

Jesus Christ our Passover Lamb by David Foster with Roland Clarke

Abraham is revered as a godly patriarch in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. His faith was brilliantly displayed in the epic story where God called him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. We read in Genesis 22:8 Abraham's confident declaration to his son that God himself will provide the lamb. At the end of this ordeal when Abraham discovered a ram snared in a thicket and slaughtered it in place of his son, he reaffirmed his expectation that God **will** one day provide a lamb. We read in verse 14 that, "Abraham called that place, *The LORD Will Provide*. And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the LORD it **will** be provided.'"

It is interesting to notice that the concept of sacrifice which is the backbone of this story is not unfamiliar to religions around the world, including animistic cultures as well as Hindu and Muslim societies.

So what does the basic idea of sacrifice teach us about God? Certainly it does not imply that God is hungry and needs food. This is clear in Psalm (Zabur) 50 where the LORD asks, "Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Sacrifice a thank offering to God and pay your vows to the Most High.... Whoever offers a thank offering honors me, and whoever orders his conduct, I will show him the salvation of God." (Psalm 50:13,14,23) Therefore a key question to keep in the back of our mind is, "How does this story show Abraham honored God by being thankful?"

Abraham was convinced God would keep his promise to give him many descendants so his willingness to sacrifice his son indicated two things. On the one hand, it showed that he relied on God's faithfulness to keep his promise. On the other hand, it showed he was thankful. Even though God had not yet provided the lamb, Abraham was fully confident that God would keep his promise. And he was thankful in advance for the substitute.

Not unlike Christians and Jews, Muslims acknowledge that at the last moment just as Abraham was about to kill his son, God/Allah intervened and "ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice" (that is a ram). This statement helps to underscore why the festival of Eid-ul-Adha is the most important Muslim celebration as they remember Abraham's obedience and God's provision every year.

As we continue unfolding the theme of sacrificial lamb in the writings of the prophets we need to keep in mind this key principle underpinning all sacrifices: let us honor the Lord as we offer sacrifice and be grateful for his provision in our place, for our deliverance.

Five hundred years after Abraham, his descendants under the leadership of Moses sacrificed a lamb at the critical moment. According to the Bible (and the Qur'an), the enslaved Israelites were being harshly oppressed and their new-born baby boys were being murdered by an evil tyrant, Pharaoh (Firaun). God commanded Moses and his people to sacrifice a lamb at the very time when the death angel would be unleashed against the entire nation of Egypt, killing all first-born sons. Egyptians were not the only ones whose lives were threatened by this plague, the eldest sons among the Israelites would also be killed if their parents refused to sacrifice the Passover lamb (or goat) as instructed by Moses.

God intended this miraculous deliverance to be indelibly imprinted in the memory of the Israelites, so he commanded Moses and his people to commemorate it with a yearly celebration called Passover. (Exodus 12:24-25, 42) This festival involved slaughtering a Passover Lamb. Not long after the

Israelites crossed the Red Sea the Lord revealed through Moses many regulations and laws as to how they ought to live. A vital aspect of the Law involved making provision for anyone who broke the Law, that is, disobeyed God whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Detailed instructions were given showing how someone could atone for his/her sins by sacrificing a lamb. Sin offerings involving lambs and other suitable animals, like goats are mentioned again and again throughout the writings of the prophets.

Scripture says, “There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.” (Ecclesiastes 7:20) Scripture tells of generation after generation of Israelites who failed to keep God's laws, resulting in discipline, deepening judgment and exile. But God never left them in despair. He revealed a ray of hope promising that a deliverer would come: God's Messiah, the servant of the Lord who brings light and “salvation to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6)

Not only so, Isaiah explained that God's Messiah would be humiliated and unjustly treated, even killed, as were some other prophets. Finally, however, this special one would be vindicated, highly exalted. In fact, he would receive the “honors of a victorious soldier.” (Isaiah 53:12, NLT)

But exactly how will this Messianic deliverer win the victory? Can he really be victorious after being slaughtered like a **lamb** as a **guilt offering**? (Isaiah 53:7-8) Isaiah foretold that this heroic servant would endure agonizing punishment – even the death that we deserve as sinners. We must not forget that the imagery of a sacrificial lamb dying in the sinner's place is rooted in the Mosaic Law. (Leviticus 4:32-5:5) In fact the idea of a lamb dying sacrificially as a ransom substitute precedes the giving of the Mosaic Law, going back to the Passover Lamb and even further, to Abraham.

Jesus Messiah our Passover Lamb

Today, we will examine OT teachings involving a sacrificial lamb and show how they were fulfilled in Jesus, the Lamb of God. However, before we open the pages of the New Testament we need to understand why salvation requires a sacrificial lamb. In order to understand this connection we need to look carefully at the relationship between salvation and sacrificial lambs.

The term “salvation” is mentioned twice in the paragraphs immediately preceding Isaiah 53, i.e. 52:7,10. This underscores that God's salvation is an integral part of the story of the lamb. Furthermore, we glimpse this theme in the words of Jethro, a God-fearing Gentile who was the father in law of Moses. Upon hearing the miraculous way God had delivered the Israelites from Pharaoh, Jethro exclaimed, “Praise be to the Lord, for he has rescued you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh ... I know now that God is greater than all other gods.” (Exodus 18:8-11)

What exactly was it that inspired this Midianite priest to make this remarkable statement? Was it the astonishing miracle of parting the waters of the Red Sea allowing the Israelites to escape from Pharaoh's chariots? Or did it also include the exceptional ransom provision of the Passover Lamb which averted a catastrophic plague of death? In fact, both these miracles are implied in the term rescue when God commanded, “I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. “You must not have any other god but me. “You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea.” (Exodus 20:2-4)

This truth was repeatedly underscored by other prophets who called on the Israelites to remember how the LORD (Yahweh) became their **Saviour** displaying his mighty arm of **salvation** under Moses'

leadership. (Hosea 13:4; Psalm 78, 106)

The prophet Isaiah continues this theme, prophesying in chapter 49 that God's servant would come to bring his “**salvation** to the ends of the earth”—the very same phrase we saw in the introduction to Isaiah 53!

The fulfillment of this prophecy came seven hundred years later when an angel announced the birth of a special son. He was to be named Jesus, which means “God is salvation.” Through his entire ministry Jesus was a beacon of light for those who had been ruined by having lived a shameful life of sin. On many occasions, he comforted such people, saying, “Your sins are forgiven.” (Luke 7 & 19)

But these words were more than a platitude, they were undergirded and reinforced by what John the Baptist declared. As he saw Jesus coming, John said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) Jesus could say with authority to the thief on the cross beside him, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

How could Jesus say this? What legal basis allowed him to give this sinful criminal a sense of assurance that he was fully forgiven and ready to enter Paradise? The law of Moses required that a spotless, blameless lamb be sacrificed, dying in the place of guilty sinners. This is precisely what Jesus was and precisely what he did! He was God's Lamb, the final and all-sufficient provision for taking away sin. Whereas animals in the Mosaic law provided a suitable yet temporary blood covering for sin, only Jesus could fully please God, having lived a sinless life in complete obedience to God. (Hebrews 10:1-10)

Notice how the criminal confessed his sin in words reminiscent of Isaiah 53, “We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” And Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:41-43)

Reflecting on Christ's death, the apostles wrote, “Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us. ... For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” (1 Peter 1:18-19)

What does Scripture mean by describing God's Lamb as “without blemish or defect”?

In the Jewish OT Scripture it was prohibited to bring a blemished or imperfect animal as a sacrifice to God. Similarly it is unthinkable for devout Muslims to dishonor Allah by sacrificing a defective lamb at their special festival in commemoration of Abraham (Eid ul-Adha) or the *'aqiqa* sacrifice at the birth of a child. Samuel Zwemer who devoted his life to reaching Muslims has noted that when sacrificing a sheep or goat, ***no bone may be broken***, and the worshipper should say this prayer: “O God, here is the *'aqiqa [sacrifice]* for my son [giving the name], its blood for his blood, its flesh for his flesh, its hair for his hair and save my son from the fire, etc.” (“Atonement by blood sacrifice,” *The Moslem World*, Volume 36, 1946, pp. 187-192)

We should not fail to note that both Islamic sacrifices (Eid & 'aqiqa) involve a lamb dying in place of the child. As such, this atonement is consistent with the great “ransom” in Surah 101:37 where Allah rescues Abraham's son. However, Muslims do not fully realize what ransom implies, nor do they understand that since Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Mosaic sacrifices, animal sacrifices are no longer necessary.

Let us pause now and consider if the Messiah's sinlessness, as taught in the Bible and the Qur'an, sheds helpful light on the requirement whereby animals had to be "without blemish." Of course, Islamically Jesus (Isa) was without sin, as indeed the Bible repeatedly states. (2 Corinthians 5:21; Surah 19:19) On the other hand, "every son of Adam is a sinner," according to authoritative Ahadith writings. This echoes what Ecclesiastes 7:20 says, "Not a single person on earth is always good and never sins." Furthermore, there is no doubt about mankind's moral ruin as mentioned in Surah 16:61, "If God were to punish men for their wrong-doing, He would not leave, on the (earth), a single living creature: but He gives them respite for a stated Term ..."

Bearing in mind mankind's sinfulness and the Messiah's sinlessness, let's consider two scenarios. Looking at each situation, we ask, "Which pleases God most?" On the one hand, we have someone who sins, but then humbly confesses and makes sacrifice. On the other hand, is a totally sinless person who never commits sin even once.

Make no mistake, there would ever only be one "servant" of the LORD who would fully obey God and please him. This qualified him to be the perfect ransom and substitute. As such, he can truly "take away the sin of the world" as we read in John 1:29.

Consider also Jesus statement in Mark 10:43-45, "whoever wants to become great among you, must be your servant." Then he added, "even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many."

Who needs to hear Good News about the Lamb of God?

Muslims, who comprise 50% of Niassa province and 23% of our world, need to learn the truth that will set them free, namely that Jesus is the Lamb of God. While claiming to follow Abraham and believing that they are spiritually blessed, they are actually misinformed and tragically missing the blessing.

While tracing the theme of Lamb through the prophets, we have touched briefly on some Islamic ideas that are similar to our own beliefs. Naturally we can use them as starting points for meaningful conversation with our friends. Even though Muslims do acknowledge, albeit superficially, that the stories of Abraham's sacrifice and the Exodus show God is mighty to rescue and redeem, nevertheless, their preachers do not include "Savior" and "Redeemer" among the 99 beautiful names of Allah. Islamic scholars have marginalized these honourable attributes which inspired the early prophets to give God the praise and glory he deserves.

One wonders if it is just coincidence that the Qur'an omits mentioning the plague which God unleashed against first born sons while he simultaneously provided a Passover Lamb? Maybe this omission was intentional, especially considering that the Qur'an emphatically denies Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. In fact, authoritative ahadith writings underscore this denial saying Jesus will break the cross when he returns to earth in the last days. This particular belief is not an obscure detail of scholarly discourse, it is widely circulated and believed among Muslims.

We can conclude that the task of bringing the truth to Muslims is, indeed, a daunting challenge. But we are convinced that God is working in people's hearts. His Spirit can penetrate the veil of deception and darkness that renders Muslims spiritually blind. So let us keep praying that God will open doors for us to befriend Muslims and have meaningful conversations enabling us to sow the seed of God's Word. As we come to understand the awesome imagery of the Lamb and what it means, we can ask the Lord to help us explain this theme with our Muslim friends. Let us also encourage ourselves, knowing that

God's Word is living, active and sharper than any two edged sword.

Conclusion: Glorifying God

Muslims often quote Surah 22:36-37 as grounds for denying the importance of bloodshed in sacrifice and in particular, Jesus' death on the cross. Speaking of sacrificial animals this passage teaches, "Their meat will not reach Allah, nor will their blood, but what reaches Him is piety from you. Thus have We subjected them to you that you may **glorify** Allah." (bold added for emphasis) Interestingly, this emphasis on **honoring** God is also evident in Psalm 69:30-31, "I will praise God's name ... [and] **honor him with thanksgiving**. For this will please the Lord more than sacrificing an ox ..."

Earlier we looked at ways that God is **glorified** in the Biblical account of Abraham's sacrifice. We saw how Abraham predicted that God would provide the lamb and even named the place "The Lord will provide." When we consider that Jesus, as God's Son died at this very same place, Mt Moriah (2 Chronicles 3:1; cf Isaiah 25:7-9) we begin to grasp the deeper significance of Abraham's prophecy.

Recall that God instructed Abraham to sacrifice, "your son, your **only son** Isaac, whom you **love**, ..." (Genesis 22:1-2, bold font added) Keeping in mind the phrase "**only son**," we read John 3:16, "For God **so loved** the world that he gave his one and **only Son**, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

John Gilchrist explores these similarities;

Abraham's love for God in being willing to sacrifice his son for him is the perfect type of God's love for us in giving his Son, Jesus Christ, for the redemption of our souls. Many times I have asked Muslims whether Allah really loves them and, if he does, what he has done to prove it? The answers usually follow the same pattern. They point to the very blessing of their lives, or to times when he has answered their prayers by healing them of diseases or saving them from financial crises. Others have mentioned children they did not think they could have or all their material benefits and possessions. I have always responded by saying that, without doubting that these are all expressions of his kindness and love, they all cost God nothing and do not affect him at all. What, I have concluded, has God ever done for them that compares with what Abraham was called on to do for him? Has God matched this supreme example of love – a father tearing at the depths of his heart and being willing to give his only son for him? This cost Abraham, indeed it cost him the expression of his very own being – has Allah ever done anything like this in return? (Isaac: The reflection of the Father's love)

For Muslims the festival of Eid ul Fitr commemorates Abraham's remarkable obedience to Allah and shows how much he loved the Lord. Certainly Abraham did pass the test, but is that all there is? What about his prophecy highlighting the lamb which God himself would provide? Are we to believe this prediction was adequately fulfilled by the **ram** providentially snared by its horns in a nearby thicket?

Let us ask some questions to help us think deeper.

How does the provision at Mount Moriah **exalt and honor** God as greater? If the ram was, indeed, the full extent of God's provision, one might be inclined (as, indeed, Muslims are) to view Abraham as the hero of the story which effectively diminishes God's role. But consider this: what if Abraham really did expect a lamb? Does this provision not harmonize better with subsequent events, including many instances where other prophets mentioned sacrificial lambs?

Surely it was no coincidence that the Israelites escaped from Egypt specifically because of the 10th

plague and the remarkable provision of a Passover lamb! Why does the Qur'an omit mentioning this critical turning point – the final and most crushing blow of the 10 plagues? Not only so, the liberated slaves were told to solemnly “keep vigil to **honor** the LORD for the generations to come” by means of the yearly Passover celebration. (Exodus 12:42)

The last book of the Bible recounts a magnificent heavenly vision where the apostle John, “heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be **praise and honor and glory** and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:13, bold font added) But before that time comes let us **honor** the Lamb by telling others what he has done on our behalf.

You may like to read John Gilchrist's fuller discussion online: <https://answering-islam.net/Gilchrist/Sharing/05isaac.html>

Another relevant article titled “God our Saviour and Redeemer” is available here: https://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/god_savior_redeemer.html

A series of five messages expanding on the theme of lamb are available here: <https://sim.ca/david-foster/>

Appendix: Isaac or Ishmael?

John Gilchrist makes several perceptive comments as he concludes his discussion of the story of Abraham's sacrifice,

“it is useful to point out to Muslims that as it was Isaac and not Ishmael who was expressly promised, and that the covenant of God was made through his line, including the Prophethood and Scripture, [Surah 29:27] and that he was born in a unique manner as opposed to Ishmael who was born by a simple illegitimate union, Isaac is obviously the more prominent of the two men. Once it is accepted that he was the son to be sacrificed, the whole purpose of his life comes into focus. He was a type and a symbol of the Messiah to come after the line of Prophethood and the prophecies of the Scriptures would have their fulfillment. You can freely challenge Muslims to become followers of the ultimate Son of Abraham, Jesus Christ, whom God has set forth as the one and only true Saviour of the whole human race, and whom Isaac prefigured. The Apostle Paul brings out the ultimate distinction between Isaac and Ishmael very concisely in these words:

Now we, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise ... we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. *Galatians 4:28,31*

Why does the Qur'an not name the son to be offered as a sacrifice and, immediately thereafter, name Isaac twice as the promised son of Abraham? Perhaps Muhammad was uncertain about the identity of the son and, though he might have wished it was Ishmael, he may have been aware that he is an insignificant and irrelevant figure in the Bible in comparison with Isaac. Hence he left the identity an open question. If, however, Isaac is overlooked as the intended victim, the whole character of the event as a type and symbol of God's coming salvation in his Son Jesus is missed completely and, with it for the Muslim world, the hope of eternal life.”