Lamb of God (John 1:29): an explanation from ancient Christian art

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ABSTRACT
The meaning of 'Lamb of God' as one of the titles used for Jesus in the Gospel of John is important to understanding the Johannine Jesus. This study evaluates existing interpretations of amnos in the light of literary approaches. The depiction of amnos in ancient Christian art sheds light on the meaning of amnos and the way in which the ancient Christian church understood it.

1 INTRODUCTION
Amnos is one of many titles used for Jesus in the Gospel of John and is only used once in the New Testament as a title for Jesus (Jn 1:29 and 36). It is one of the less important titles in the Gospel of John, but the meaning of amnos is still important to understand the Johannine Jesus.

This study evaluates existing interpretations of amnos in the light of literary approaches. Furthermore, the depiction of amnos in ancient Christian art is used to shed light on the meaning of amnos and the way in which the ancient Christian church understood it.

2 VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS AND CRITICISM
Scholars differ on the interpretation and meaning of amnos. A short summary of the most important interpretations follows below.

2.1 Amnos as the apocalyptic lamb
Dodd favours this interpretation (Dodd 1953:230-238). The background is found in the Jewish apocalypses (TJos 19.8 and 3En 90.38) where the figure of a victorious lamb destroys the sin of the world. The same image of a victorious lamb is found in Revelation 7:17 and 7:14. The problem with this argument is that the lamb is called arnion in Revelation and amnos in the Gospel of John.

Another argument used to support this view is that the apocalyptic image of the lamb corresponds with the eschatological preaching of John the Baptist in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 3:7–12 and Lk 3:7–18). Therefore scholars think it possible that John the Baptist saw amnos, the One who will condemn, as an
apocalyptic lamb. John says of him: ‘He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ (Mt 3:11; Lk 3:16). According to the view of John the Baptist in the synoptic Gospels the One came to destroy the sinner and not to take away the sin of the world as mentioned in the Fourth Gospel.

2.2 Amnos as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53

The author of Acts 8:32 associates Isaiah 53:7–8 with the gospel of Jesus and at the end of the first century, Clemens of Rome (1.16) applied Isaiah 53 in full to Jesus. The figure of John the Baptist is also associated with Isaiah 40:3 as ‘the voice that calls in the desert’. Two aspects of the testimony of John in John 1:29–34 can also be associated with the servant: ‘My chosen one’ and ‘I will put my spirit on him’ (Is 42:1). This interpretation assumes that the Evangelist sees a connection between the servant in Isaiah 42 and in Isaiah 53 and that the variant reading in John 1:34 reads ‘chosen one’ instead of ‘son’. Less important, but still significant is that Isaiah mentioned that the servant will bear the sin of many or will take it on Him, but John states that the amnos will take away the sin of the world.

The main problem with this interpretation is that during pre-Christian times the suffering servant was not seen as one of the expected eschatological figures. The Messiah was also not associated with the suffering servant.

2.3 Other theories related to the ‘servant’ explanation

The Aramaic word talya is used for servant as well as lamb and the Evangelist may have translated it incorrectly as lamb. This means that John the Baptist says: ‘Look, the servant of God’. The servant of God is known as the Ebed Jahwe and talya (Hebrew: taleh) is never used for servant in this context. Likewise amnos is never used as a translation for taleh in the Septuagint (cf Brown 1966:61).

Negoitsa and Daniel give a remarkable explanation using a text immanent approach. According to them, the terminology in the Syrian translation of John 1:29 (and 34) is ambivalent. They see a similar equivocal instance in the Aramaic word ‘immera’ (lamb) which could possibly be pronounced as ‘imra’ (word) and in Hebrew ‘imerah (word). According to them both meanings are present in the Greek amnos (Negoitsa & Daniel 1971:36-37; cf Du Plessis 1978:125). With this, John emphasises the divinity of Jesus, because in the prologue the focus is on the ‘sarx egenetō’ (1:14). This is confirmed by the second announcement of John the Baptist after which two of his disciples follow Jesus. Although an interesting explanation, the conclusion cannot be drawn that the ambivalence in the terminology of one language can also be found in another language (Du Plessis 1978:125).
2.4 Amnos as referring to one of the offerings in the Old Testament

Less important interpretations presented for amnos are the daily ‘tamid’ offering that was presented in the Temple, the ‘kebasim’ (Nm 29:1–4, 8–10), the burnt offering (Lv 1:10), the peace offering (Lv 3:7–9), the sin offering (Lv 4:32), et cetera. With all these offerings a lamb or sheep or ram has an important cultic function, namely peculiar or vicarious. However, John 1:29–34 never refers to the slaughtering of the amnos or the vicarious death of the amnos.

2.5 Amnos as the paschal lamb

The Church Fathers of the West advocated this interpretation while the Church Fathers of the East favoured amnos as the servant. Amnos as a paschal lamb is favoured by most of the Johannine commentaries. Pryor, for example, is of the opinion that the Evangelist has the intention to portray Jesus as the true paschal lamb (1992:81). Davies (1992) says that the Gospel of John portrays Jesus as the second Moses and that the complete gospel is narrated in terms of the Passover because most of Jesus’ conversations are presented as having taken place during three or four Passovers. The following Passover motives are associated with the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospel of John:

* Jesus dies at the time when the paschal lamb is slaughtered in the temple.
* The soldiers use a stalk of the hyssop plant to offer him wine vinegar.
* No bone may be broken (Ex 12:46).
* The preparation of the Passover is mentioned twice during Jesus’ trial (Jn 18:28, 19:14).
* The appearance and conversations of Jesus occur mostly in Jerusalem and He attends not less than three and probably four Passovers, while the synoptic Gospels mention only one visit to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover (Davies 1992:234).

3 LITERARY AND RHETORICAL EXPLANATIONS OF AMNOS

3.1 Amnos is not the paschal lamb

I have always been uneasy with the explanation of amnos as the paschal lamb. One of the aims of this study is to find an alternative explanation for amnos from the Gospel of John. I am convinced that amnos in John 1:29 and 36 does not refer to the paschal lamb (cf. Ashton 1991:491). The following serves as substantiation:

1. The most important argument is that the context of John 1 and more specifically 1:29–34, does not refer to the Passover and does not suggest any Passover theme.
2. The titles and names used for Jesus are *termina gloriae* and the image of the slaughtered paschal lamb does not fit the image of Jesus as the only One coming from the Father.

3. In the Fourth Gospel most of Jesus’ conversations and actions take place during Passover, but the content of His discussions does not necessarily suggest the Passover events as such. John 6–7, for example, refers to the exodus, but not to the Passover.

4. Of utmost importance are the Passover themes associated with the crucifixion of Jesus. In my opinion they do not decisively indicate that *amnos* is to be interpreted as the paschal lamb. In John 18:28 the accusers of Jesus do not enter the official residence of the governor because they do not want to defile themselves.

5. The view of those who support this interpretation is that the fourth Evangelist depicts the death of Jesus as coincidental with the slaughtering of the paschal lamb in the temple, specifically with the intention of portraying Jesus as the paschal lamb. John, however, gives only one indication of time namely the sixth hour in the morning (Jn 19:14). This is the time when Pilate sentences Jesus and thereafter John does not mention the time of Jesus’ crucifixion and death. The synoptic Gospels and not John, mention the third hour as the time when Jesus died. The Gospel of John should not be harmonised with the synoptic Gospels.

6. The stalk of the hyssop plant is used to offer the sponge soaked in wine vinegar to Jesus (Jn 19:29). Hyssop is a scrub or a creeper used mainly for cultic purifying customs (*Lv* 14:49–52; *Nm* 19:2–6). Seen in the light of John 18:28 it may well point to the preparation or symbolic ‘purification’ of Jesus before his last words, ‘It is finished’, followed by his death. This is in coordination with John 12 where Jesus interprets his anointing by Mary as preparation for his funeral, as well as with the washing of the feet of the disciples in John 13. Indeed, in contrast with the exodus, it is the very only-begotten Son of God that dies and his death cannot be prevented, because for this reason He entered the world. Another possibility is that the original text in John 19:29 should read ‘hyssos’, a soldier’s spear. This viewpoint has merit since the piercing of Jesus’ side is supported by a quote from Scripture (*Zch* 12:10), but only the protohoairyish tradition bears evidence of such a possibility.

7. A last reason found to support the Passover motive of the Passion narrative is the bones of Jesus that were not broken. The quote in John 19:36 comes from Psalm 34:21 and refers to the righteous one and not to the paschal lamb as in Exodus 12:46.

On the basis of these arguments I conclude that the reasons for regarding *amnos* as the paschal lamb are not decisive.
3.2 The baptismal function of John

The pericope shows clearly that John was sent to baptise and the *amnos* was introduced to Israel through his baptism, although the actual baptism of Jesus is not mentioned. John acts as a witness. His function to reveal is so much at the centre that it surpasses the baptism function completely. It is not a baptism of repentance as in the case of the synoptic Gospels. John’s task is determined by his ‘missionary function’, namely to introduce Jesus as the *amnos* who will take away the sin, to Israel. In the Fourth Gospel, John functions as a witness and revealer or announcer (Nortje 1988:125).

3.3 The title *amnos tou theou*

Two aspects should be taken into consideration when explaining the title: Should it be explained on the basis of the context or is it justifiable to bring in extratextual associations to the word and the context? To answer this question we need to take into account the general meaning of words. Louw and Nida (1988:xvii) claim that a word does not have a ‘Grundbedeutung’. It does, however, as a lexical unit, have ‘unmarked-meaning’. This means that a word is ‘empty’ as a sign and that a word only receives or is given meaning within a context. Next to the ‘unmarked-meaning’ as a semantic field with a specific focus on one or more connotations within the field of a specific context, a word also has ‘associative functions’ (Louw & Nida 1988:xv). The context in the spoken language is determined by the interaction between the speaker and the listener (cf Vorster 1991:42). Problems arise, however, with regard to ancient written texts. Unless the context or extratextual evidence ‘strengthens’ an associative function of the word it is impossible to determine the associative meaning of a specific word.

*Amnos* is such a word. It is only used by the fourth Evangelist and only in John 1:29 and 36. If dominant associations are related to the word, as mentioned in the above argument, it can be asked why John and other ancient authors, intra- and extra-biblical, do not use the word or unit with that association. If the authors of the ancient Church linked the association of offering and reconciliation to *amnos* or *agnos* then it would be justified to speculate that John probably also did.

Louw and Nida (1988:41) describe the unmarked meaning of *amnos* as ‘the young of sheep’. In the context of Luke 10:3 the phrase ‘lambs among wolves’ points to the defenselessness of the lamb, without any sacrificial connotations. In Acts 8:32 the word appears in the quote from Isaiah 53:7-8 where the context itself implies the offering idea as association: ‘He was led like a lamb to be slaughtered’. In Revelation 17:4 where the word *arnion* is used, it is used as a title for Jesus with evident ‘supplementary components of
meaning...the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross’ (Louw & Nida 1988:42).

Looking at John 1:29 we do not find any dominant association in the immediate context. The fact that the function of the amnos is indicated as ‘to take away the sin of the world’ is in itself not sufficient to assume the above motives. The various components of the announcement must not be seen in static relation to each other (Vorster 1991:42). For this reason the ‘taking away of the sin’ does not necessarily imply the offering or vicarious meaning of the amnos. Only the fact of the ‘taking away of the sin’ is mentioned and not the way in which the amnos does it. Wahlde states frankly: ‘John’s references to Jesus as the “Lamb of God” is one of the few references in the gospel to the death of Jesus as a sacrificial, atoning death...’ (1989:70). Such an idea is simply not assumed in the text. An existing and familiar image is used, but a new meaning is given to it by the context (cf Swanepoel 1986–1987:130-131).

It can be expected that the fourth Evangelist will put aside the ideas of humiliation associated with an offering act or a Passover act. Another reason to object to this interpretation is that the function of the amnos is ‘to take away the sin of the world (cosmos)’. Not only Israel is included, but the cosmos as a whole.

What then is the meaning of the ‘amnos tou theou’? The character of Jesus is the issue of prime importance and not the title amnos. In John 1:30 the first qualification ‘houtos estin’ refers to the broader context of John 1:14-18. In this pericope the focus is on the incarnation of the logos (v 14). An important indication for understanding this section is the monogenes. The monogenes refers to the special and unique relationship between Father and Son. The Old Testament background of the first or only child gives us an indication of the importance thereof. He is the heir, continues the clan and is devoted to God, because as firstborn he is sacred before God {cf Lk 2:22-23; Mi 6:7; Am 8:10; Jer 6:26}. From John 1:14 it is clear that Jesus is the bearer of God’s exceptional love, care and predestination. The fourth Evangelist uses the word five times and no offering motive is present. The relation between doksa and monogenes does not imply suffering and humiliation, but glory. The glory of the monogenes is the foundation of all the christological titles for Jesus in John 1, and therefore all the titles in John 1 are termina gloriae (Du Plessis 1978:129). This also holds good for amnos, because John the Baptist qualifies amnos in Jn 1:30 with the same pre-existent evidence that he applies to the monogenes in Jn 1:15: ‘This is the one I meant when I said...

Why does the author specifically use amnos? The word itself does not contain the qualities of tenderness, love and glory. It stands to reason that the word is not empty, but the meaning thereof as indicated above is given to the word by the context.
The concept *amnos* thus suggests that Jesus has a special hypostatic relation with the Father as his *monogenes*. He displays the exceptional unity with and love of the Father in his *doksa*. In John 1:29-34 it is explicitly indicated by the chiastic enclosure of 'houtos estin'. The *amnos* of God (1:29) is indicated as the 'son/chosen one of God' (1:34) (Du Plessis 1978:130). Petersen is also of the opinion that *amnos* is a substitute and synonym for son (1:34) and *monogenes* (1:14) (1993:26).

What is the meaning of 'taking away the sin of the world'? Some commentators are of the opinion that it is a later addition, because the phrase is not repeated in verse 36 (Ashton 1991:258). There is, however, no proof from the textual tradition that it is not part of the original text.

Du Plessis (1978:131) is of the opinion that in this pericope there is no reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus as such. He shows that the 'taking away of the sin' in verse 29 corresponds with 'the baptism with the Holy Spirit' in verse 33. In the baptism with the Holy Spirit there is no suggestion of sacrifice, but rather the idea of powerful performance. Therefore the meaning of the word 'to take away' is something like the moving of an object from one place to another. John does not state in this pericope in what manner the *amnos* does this, but from the context of the gospel Du Plessis concludes that the 'baptism with the Holy Spirit' means that new life is given by the forgiveness of sin (1978:133). Lastly Du Plessis (1978:136) finds the most important and final relation between the baptism with the Holy Spirit and the 'taking away of sin' in John 20:21-23: '..."As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that He breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven, if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven".'

Du Plessis is correct in his explanation that no offering motive or vicarious death is discussed in this case. But in the context of the gospel it is clear that the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus are involved. The question is how?

It is not the purpose of this study to take up this question. Du Plessis's argument has merits, but certain aspects need to be researched in more detail.

4 AMNOS AS DEPICTED IN ANCIENT CHRISTIAN ART

This study intends to compare the literary insights regarding the meaning of *amnos* with the depiction of John the Baptist and the lamb in ancient Christian art.

During the time of Theodosius 1 (AD 379-395) typical physical characteristics of the apostles were established: Paul was seen to have a pointed beard and receding hairline, Peter had a curly head and curly beard and John the Baptist had a camel robe and a pointing finger. This is the depiction of John...
the Baptist's announcement in John 1:29 and 36 where he draws the attention to Jesus and introduces him. In later art (thirteenth to sixteenth century) John holds a long thin cross, which suggests martyrdom or symbolises a preacher or missionary (Speake 1994:340).

The oldest depiction I could find of John is on the ivory throne of archbishop Maximian at the San Vitale in Ravenna. It dates back to the fifth/sixth century. In this depiction John appears in the middle together with the four Evangelists. Important to notice is the lamb he holds in his arms and the finger pointing to the lamb.

The second oldest depiction dates back to approximately 1192: a marble statue of John with the lamb in his arms found outside the Chartres Cathedral in Paris. The same depiction of John with the lamb in his arms is found on a wall plate from Sepchstein of Xeropotamu dating from the beginning of the thirteenth century.

Most of the depictions of John that I found, are dated between the thirteenth and middle fifteenth century. During this time he is depicted as an adult together with apostles or saints, pointing to the Mother and Child. Thus, we may conclude according to early depictions, that the Christ child or baby is indicated as the lamb of God. Mostly, but not always, John stands next to the Mother and Child. Once again the indicating or revealing function of John is stressed. The bond between Mother and Child becomes a reflection of the relationship between God and Son, the lamb.

During the middle fifteenth to middle sixteenth century John is depicted with typical characteristics, usually as a baby together with the Mother and baby Jesus. The same meaning as above can be associated with this depiction.

No depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus was made before the fourth century, probably because of the stigma and gruesomeness associated with it. After Constantine (AD 312) banned the crucifixion as punishment the negative connotation gradually vanished and the cross came to be seen more as a sign of victory. The crucifixion of Jesus was not depicted until the ninth century and not until the beginning of the fifteenth century was the lamb directly connected with the crucifixion of Jesus.

In early Christian art, the paschal lamb was never identified with John the Baptist and his announcement of the amnos. Only from the beginning of the fifteenth century was the amnos depicted as a sacrificial lamb and connected with the crucifixion of Jesus.

It is difficult to give an exact interpretation of the lamb in John's arms. The fact that he carries the lamb in his arms and that the lamb does not stand on the ground as in the portrait by Matthias Grünewald, or that he does not carry it on his shoulders as the shepherd does, expresses special care and cherishing. This reinforces the argument that a special relationship exists...
between the bearer, in this case John, and the lamb. Nevertheless, it is not the lamb of John, but the lamb of God. Thus, the depiction of the lamb in the arms of John is a symbolic expression of the special relationship between God and the amnos and that John, as the one sent by God, specifically has the instruction to introduce or reveal the amnos. This special relationship is also portrayed by the Mother-Child relationship.

The depictions confirm the explanation that the meaning of amnos is situated in the monogenes, namely the special relationship between God and his Son. That He would take away the sin of the world, is part of his mission to this world and the instruction that He received from the Father. He would do this by giving his life voluntarily (Jn 10:17-18).

There are two other depictions which possibly relate to John and the lamb. The ancient Christians used the symbols and depictions of the gentile world because of their fear of being recognised and prosecuted. One of the earliest Christian symbols is the shepherd with the sheep on his shoulders. This was a symbol of redemption and the ancient Christians quickly started using this symbol for the Good Shepherd (Jn 10; Lk 15; Ps 23). The earliest example of such a Christian piece of art (AD 240) that could be accurately dated, was found in the Baptisterium, named after John the Baptist, at Dura Europus in Syria. The baptism of Jesus also symbolises redemption. It is particularly during the baptism of Jesus that John testifies that He is the Lamb of God. Thus the question arises if the depiction of John with the lamb in his arms is not influenced by the shepherd with the sheep on the shoulders and the baptism, which are both symbols of redemption. This would indeed indicate the ‘taking away of the sin’ as the redemption that Jesus brings as the amnos, the son and the monogenes of God by baptising with the Holy Spirit and thus forgiving sin.

WORKS CONSULTED


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