

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.*

The tradition of singing the *Agnus Dei* with communion traces back to the 7th-century church. But the roots of Jesus as the Lamb of God goes back to the first-century banks of the Jordan River. In our gospel reading, on two successive days John the Baptizer sees Jesus and declares him “the lamb of God.” But what exactly does “lamb of God” refer to?

A wide-angle answer involves the regular use of lambs in sacrifices at the Jerusalem Temple. Lambs could be sacrificed for a variety of reasons, including sin offerings. However, these individual offerings do not rise to John the Baptizer’s added declaration about Jesus as the Lamb of God “who takes away the sin of the world.”

Such a sweeping action may be seen in the background of the Jewish Holy Day of *Yom Kippur*, or Day of Atonement. In Temple Judaism, the day climaxed with a particular sacrifice related to the people’s repentance of and forgiveness for the past year’s sins. However, that sacrifice did not involve a lamb but a pair of goats. One goat was sacrificed at the Temple. The second goat was driven into the wilderness as a symbolic act of carrying away the sins of the people. And the name that became applied to this second animal? Scapegoat.

The Church came to interpret the Baptizer’s “lamb of God” in connection with the Passover lamb. In Passover’s origin story, the families of Israel in Egypt were to smear their doorpost with the blood of a lamb. The Angel of Death would then “pass over” that house. The Passover Lamb of God thus serves as a symbol of God’s deliverance. One detail of Passover Lamb symbolism proves intriguing in John’s gospel. In the other three gospels, Jesus celebrates Passover with his disciples and is crucified the next day. But in John, Jesus is crucified a day earlier (John 19:14). His death on the cross coincides with the Temple rituals when Passover lambs were slaughtered. They were then cooked and used as the main dish for Passover meals.

For Reflection and Action:

*What kinds of things does a lamb signify to you, apart from religious meanings?
How might such understandings play into what our interpretation of Jesus as “lamb of God?”
How and where have you seen/heard “lamb” imagery in the church’s music, art, or rituals?*