

Behold the Lamb (with questions for group discussion) by David Foster

Last time we looked at a prophecy foretelling that the serpent's head would be crushed by the seed of the woman. We traced this theme through to the last book of the Bible where Satan, the ancient serpent – the dragon – is finally defeated by “the blood of the Lamb.” Interestingly the apostle John mentions two highly contrasting titles over a dozen times: Dragon and Lamb! What an astonishing and incongruous scenario: a gentle Lamb facing a powerful, hideous dragon! Who do you suppose will win? Believe it or not, the Lamb and his followers win the war. We saw too, how Jesus declares judgment against the Devil called “the ruler of this world.” Judgment is rendered through the sacrificial death and resurrection of the Messiah which Jesus likens to a seed going into the ground and sprouting up into a vibrant plant that produces a large crop. (John 12:24)

Today we'll take a closer look at the remarkable, if perplexing, title, the Lamb, beginning with Genesis 22:1-14 a story that is familiar to Christians and Muslims. These faith communities are the two largest religions in our city, indeed, around the world. We should also bear in mind, that Christians have long recognized this epic story of Abraham's sacrifice as one of the most significant ways to engage our Muslim neighbors in a gracious and friendly heart to heart conversation about spiritual things and thus pointing them to Jesus.

1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

2 Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, 7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

8 Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

12 “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

13 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So 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.”

As a matter of fact, 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.

1. 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 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) So then, a key question to keep in the back of our mind is, “How does this story show Abraham was thankful?”

Abraham was convinced God would keep his promise to give him many descendants. He was thankful and did not doubt that the LORD would keep his promise. When Isaac asked, “Where is the lamb?” his father assured him God will provide. (v.8) Therefore Abraham's remarkable act of sacrifice showed thankfulness coupled with faith. Even though God had not yet provided the lamb, Abraham was fully confident that God would keep his promise. This confidence is underscored again in verse 14 where Abraham names the place, “The Lord will provide.” Moreover, the next sentence adds, “And to this day it is said, *On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.*”

Interestingly, it so “happened” that a ram became available as a suitable substitute at just the right time and place. Was this coincidental or providential? Most God-fearing people readily recognize this wasn't random luck, regardless of creed. Clearly, it was according to Divine design. This view is explicit in Surah 37:107 where the Qur'an emphatically states that Allah “ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice.”

2. What does this story teach us about ourselves / people?

a) Children are by nature curious. We see this in Isaac's question. (v.7)

b) A genuine act of sacrifice involves a test. It wasn't easy for Abraham. In fact, it was very difficult and challenging. While it is true that making sacrifice is a test, ultimately, God is the one who makes the provision for us. (v.14) He is the one who redeems and rescues people.

3. What do you need to apply / obey? Will I trust God even when obeying him is hard? Will I obey the Lord when he asks me to do something that involves taking a risk?

4. Who are you and I going to tell? ... i.e. the good news about God as my provider? ... who will I tell that God is my Redeemer, rescuer?

In conclusion let us briefly skim over what we'll be exploring these next few weeks as we trace the unfolding promise of God's Lamb. Each step will shed some more light on the perplexing scenario involving the dragon fighting the Lamb.

1) Like their father Abraham, Moses and his people sacrificed a Passover lamb in place of their eldest sons. (Ex. 12) This celebration was to be a “lasting ordinance” pointing to a greater provision.

2) Isaiah reminded Israel: the LORD is your Redeemer. God's Messiah will one day come to bring his salvation. Not only so, he will be “like a lamb.” (Isaiah 29:22; 49:6; 53:8)

3) Many years later, John the Baptist (Arabic, Yahya) said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29)

4) Jesus died as our spotless "Passover Lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7; cf. John 12:23-26;13:1; 1 Peter 1:19)

In closing let us sing praise to the Lamb. There are many well known songs inspired by the heavenly vision John saw of the Lamb who was slain. One is, "All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord." Then we'll also sing two others: "Worthy is the Lamb", "Lamb of God, Holy One."

Long time ago the promise came to Abraham,
That God himself would provide the perfect Lamb,
To suffer in my place,
O what amazing grace,
My sin has been erased,
I worship him alone.

Those Hebrew slaves, in Egypt cried out to the Lord,
He heard their cries, rescued with his mighty arm,
Passover Lamb was slain,
Eldest sons were saved,
Freedom's price was paid,
I worship him alone.

All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord,
Who once was slain to reconcile man to God,
Forever he will be,
The Lamb upon the throne,
I gladly bow my knee,
And worship him alone.

I will proclaim, the glory of the risen Lord,
Who once was slain to reconcile man to God,
Forever he will be,
The Lamb upon the throne,
I gladly bow my knee,
And worship him alone.

Endnote: The concept of honor is a core value among Muslims. Accordingly, the Qur'an says sacrificial animals are "*subject to you, that ye may be grateful... that ye glorify God*". (Surah 22:36,37) This calls to mind 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 ..." Let us bear this in mind as we trace the lamb theme in the coming weeks. "How does the Bible story of the Lamb **exalt** him and ultimately bring God **glory and honor**?" A summary answer is provided in Revelation 5:12-13;

In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and **honor and glory and praise!**" Then I 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!"

Of course, we can also list other passages that **exalt and honor** the Messiah precisely because he laid down his life sacrificially for the supreme cause of bringing salvation; Isaiah 52:12-53:8; John 12:22-24; Philippians 2:5-11.