**Jesus the Lamb of God**

Have you ever had a lamb cake as part of your Easter celebration? Have you seen art that shows a lamb holding a triumphant banner? The lamb as a symbol for Christ has its roots in the Old Testament. For centuries people worshipped God by sacrificing animals. They killed them and offered them to God. For the Jews a lamb was the main animal of sacrifice. In the Temple a lamb was offered every day. The sacrifice of a lamb also played an important part in the Exodus.

In the biblical story of the Exodus, God led the Israelites out of Egypt, where they were slaves, and into the promised land. On the night God's people were to depart, the firstborn in all the Egyptian families died. The firstborn of the Israelites were saved because God had instructed them to kill a lamb or goat and mark their doorposts with its blood. The angel of death then knew to pass over those houses. The Israelites ate the lamb in a meal before they left. The lamb was to have no blemish, and none of its bones were to be broken. To this day the Jews remember this night with the Feast of Passover. On this day they share a special meal called a Seder meal. The shank of a lamb is one item on the Seder plate.

Jesus is called the lamb of God because he is the perfect sacrifice offered to God. In 1 Peter 1:18-19 we are told, “You were ransomed . . . not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb.” A prophecy about the Messiah states, “Though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth; Like a lamb led to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7). After Jesus' crucifixion, soldiers did not break his legs to kill him because he was already dead. Like the Passover lamb, his bones were unbroken.

Paul states, “Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7). Jesus' death on the cross was a passover from death to life for himself and for all of us. By his blood we are saved from death. Jesus made it possible for us to break out of the slavery of sin and death. He gave us the hope of reaching our promised land, heaven. The Gospel of John clearly compares Jesus to the Passover lamb by saying that Jesus was crucified the same day that the Passover lambs were being killed in the Temple (John 19:31).

In the Gospel of John it was John the Baptist who gave Jesus the title Lamb of God (John 1:29). The Book of Revelation speaks of the Lamb at least 29 times. In a vision John sees a lamb. Four living creatures and 24 elders fall before the Lamb and sing praise because he purchased all people with his blood (Revelation 5:9).

† Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us! †

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# Why is Jesus called the “Lamb of God?”

To understand why the title “Lamb of God” is used for Christ, we must first appreciate the celebration of Passover.  Recall that at about 1250 BC, the Israelites were slaves of Egypt.  Almighty God heard the cry of His people:  Exodus 2:24 stated, “He heard their groaning and was mindful of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”  God sent Moses to deliver His people from their bondage.  After Moses had performed nine signs, Pharaoh’s heart was still unmoved.  Finally, God told Moses to have each family take a one-year-old, male, unblemished lamb; slaughter the lamb; and paint the door posts and lintel of every house where they would eat its roasted flesh with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.  That night, the Angel of Death would “passover” the homes protected by the blood, but take the lives of the first born children unprotected by the blood of the lamb.  Because of that blood sacrifice, Pharaoh let the people go:  they went from slavery to freedom, from a land of sin to the Promised land, and from death to new life.

The prophets used this image of the lamb to describe the Messiah.  Isaiah prophesied, “Though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth; like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearer, he was silent and opened not his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7).  However, the image is twofold:  the Messiah would be both the sacrificial lamb to atone for sin and the suffering servant.  Interestingly, when speaking to the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading this exact passage from Isaiah, St. Philip told how it referred to Christ and how He fulfilled it (Acts 8:26ff).

Nevertheless in the Gospels, Jesus is specifically identified as “the lamb of God” in the sense of both the sacrificial offering for sin and the suffering servant.  As John the Baptizer was proclaiming the coming of the Messiah at the River Jordan, he saw Jesus and proclaimed, “Look!  There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). After foretelling His passion, death, and resurrection for the third time, Jesus asserted, “Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest, and whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all.  Such is the case of the Son of Man who has come, not to be served by others, but to serve, to give His own life as a ransom for the many” (Matthew 20:26-28).

The imagery of “Lamb of God” becomes clear in the Passion Narratives of the Gospels.  In St. John’s gospel, Pilate condemned Jesus to death on the preparation day for Passover at noon (John 18:28, 19:14), the hour when the priests began to slaughter Passover lambs in the temple.  After the crucifixion, the Gospel recorded that they did not break any of Jesus’ bones in fulfillment of Scripture (John 19:36); this reference corresponds to Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12 where none of the Passover lamb’s bones were to be broken.  After our Lord’s death, the soldier thrust forward his lance, piercing the heart of our Lord; out flowed blood and water (John 19:34), always interpreted as signs of the life-giving sacraments of Holy Eucharist and Baptism.

Ponder the depth of what is happening in the passion narratives!  At the crucifixion, Jesus, the innocent and sinless victim, takes all of our sins unto Himself.  He though does not just bear our sins and suffer the punishment for us that is due for them; no, Jesus Himself expiates the sins.  He as Priest offers Himself on the altar of the cross.  Through His blood He washes away sin.  However, unlike the Passover lamb that was slaughtered, roasted, and eaten, our Lord rose from the dead, conquering both sin and death.  He has truly delivered us from the slavery of sin, shown us the path of salvation, and given us the promise of everlasting life.  He has made a new, perfect, and everlasting covenant with His own blood.  Therefore St. Peter exhorted, “Realize that you were delivered from the futile way of life your fathers handed on to you, not by any diminishable sum of silver or gold, but by Christ’s blood beyond all price, the blood of a spotless, unblemished lamb…” (I Peter 1:19).

We must not forget that this image evokes victory.  The Book of Revelation highlights this notion picturing the Lamb surrounded by angels, the “living creatures,” and elders, who cried out, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5:12).  Jesus is the King of kings, and Lord of lords (Revelation 17:14) who will be victorious against the powers of evil and will invite the righteous to the wedding feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9), the union of the Church, the new Jerusalem, in heaven with the Lord.

For this reason, the *Agnus Dei* is sung during the fraction, the breaking of the consecrated Host.  St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) preached of how the fraction symbolized the Passion of Christ:  “What Christ did not suffer on the Cross, He suffers in the sacrifice for thee.”  The hymn itself invokes Christ and recalls His sacrificial death with overtones of a hymn of victory of the triumphal Lamb.  This belief is then emphasized again when the priest holds up the fractured Host and says, “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, happy are those who are called to His supper.”  (Or, in a literal translation of the Latin, “Happy are those who are called to the supper of the Lamb,” better reflecting the imagery of Revelation.)

As we celebrate the mysteries of the Mass, we look to the Lamb who suffered, died, and rose for our salvation.  We must gather around the altar of the Lamb, offering to Him our own hearts and pledging to be His servants, so that we may welcome Him and become wedded to Him in the Holy Eucharist.

<https://catholicstraightanswers.com/why-is-jesus-called-the-lamb-of-god/>

## Question:

What is the meaning of reciting "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world?"

## Answer:

When the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt, they were liberated by God through Moses in the Exodus. Egypt did not want to free the slaves, so God sent a series of plagues to convince the Pharaoh to let the Jewish people go. The last of these plagues was the death of every firstborn male (Ex. 11:1–12:36). The Jewish people were spared from this plague by marking their doors with the blood of an unblemished lamb that God had commanded them to eat (Ex. 12:3-13). The blood of this lamb saved the Jewish people from the plague of death and resulted in their liberation from slavery.

Similarly, the death of Jesus saves us from eternal death and slavery to sin. This connection was foreseen by the prophet Isaiah who spoke of the Messiah as a sacrificial lamb (Is. 53:7) and John the Baptist who foretold the saving death of Jesus by calling him the Lamb of God (John 1:29). The author of the Gospel of John employs this imagery by stating that Jesus was sentenced to death at the same hour that the Passover lambs were being slaughtered (John 19:14) and by pointing out that none of his bones were broken (John 19:36), the same as the Passover lamb’s bones were not to be broken (Ex. 12:46).

Every time the Eucharist is celebrated, we believe that Calvary is mysteriously made present in our midst. We recognize the mystery of our faith by proclaiming the Lamb of God (Jesus) made present under the appearances of bread and wine.

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