτία, and not a plural.³⁰⁾ The use of singular ἁμαρτία is not unimportant for a good understanding of John’s Gospel as a whole. In John “sin” does not, unlike in Isaiah 53, refer to the multitude of sins committed in the past, but to the one sin of not-believing in Jesus.³¹⁾ In this respect the words “who takes away the sin of the world” (ὁ αἶρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου) also differ from the early Christian surrender or dying formula (“he died for our sins”), in which “sins” refer to the multitude of past sins as well. “Taking away” (present tense) the sin from the world is not the same as “having died” (past tense) for past sins. John’s soteriology does not have the Pauline emphasis on Jesus’ death as saving event,³²⁾ but focuses instead on the “yes” or “no” to Jesus

29) See also J. Zumstein, *L’Évangile selon Saint Jean*, 77 n. 29. Exceptions are 5:8-12 (“to pick up”), 10:24 (an idiomatic expression for “keep in suspense”) and 11:41 (“to lift up the eyes”).

C. Schlund, *Kein Knochen soll gebrochen werden*, 175-176 interprets the verb as meaning “to take on himself” although she admits that αἶρειν usually means “to take away”.

30) See e.g. B. A. Newman and E. A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, 37: “In the present passage, as in most places in the Gospel, John refers to sin in the singular, and so the focus is on the sinful condition of the world, rather than on particular sinful deeds.” There are some instances of plural ἁμαρτίαι in John: it occurs in 8:24 (2x) with the same meaning as the singular, and in 9:34 (for the multiple sins of the Jews) and 20:24 (about forgiving each other’s sins).

31) This becomes very clear in 16:9 where Jesus states that after him the παράκλητος will come to show what sin is, namely “not believing in me” (ὅτι οὐ πιστεύουσιν εἰς ἐμέ). The ὅτι in vv 9-11 introduces direct object clauses (ὅτι *recitativum*) and does not have causal meaning: it explains the content of the three topics mentioned in 16:8.

32) Cf. J. Schröter, “Sterben für die Freunde”, e.g. 267, who also argues that the Johannine soteriology should not be explained in terms of Pauline theology, see his “Sterben für die Freunde.” Schröter traces the use of the ὑπέρ formulas in John back to the Greek ethics of

in the believer's encounter with him and on the necessity of acknowledging him as the unique representative of the Father. Considering the wider context of the first chapter and the Gospel as a whole, the phrase ὁ αἵρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου must mean that Jesus came into the world to take away (present tense) the world's sin. It refers to his appearance, his presence in this world and his message to this world, but not to his death.

John of course mentions the cross, but he does not understand it as the place of Jesus' suffering and death, nor as the place where salvation was brought about. Rather, John emphasizes the cross as the place of Jesus' glorification.³³⁾ Undoubtedly there are also traces of the older, traditional soteriology visible in John (in 11:50-51 and 18:14 he does make use of a traditional "dying formula") and the plot of the passion narrative focuses on the crucifixion,³⁴⁾ but the overall emphasis in John's *soteriology* is not on Jesus' death.

Even the words τιθέναι τὴν ψυχὴν ὑπὲρ (often rendered as "to lay down your life for") do not necessarily support the traditional view – contrary to what W. Bauer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* suggests.³⁵⁾ The expression occurs in e.g. John 10, 13:37-38, especially 15:13 "[Greater love has no man than this,] that a man lays down his life for his friends" (ἵνα τις τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ θῆ ὑπὲρ τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ).³⁶⁾ It is tempting to interpret the

friendship, see also below n. 39.

33) M. de Jonge, *Christology in Context. The Earliest Christian Response to Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 145 and 148, compare e.g. John 3:14, 8:28, 12:33, and 12:34.

34) M. de Jonge, *Christology in Context*, 148.

35) *BDAG*, 1003, s.v. τίθημι 1bβ, interprets the verb as more or less synonymous with δίδωμι. However, the three non-New Testament references *BDAG* gives to support this are completely misleading: *Apoc. Sedr.* 1:5, ed. O. Wahl (Leiden: Brill 1977), 38 is an obvious allusion to, perhaps even quotation of John 15:13, *Sib. Or.* 5,157(210) has "Because of honor, which was first assigned to lord Poseidon" (εἵνεκα τιμῆς αὐτοῖ πρώτον ἔθηκάν τ' εἰναλίω Ποσειδῶνι) and finally Appian, *Bell. Civ.* 4,68 does not have τίθημι τὴν ψυχὴν but τίθειαι δεξιᾶς which means "give the right hand" as to confirm a promise ("You, Romans, swore by the gods when you recently concluded the treaty with us through Gaius Caesar, and to the oaths you added libations and gave the right hand, assurances valid even among enemies; shall they not be valid among friends and guardians?"). The LXX version of Judges 12:3 καὶ ἐθέμην τὴν ψυχὴν μου ἐν τῇ χειρὶ μου comes close, but is still different because it uses a middle voice (τίθειμαι) and not the active, and has the addition ἐν τῇ χειρὶ μου; cf. also 1 Samuel 19:5, 28:21.

36) RSV, NRS, ESV, NLT, NIV and NET all have "to lay down", GNB has "to give your life for" and CEV has explicitly translated with "to die for".

words as though they read δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν (“to give one’s life”). But the Johannine choice of τιθέναι is in fact remarkably different from the traditional Jewish-Hellenistic or early Christian surrender formulas.³⁷⁾ Apart from 1 John, which is most likely related to the Gospel, it occurs nowhere else in the New Testament.³⁸⁾ Rather than “to give one’s life for” (with the certainty of death), the phrase τιθέναι τὴν ψυχὴν ὑπὲρ means “to risk one’s life for,” which does not necessarily end in death.³⁹⁾ The phrase is characteristic of the so-called *Freundschaftsethik* in Graeco-Roman popular philosophy, as John 15:13 clearly shows. Even the often quoted verse John 3:16 (“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son ...”), which uses the aorist of the verb διδόναι⁴⁰⁾ does not

37) Some mss (P45, Codex Sinaiticus original reading, codex D) have changed it, under the influence of the existing surrender formula, to δίδωσιν.

38) Romans 16:4 has οἵτινες ὑπὲρ τῆς ψυχῆς μου τὸν ἑαυτῶν τράχηλον ὑπέθηκαν (RSV: “3Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 4who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches”) but here ὑποτίθημι τὸν τράχηλον clearly has the meaning of “risking one’s life for” (“sticking one’s neck out”); see also Acts 15:26 ἀνθρώποις παραδεδοκόσι τὰς ψυχὰς αὐτῶν, where Paul and Barnabas are said to “have risked their lives” for the sake of the Gospel.

39) Epictetus, *Diatr.* II vii,3 (ed. W. A. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library 131, 254-255) makes a clear distinction between risking one’s life for someone on the one hand, and giving one’s life for (with the certainty of death) on the other: “If, then, it becomes necessary for me to risk my life for my friend, and if it becomes my duty even to die for him, ... (ἂν οὖν δέη κινδυνεύσαι ὑπὲρ τοῦ φίλου, ἂν δὲ καὶ ἀποθανεῖν ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ καθήκη)”. In the 17th century, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) observed in his annotation on this verse “ψυχὴν τιθέναι [animam ponere] significat hoc loco *mortem non defugere* sive reipsa mors sequatur, sive non” (“ψυχὴν τιθέναι [to give one’s life] mean here *not avoiding death* whether this will ultimately result in death, or not”). Chr. Maurer in *Theologisches Wörterbuch* VIII, 155: “Alle griechisch-hellenistischen Parallelen, die das Verbum τίθημι verwenden, drücken nicht die tatsächlich vollzogene Hingabe des Lebens aus, sondern meinen nur das in Kauf zu nemende Risiko: παρατίθεμαι τὴν ψυχὴν *sein Leben aufs Spiel setzen*.” However, Maurer is convinced that John uses this phrase with the meaning of the traditional surrender formula. Similarly H. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 490; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John. An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text. Second Edition* (London: SPCK, 1978), 374-375. Also R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 29 (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1966), 386-387, 394-95, especially 387, where Brown points in particular to 10:17-18 where reference is made to Jesus’ death. J. Schröter, “Sterben für die Freunde”, 270 admits that τιθέναι τὴν ψυχὴν ὑπὲρ does not refer to atonement (the purging of sin) but assumes that it does express the idea of dying for the benefit of others. Schröter explains John’s use of these words in terms of the ancient Greek ideal of “dying for one’s friends.”

40) “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν

mean that God has sacrificed his Son but that he has sent him into this world. The following verses make explicit what John intends with “to give”: “For God sent the Son into the world” (ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον) etc. No mention is made of Jesus’ death. Once again: in John the traditional emphasis on Jesus’ *death* as saving event (such as we know it from Paul) is pushed into the background in favour of a new soteriology which implies that all those are saved who accept Jesus as the one sent by God.

For Bible translation the above means that, if possible, a singular for “sin” is to be preferred over a plural because it should not be taken as referring to past sins but to the one and only sin of not recognizing Jesus as God’s unique representative. The TLA’s rendering of John 1:29, e.g., is not very fortunate, because it reads the verse through a Pauline lens: “Aquí viene el Cordero de Dios que quita el pecado de la gente del mundo! Por medio de él, Dios les perdonará a ustedes todos sus *pecados*.” A singular does more justice to the particular meaning the term “sin” has in the Gospel of John.

The same goes for τιθέναι τὴν ψυχὴν ὑπέρ. It should be rendered differently from the Pauline phrases such as (παρὰ)διδόναι ἑαυτὸν ὑπέρ. In my opinion, many translations go wrong here, including the New Dutch, where I myself was responsible for the translation of John (we wrongly translated “to give his life for”). Preferably, the expression should be rendered as “to risk one’s life for”. Most English versions have (e.g. in John 10:11) “to lay down his life”, “to sacrifice his life”; GNB has a better rendering with “to be willing to die”, similarly GCL with “Ein guter Hirt ist bereit, für seine Schafe zu sterben”, FCL “Le bon berger est prêt à donner sa vie pour ses brebis” or TLA “El buen pastor está dispuesto a morir por sus ovejas.” Being willing to die, does not necessarily mean that death will be the outcome. The differences seem tiny and negligible, but sometimes details like these make an important difference in how a text can be understood. This applies certainly to John, in whose distinctive soteriology Jesus’ death is just no constituent.

κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ...).

3. Conclusions

First, the background of John 1:29 and 36 is probably best explained with the help of Isaiah 53:7, but the emphasis is on obedience and submission, not on suffering and death. Secondly, the image of “lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” does not have a sacrificial meaning. It does not refer to Jesus’ death. Thirdly, the origins of the early-Christian idea of the atoning effect of Jesus’ suffering and dying do not lie in the Hebrew Old Testament but in the Hellenistic-Jewish concept of the martyr (which in its turn derives from pagan Greek tradition). Fourthly, Johannine soteriology is different from Pauline soteriology: the emphasis in John is not on Jesus’ death as saving event, but on accepting Jesus as the only one through whom the Father can be known. And fifthly, for translation it should be seriously considered to render – if of course possible in the target language – the singular ἁμαρτία with a singular in the target language, and to render τίθεναι τὴν ψυχὴν ὑπὲρ with “to risk his life for”.

Fortunately, at the request of the local churches the Turkmen translation of John 1:29 and 36 was changed back from *janly* (“sacrificial animal”) to *guzy* (“lamb”), simply because they had a strong preference for the rendering of the 1992 translation. And indeed, the term “sacrificial animal” does not fit well with John’s message as a whole; “lamb” was after all the better choice.

<Keywords>

Atonement, Death of the Martyr, Isaiah 53, “Lamb of God”, Passover Lamb, Soteriology of John.

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<Abstract>

**John 1:29, 36: The Meaning of ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ
(amnos tou theou) and John's Soteriology**

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The title “Lamb of God” for Jesus in John 1:29 and 1:36 has traditionally been explained as a reference to Jesus’ sacrificial death, and the phrase “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” has mostly been interpreted in terms of Old Testament sacrifices or near-sacrifices as for example Genesis 22 (the binding of Isaac) or Leviticus 16 (the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement), the Passover lamb, or as a reminiscence to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. The aim of this article is to argue two things.

First, that the words “lamb of God” do not refer to a sacrificial animal. They originate from Isaiah 53, not, however, as a reference to an atoning sacrifice, but as an expression of Jesus’ complete obedience to the Father and his willingness to suffer (and ultimately die) as a consequence. Secondly, that in his Gospel, the Fourth Evangelist focuses on the salvific effect of the believer’s affirmative “yes” to Jesus as the one through whom the Father can be known, rather than on Jesus’ death as saving event.